IV WPSC
IV WORLD PLANNING SCHOOLS CONGRESS JULY 3-8TH 2016 RIO, BRAZIL

Invisible urban informality: compromised living environments in East and Southeast Asia

Shraddha Nadkarni
Doctoral student in Urban Systems, NJIT & Rutgers University
sn346@njit.edu

Several major cities across the world are facing severe problems such as high rate of inward migration, overcrowding and consequent escalation in living costs. Especially in the developing countries which consist of more rural areas than cities, skilled as well as unskilled workers often perceive cities to be attractive locations for a better socio-economic standard of living. This heterogeneous pattern of migration often creates a social and economic polarization in rapidly urbanizing cities where some populations suffer from poor living conditions and slums. However, in the prominent cities of East and Southeast Asia, these deteriorating components are concealed in urban fabric and sociopolitical structures either deliberately or due to circumstances, although in fact; they coexist with the upbeat image of the urban streetscape, the latter being branded lavishly. This 'out-of-sight' inequality in urban development forces the vulnerable resident population to also face disparities in overall quality of life. In this paper, I use the term, invisible informality to refer to this phenomenon.

I identify the surfacing of this situation through an analysis of three existing bodies of literature: urbanization in East and Southeast Asia, sociospatial exclusion and inequality, and informality as a response to urban socio-political policies. Additionally, I also examine informality in employment with respect to gender, recent commodification of land and buildings in the development state model and the association of these phenomena with rapid economic growth in East Asia.

In this paper, I deduce a working definition of invisible urban informality and apply it to explore three cases in eastern and southeastern Asia: Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore. For the purpose of this project, I consider city-states of Hong Kong and Singapore as rapidly urbanizing cities. My working definition conceptualizes invisible informality as an urban phenomenon of compromised living conditions that are: visually

less obvious in the spatiality of urban streetscape, veiled in the social structure due to proximate physical coexistence with higher income groups, deliberately secreted and officially less reported by the state for political and economic reasons. I assert that spatial configuration, social construction, and controlling role of the state are linked with each other in the urban context and together frame the occurrence of invisible informality.

Through a case-study approach, I investigate the generation of invisible informality in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore. I explore the reasons behind its existence in these locations, the resident population, and the characteristics of living environments. My research focuses on conversion of underground storage basements to residences in Beijing and rooftop/penthouse slums in Hong Kong. In case of Singapore, I identify two distinct scenarios of invisible informality: dormitories for immigrant workers and public housing for marginalized elderly and other socio-economically disadvantaged population groups. I also scrutinize role of the state in measuring and tackling the issue of invisible informality in these three urban areas. The findings of this paper from secondary sources of literature indicate the presence of invisible informality in Beijing, Hong Kong and Singapore. Although most of the vulnerable population consists of domestic migrants and immigrants, underprivileged local citizens (in the case of Singapore) are also at a high risk. Informality is present in small pockets and is scattered throughout these three cities. A prime factor behind its less evidence is the stringent control of their respective states in manipulating demographics and land use, as well as enforcing deliberate regulatory actions in hiding urban poverty. Such practices are implemented by the states to preserve and promote their manicured images and rapidly advancing economic positions in the globally competitive network.

The findings of this paper are expected to inform local citizens, architects, urban designers, planners, policy makers and other related institutions about these less visible, declining conditions of urban environment and to create awareness for necessary reforms. Through this paper, I indicate a need of future research to examine these understudied urban marginal conditions through a multi-dimensional framework that applies to citizens, domestic migrants, and immigrants as well as interrogates the

role of state. Through this paper, I purport that appropriate measures of urban poverty should not only evaluate overall monetary income but also take into account an affordable, equitable, and straightforward access of various population groups to formal housing, sanitation, healthcare, education, food systems, and legal institutions.

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