

Hijacked Buildings and Emerging Forms of Informality in South Africa: Insights from Recent Urban Case Studies

Vuyiswa Letsoko, Ockert Pretorius

(Dr Vuyiswa Letsoko, University of Johannesburg, 58 Beit Street, Doornfontein Campus, Johannesburg, South Africa; vuyisway@uj.ac.za)

(Dr Ockert Pretorius, University of Johannesburg, 58 Beit Street, Doornfontein Campus, Johannesburg, South Africa; opretorius@uj.ac.za)

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1 ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emergence of hijacked residential buildings in affluent suburbs as a new form of urban informality, using a qualitative case study of Bryanston in Johannesburg. Drawing on secondary data and informed by theories of informality as a mode of urbanisation, grey space and the Right to the City, the study shows that suburban hijackings are not isolated criminal incidents but structural outcomes of housing exclusion, weak governance of vacant property and housing financialisation. The findings reveal how informal rentalisation of high-value suburban properties provides precarious access to well-located urban space while reproducing vulnerability and exploitation. The paper argues that the suburbanisation of informality challenges spatially bounded planning imaginaries and enforcement-led responses and calls for metropolitan-wide, justice-oriented planning approaches that address vacancy, regulate informal rental markets and expand access to affordable housing in well-located areas.

Keywords: Hijacked buildings, Urban informality, Spatial justice, Housing inequality, Urban governance

2 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Urban informality is a defining feature of contemporary cities and is increasingly understood not as a peripheral or temporary condition, but as a structural outcome of how cities are planned and governed. Critical urban scholarship argues that informality is produced through selective regulation, uneven governance, and exclusion from formal urban systems rather than through the absence of planning (Roy, 2005; Roy & AlSayyad, 2004). While informality has historically taken forms such as informal settlements and backyard dwellings, growing attention is being paid to the informal occupation of buildings. Vacant or underutilised properties, often linked to speculation, absentee ownership, or legal disputes, are increasingly repurposed as informal housing, creating concealed and hybrid spaces that blur the boundaries between formality and illegality and are sustained by fragmented governance and weak oversight (Lees et al., 2018; Yiftachel, 2009). In South Africa, urban informality is rooted in apartheid spatial planning, which excluded the majority of the population from well-located urban land and continues to shape contemporary inequality. Despite post-apartheid commitments to spatial justice, cities face persistent housing backlogs, rising costs, and limited access to affordable, well-located accommodation (Harrison & Todes, 2015; Turok & Visagie, 2018). Informality has therefore remained a structural feature of urban life, historically concentrated in informal settlements and backyard dwellings within townships (Lemanski, 2009). More recently, however, informality has begun to emerge within affluent suburban areas. In Johannesburg, hijacked buildings, once associated with inner-city decline, are increasingly appearing in well-located suburbs such as Bryanston, involving the illegal modification of high-value homes and unlawful service connections. These concealed practices challenge planning assumptions that equate informality with peripheral or deteriorated areas. This study uses a qualitative case study of hijacked residential properties in Bryanston to examine the dynamics of suburban informality and their implications for housing exclusion, governance failure, and spatial justice in South African cities.

2.1 Literature review and theoretical framework

Urban informality has been extensively examined within urban studies, particularly in relation to housing exclusion, governance failure, and spatial inequality. Early conceptualisations framed informality as a residual or transitional condition associated with poverty, rapid urbanisation, and weak state capacity. More recent scholarship has challenged this understanding, arguing that informality is not external to planning systems but is actively produced through them. Roy's (2005) conceptualisation of informality as a mode of urbanisation has been particularly influential in reframing informality as the outcome of selective regulation,

uneven enforcement, and state inaction. From this perspective, informality emerges not where planning is absent, but where legality is unevenly applied across urban space. This reconceptualisation has been critical in shifting attention away from informal settlements alone toward a broader range of informal practices embedded within formally planned environments. Informality is increasingly understood as a continuum rather than a binary, blurring distinctions between legality and illegality, and between formality and informality (Yiftachel, 2009). The concept of grey space further illuminates how certain urban practices remain tolerated, ignored, or intermittently enforced, producing spaces that are neither fully legal nor fully illegal. This theoretical framing is particularly relevant for understanding informal housing practices that occur within existing building stock, often concealed within formal neighbourhoods. A growing body of international literature examines the informal occupation of buildings as a response to housing shortages, rising costs, and speculative property markets. In cities across the Global North, including London, Berlin, Barcelona, and Athens, high levels of residential and commercial vacancy coexist with acute housing unaffordability. Scholars document how vacant or underutilised buildings, frequently held as speculative assets or entangled in legal disputes, have been informally occupied by low-income households, migrants, and homeless populations seeking access to well-located urban space (Aalbers, 2016; Lees et al., 2018). These cases demonstrate how informality can emerge even within strong regulatory contexts when housing is treated primarily as an investment rather than a social good. While some building occupations in these contexts are politically organised and linked to housing movements, others operate as informal rental arrangements mediated by unregulated landlords or intermediaries, blurring the line between resistance and exploitation (Pruijt, 2013). This distinction is important, as it complicates normative readings of informal occupation as inherently rights-based. Drawing on the Right to the City framework (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008), scholars argue that informal occupation often reflects claims to urban space based on use and need rather than ownership. However, such claims are frequently distorted by unequal power relations and market pressures, resulting in precarious and exploitative living arrangements rather than substantive urban rights (Marcuse et al., 2009).

In the Global South, informal building occupation has long been observed alongside informal settlements, yet scholarship increasingly highlights its expansion beyond inner-city or visibly marginal areas. In São Paulo, centrally located office and residential buildings have been occupied by low-income households seeking proximity to employment and services, often governed through informal systems that regulate access, rent, and internal order (Caldeira, 2017). Similarly, in Mexico City, abandoned or partially completed apartment blocks have been informally occupied in contexts of weak enforcement, fragmented ownership, and post-disaster abandonment (Duhau & Giglia, 2008). In Indian cities such as Mumbai, informal subdivision of older buildings has intensified as formal housing becomes increasingly inaccessible, producing dense and unsafe living conditions within formally zoned urban areas (Bhan, 2016). Across both Global North and Global South contexts, several common themes emerge. Informal building occupation is closely linked to vacancy and underutilisation, particularly where housing is financialised and disconnected from social need. These forms of informality are often spatially concealed, embedded within formal neighbourhoods, and sustained through fragmented governance. Moreover, informal building occupations frequently operate as informal rental markets, where access to shelter is mediated by intermediaries who extract rent, reinforcing vulnerability rather than alleviating it. These patterns underscore Roy's argument that informality is a governance outcome rather than a spatial deviation.

Within South Africa, scholarship on informal housing has historically focused on informal settlements and backyard dwellings, particularly within townships. Backyard shacks have been widely documented as a coping strategy that enables households to generate income while accommodating those excluded from state-subsidised housing and formal rental markets (Lemanski, 2009). Planning and policy responses have largely treated such informality as spatially bounded, reinforcing the assumption that informality belongs in marginalised spaces. This framing aligns with critiques from spatial justice scholars, who argue that planning systems often reproduce inequality by normalising informality in some areas while criminalising it in others (Soja, 2010). Research on hijacked buildings in South Africa has primarily concentrated on inner-city Johannesburg, linking their emergence to deindustrialisation, white flight, property disinvestment, and the collapse of formal property management during the late apartheid and early post-apartheid periods (Beall et al., 2002; Huchzermeyer, 2011). These studies document how unlawfully occupied buildings are governed through informal and often criminal systems that regulate access and extract rent in the absence of effective

state intervention. More recent evidence suggests that hijacked buildings are no longer confined to inner-city areas but are increasingly appearing in well-located suburban contexts, reflecting broader housing affordability pressures and governance gaps. Despite these insights, there remains limited empirical work examining suburban hijacked buildings in South Africa through a theoretical lens that connects informality, governance, and spatial justice. Existing literature has yet to fully engage with how informality is shifting spatially into suburbs and what this reveals about the limits of current planning frameworks. By drawing on theories of informality as a mode of urbanisation, the Right to the City, and grey space, and situating suburban hijacked buildings alongside international experiences of informal building occupation, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of urban informality as a metropolitan-wide phenomenon shaped by structural inequality, vacancy, and governance failure.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to examine hijacked residential buildings in affluent suburban contexts, focusing on Bryanston in the City of Johannesburg as a critical and illustrative case. The study is exploratory and aims to unpack how hijacked buildings operate in suburban environments and what they reveal about housing exclusion, governance dynamics, and planning failure. Bryanston was selected due to the emergence of multiple high-profile hijacked luxury properties, which challenge assumptions that building hijackings are confined to inner-city or marginalised areas, and because sufficient public information exists to support robust analysis. The study draws on secondary qualitative data from investigative journalism, municipal documents, policy frameworks, and academic literature, which were analysed using thematic qualitative analysis combining deductive and inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theoretical lenses informed the initial coding, while cross-source triangulation was used to enhance analytical credibility.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Suburban informality and the limits of planning imaginaries

A key finding of the study is the emergence of informality within affluent suburban contexts, which unsettles entrenched planning imaginaries that equate suburbs with formality, legality, and effective governance. Planning scholarship has long shown that the “suburb” is not merely a residential form but a normative project, built around assumptions of order, controlled density, private property protection and regulated access to urban services (Fishman, 1987; Knox, 2008). In many contexts, suburbs are governed through a combination of municipal regulation and privatised systems of control (e.g., security regimes, homeowners’ associations, managed infrastructure), producing what some scholars describe as splintered or uneven urbanism, where services, rights, and protections are distributed unequally across space (Graham & Marvin, 2001). Within this frame, the appearance of hijacked luxury homes in Bryanston is not simply “informality in the wrong place”; it exposes the fragility and selective nature of suburban governance arrangements and the extent to which suburban order relies on assumptions of predictable ownership and continuous management. The Bryanston case also challenges the spatially bounded way in which informality is typically anticipated in planning practice. Much of the planning and housing literature, especially in South Africa, has treated informality as a phenomenon expected in townships, informal settlements, and inner-city areas shaped by disinvestment and marginality (Huchzermeyer, 2011). This has produced what Watson (2009) critiques as a persistent “informality–formality” binary in planning, where informality is handled through containment, upgrading, or enforcement in already marginalised zones, while suburban spaces are protected as sites of “proper” urbanism. The suburbanisation of informality destabilises this logic by showing that informality can be produced within formal planning regimes, not merely outside them.

Roy’s (2005) theorisation is particularly useful here because it reframes informality as a mode of urbanisation and a product of governance rather than a location or sector. Seen through this lens, suburban hijackings are not anomalous but symptomatic of how urban legality is unevenly produced. Roy argues that states do not simply regulate informality; they actively construct it through selective enforcement and the normalisation of exceptions. This resonates with Yiftachel’s (2009) “grey space” thesis, which emphasises that urban spaces often exist between legality and illegality, sustained by delayed enforcement, institutional ambiguity, and political calculation. The Bryanston case illustrates how suburban spaces can also become grey: properties can remain effectively “unseen” by governance systems when vacancy, absentee ownership,

or weak monitoring create regulatory blind spots, until a crisis triggers sudden and forceful intervention. At the same time, the suburbanisation of informality must be read within the political economy of housing and land. International debates on housing financialisation show how property is increasingly treated as an asset class rather than shelter, generating vacancy, absentee ownership, and disconnection between housing supply and housing need (Aalbers, 2016). When affordability crises intensify, the literature shows that informal and precarious habitation can appear in unexpected places, including within high-value neighbourhoods because access to well-located space is increasingly restricted through market mechanisms (Lees et al., 2018). In this sense, the Bryanston case is part of a broader urban contradiction: high-value suburbs may simultaneously embody wealth and become sites of concealed housing precarity when vacant properties are repurposed through informal occupation.

Critically, the visibility and politicisation of suburban informality also reveals the classed and racialised moral geographies of “acceptable” informality. Scholarship on “advanced marginality” and territorial stigma demonstrates how certain spaces become socially coded as legitimate sites for poverty and informality, while others are protected from it through intensified surveillance and boundary-making (Wacquant, 2008). In South African cities, this is amplified by apartheid’s spatial legacy, where townships and informal settlements are often treated as the expected reservoirs of urban crisis, while suburbs are framed as spaces of entitlement and security. When informality appears in suburbs, it is more likely to be narrated as invasion, disorder, or criminality, rather than as a housing system failure, thereby legitimising enforcement-heavy responses and reinforcing spatial exclusion (Huchzermeyer, 2011; Watson, 2009). The suburbanisation of informality therefore exposes not only housing failure but also the limits of planning’s dominant spatial imagination. It suggests that planning has often operated through a dual logic: normalising informality as a manageable condition in historically marginalised areas while treating its emergence in affluent areas as an exceptional threat. This dualism is increasingly untenable as metropolitan housing pressures intensify and as informal housing markets adapt to new spatial opportunities. The Bryanston case thus foregrounds a critical planning challenge: to move beyond spatial containment and moralised framings of informality, and to recognise suburban informality as a metropolitan-scale governance and housing question shaped by market exclusion, vacancy, and uneven regulation.

4.2 Vacancy, informal rentalisation and the production of grey urban space

The Bryanston case reveals how vacancy and informal rentalisation intersect to produce suburban grey space, transforming high-value private properties into sites of concealed informality. Vacant and underutilised homes often linked to absentee ownership, unresolved legal status, speculative holding, or long-term service disconnections, emerge as critical entry points through which informal occupation takes root. Importantly, this process is rarely abrupt. Instead, it unfolds incrementally as weak monitoring and the absence of proactive municipal intervention allow properties to be quietly subdivided, informally retrofitted, and reconnected to services over time. What initially appears as temporary or marginal illegality gradually solidifies into a stable, though informal, housing arrangement. This dynamic aligns closely with Yiftachel’s (2009) concept of grey space, where urban practices exist between legality and illegality and are sustained through institutional ambiguity and selective enforcement. In suburban contexts such as Bryanston, properties are neither immediately sanctioned nor regularised; rather, they persist through tacit tolerance, delayed intervention, and fragmented governance. Suburbs are often assumed to be self-regulating through private ownership, security regimes, and zoning controls, resulting in limited proactive oversight by planning authorities. Responsibility for intervention is dispersed across departments concerned with housing, utilities, by-law enforcement, and public safety, allowing illegality to normalise until it becomes visible through infrastructural strain, safety risks, or financial loss. At that point, enforcement is intensified, often abruptly and punitively. However, the production of grey space in Bryanston is not solely a function of regulatory failure; it is also deeply tied to the informal rentalisation of vacant property. The findings indicate that hijacked suburban buildings operate primarily as informal rental housing rather than spontaneous squatting. Occupants reportedly paid rent to intermediaries who controlled access, subdivided internal space, and managed utilities, revealing a commodified form of informality embedded within private property regimes. This reflects broader debates on housing financialisation, where housing is treated as an asset rather than shelter, generating vacancy alongside acute housing need (Aalbers, 2016). In this context, informality becomes a market response to exclusion, filling the gap between unaffordable formal housing and unmet demand for well-located accommodation.

From a Right to the City perspective, these informal rental arrangements represent distorted claims to urban space. Residents seek proximity to employment, services, and infrastructure that affluent suburbs offer, yet access is mediated through precarious, marketised arrangements rather than rights-based inclusion (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008). The right to inhabit the city is effectively reduced to the ability to pay informal rent to unregulated intermediaries, stripping it of its collective and political dimensions. Rather than democratizing access to urban opportunity, suburban informality reproduces exclusion through new spatial forms, where vulnerability is intensified by unsafe living conditions, lack of tenure security, and exposure to sudden displacement. Critically, this merged dynamic exposes a profound contradiction in planning governance. While planning frameworks emphasise spatial justice, efficiency, and sustainable land use, they offer limited mechanisms for regulating vacancy and informal rental markets within private property systems. Planning silence around speculation, absentee ownership, and the social obligations of property ownership enables the very conditions under which suburban informality emerges. Hijacked suburban buildings are therefore not simply governance failures or criminal deviations; they are products of a planning regime that tightly regulates land use while largely ignoring how property is held, left vacant, or informally commodified.

An instructive analogy is to view suburban hijacked buildings as the “backyard shacks of the affluent city” not in form, but in function. Just as backyard dwellings in townships absorb housing pressure through informal rentalisation on private plots, hijacked suburban properties absorb metropolitan housing demand through concealed subdivision and informal rent extraction within high-value homes. In both cases, informality is tolerated as long as it remains spatially and socially contained. When it breaches the moral and spatial boundaries of privilege, it is reframed as crisis, prompting enforcement rather than structural reform. This analogy underscores that suburban informality does not represent a breakdown of the urban system, but rather its adaptation, revealing how housing exclusion, vacancy, and uneven governance are redistributed across space rather than resolved. By foregrounding vacancy and informal rentalisation as central mechanisms, the Bryanston case demonstrates that suburban hijacked buildings are a critical lens through which to interrogate the limits of planning frameworks that separate land-use control from housing justice. Addressing such phenomena therefore requires moving beyond reactive enforcement toward metropolitan-scale interventions that confront vacancy, regulate informal rental markets, and expand access to affordable, well-located housing, before grey spaces harden into entrenched urban conditions.

4.3 Implications for planning, spatial justice and urban futures

Taken together, the findings reveal that suburban hijacked buildings are not anomalies but warning signals of deeper structural contradictions in South African cities. They expose the failure of planning systems to reconcile property regimes with housing justice, and the inadequacy of spatially bounded approaches to informality. For urban planning, this demands a shift from reactive enforcement toward metropolitan-wide strategies that address vacancy, affordability and access to well-located housing. This includes proactive monitoring of underutilised properties, stronger regulation of vacancy, and the expansion of transitional and affordable housing options in suburban and central locations. Without such interventions, informality will continue to adapt and reappear in new forms, further blurring the boundaries between formal and informal urban space. As a result, the suburbanisation of informality forces planners to confront uncomfortable questions about who the city is planned for, whose informality is tolerated, and whose is criminalised. Addressing hijacked buildings therefore requires not only technical solutions, but a reorientation of planning practice toward spatial justice and substantive urban inclusion.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

This paper has examined the emergence of hijacked residential buildings in affluent suburban contexts through a case study of Bryanston in the City of Johannesburg. Drawing on theories of informality as a mode of urbanisation, grey space, and the Right to the City, the study demonstrates that suburban hijackings are not isolated criminal anomalies but structural outcomes of housing exclusion, uneven planning regulation, weak governance of vacant property, and the financialisation of housing in deeply unequal cities. The findings reveal a significant spatial shift in informality, challenging entrenched planning imaginaries that confine informality to townships or inner-city areas. Vacant and underutilised suburban properties become grey spaces where illegality is normalised through institutional ambiguity and delayed intervention, while informal rentalisation offers precarious and exploitative access to well-located urban space. The Bryanston case exposes a central contradiction in South African urban planning: although policy frameworks emphasise

spatial justice and integration, planning practice continues to rely on spatial containment and enforcement-led responses to informality. Such approaches restore formal order temporarily but fail to address the structural drivers of suburban informality, leading to cyclical displacement and the reproduction of vulnerability across the metropolitan region. As housing pressures intensify, informality is likely to continue adapting and reappearing in new spatial forms unless these underlying conditions are addressed. In response, this paper argues for a shift toward proactive and justice-oriented urban governance. Municipalities should strengthen the monitoring and regulation of vacant and underutilised properties, including mechanisms that discourage prolonged vacancy and speculative holding. Planning and housing strategies must expand transitional, social, and affordable rental housing options in well-located suburban and central areas, including the adaptive reuse of suitable properties. Responses to hijacked buildings should be integrated across planning, housing, social development, and enforcement functions, moving beyond fragmented and punitive interventions. Finally, planners must rethink spatially bounded assumptions about informality and recognise it as a metropolitan-wide phenomenon shaped by structural inequality rather than a localised deviation. Addressing suburban hijackings effectively therefore requires not only improved regulation, but a reorientation of planning practice toward spatial justice and substantive urban inclusion.

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