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Converting Garages into a Dissertation: A Conversation with Jacob Wegmann

June 17, 2014 By [Jonathan P. Bell](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



Unpermitted garage conversion with added living space in unincorporated South Central Los Angeles

Today, planning scholars are examining informality in the United States housing market with the gusto once reserved for the [Central Place Theory](#) and other mainstays of planners' education. [1] This surge of research is encouraging. Until recently, the subject of informal dwelling units in the U.S. housing market remained glaringly understudied. The developing scholarship builds on pioneering – though scant – research on “[shadow markets](#)” [2] and “[accessory apartments](#)” [3] in American single-family housing.

I have a personal and professional stake in this debate. From 2006 to 2014, I worked as a Los Angeles County [Zoning Enforcement](#) planner. During that time I inspected over one thousand informal units (and other zoning violations) across Los Angeles County's diverse [unincorporated](#) communities. Here's one thing I learned: the garage apartment, developed and occupied stealthily in violation of zoning, building, and health codes, is *ubiquitous* throughout the L.A. region. [4] Informal dwelling units transcend all jurisdictions, demographics, and geographies. If you live in L.A., there's an informal unit on your street. Their uses vary, from [granny flats](#) [5] and rumpus rooms to rental units

and businesses. Sometimes a property owner will rent out the main house and live in the converted garage. Bottom line: this housing typology is everywhere here and it's about time we're studying it.

No doubt I'm pleased to witness the surging scholarly attention to informal garage apartments and the like – or what we enforcement planners non-euphemistically call “unpermitted” or “illegal” dwelling units. While the attention is reassuring, I nevertheless remain unsatisfied with the research to date. Because in this surge of research on American informal housing I still see a lack of attention paid to the all-important [implementation](#) [6] side of planning, namely, the regulation and enforcement of unpermitted dwelling units. Reality check, fellow planners: while some informal units look nicely built, many others are objectionably substandard, and neither type has been inspected for code compliance. Safety is at the heart of regulation. Planning enforcement is “where the rubber meets the road.” But as [Todd Bressi](#) observed decades ago, a rift persists between planners and code inspectors, and planners themselves rarely do enforcement. [7] Worse yet, some academics have characterized [enforcement](#) as [burdensome](#) [8] and inspection staff as agents of “[enemy](#)” [zoning codes](#). [9] Although regulation prevents the [injuries](#) [10] and [fatalities](#) [11] so often linked to illegal dwelling units, responsive enforcement as *a planning function* remains mostly ignored.

So you can understand my interest when UC Berkeley PhD candidate Jacob Wegmann contacted us to gather data for his doctoral dissertation, titled “We Just Built It:” Code Enforcement, Local Politics, and the Extralegal Housing Market in Southeast Los Angeles County. Due out later this year, the dissertation examines the role of unpermitted units in Los Angeles' housing market and political economy. Enforcement is core to the study. Recently, I interviewed Wegmann about his dissertation's contribution to the American informal housing debate.



Unpermitted garage conversion in unincorporated South Central Los Angeles

JPB: What is your academic and professional background?

JW: Strangely enough, I was a computer science major in undergrad. Immediately following my undergraduate studies I began a PhD program in glaciology. I once spent six weeks on a glacier in Alaska collecting data for my master's thesis. But I stopped with a master's degree when I realized that becoming a scientist was not for me. However far removed from urban planning, these experiences working with computers and data have been helpful in my new career as an urban planning academic.

After shifting directions, I spent over five years working for affordable housing developers in Denver and San Francisco, with two years off in the middle to get a master's degrees in planning and real estate at MIT. I realized that I'm much more cut out to study affordable housing than to build it, and so I started my city planning PhD at Berkeley in 2009 and have been there ever since.

JPB: How did you become interested in studying unpermitted housing?

JW: I became fascinated with housing units that go by the somewhat clunky title of [Accessory Dwelling Units](#) [12] (ADUs) or [secondary units](#), [13] as a direct result of my experiences developing affordable housing projects. These are small housing units carved out of or placed next to houses, and they take

various forms, such as apartments over garages or backyard cottages. ADUs struck me as inexpensive and less complex ways of adding to the stock of modestly priced housing, especially in a region like coastal California where the regulatory process is so difficult. As I got deeper into the topic, I became increasingly struck by how many housing units – some of which take the form of ADUs and some of which don't – already exist *without* permits. And after all, to do a PhD dissertation you need to study something that already exists, not something that may someday be widespread. Finally, I became fascinated by the legal gray area that unpermitted housing units represent.

JPB: Why is unpermitted housing important to study?

JW: I've noticed that in a lot of urban scholarship, one kind of scholar studies housing in U.S. or other developed world cities, and another kind of scholar typically studies cities in the developing world. The former are usually housing economists, and their methods tend to have an unquestioned assumption that you don't get housing unless it's allowed by zoning or other formal rules. Meanwhile, in the developing world, scholars for decades have grappled with the complexity of the uneasy coexistence of the extralegal housing market right alongside the formal market. If you're in Rio de Janeiro amidst the high rises near the beach, you can't ignore the *favelas* on the hillsides.

But I think there's a real need to bring these two different perspectives together. A few scholars have begun to do that. For instance, [Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris](#) [14] at UCLA have been studying extralegal housing in the City of Los Angeles with a perspective informed by their experiences studying housing in such disparate locations as Mumbai and rural inland Southern California. So there's this small but growing body of scholarship that I'm excited to contribute to.

For my project, I'm studying Southeast Los Angeles County, and trying to look at it in a fresh way as I might if I were accustomed to studying cities in the developing world. They're different, of course – Southeast L.A. looks nothing like the *favelas* of Rio. The differences are fascinating to me: for example, Los Angeles's extralegal housing market is built on top of fully legal property ownership. I believe the scholarly literature on extralegal housing will be enriched by this interesting case, which differs from others that have been studied thus far.

Meanwhile, on a more practical level for the communities I'm studying, extralegal housing is clearly an enormously important issue that's important to the present and future of these places. But so little is known about extralegal housing that there's little opportunity to begin to think strategically about how to deal with it in any systematic way. I'm hoping that my work makes a contribution in that direction.



Rear patio converted into an unpermitted dwelling unit in unincorporated South Central Los Angeles

JPB: What have other researchers found in studies of unpermitted housing?

JW: An important lesson I've absorbed from reading other studies is that it's not just about verifying whether a housing unit is permitted or unpermitted; it's also about making distinctions between types of extralegality. A four-bedroom house that's been converted into a bunkhouse accommodating 20 single men is a far cry from an owner-occupied house where the family has added an unpermitted rear extension to accommodate an elderly parent. Ananya Roy, an urban planning theorist at UC Berkeley, has written extensively about the need to ask "[what kind of informality?](#)" as well as "[formal or informal?](#)" [15]

Another important insight is Asef Bayat's notion of the "[quiet encroachment of the ordinary.](#)" [16] When enough separate, legally unsanctioned actions happen – like converting garages into housing units, or building unpermitted back houses – they start to exert a weight in politics and the market. And this happens without political coordination or organizing among the people doing these things.

JPB: Where in Southeast L.A. did you situate your study, and why there?

JW: After many false starts, I settled on an area of [Southeast Los Angeles County](#) that I, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, refer to in my dissertation as "the City of Gateway." This is a play on the widely recognized term "[Gateway Cities,](#)" and is intended to draw attention to the fact that this area is cut up into a myriad of small cities for somewhat arbitrary historical reasons, but with enormous consequences today. The City of Gateway includes ten incorporated cities: [Bell](#), [Bell Gardens](#), [Cudahy](#), [Maywood](#), [Huntington Park](#), [Compton](#), [Lynwood](#), [Paramount](#), [Bellflower](#), and [South Gate](#); it also includes four chunks of [unincorporated Los Angeles County](#): [Florence-Firestone](#), [Walnut Park](#), [East Rancho Dominguez](#), and [Willowbrook](#).

I chose this area because in many ways the phenomenon of extralegal housing that I'm studying is at a maximum here. First, the area is located directly within the industrial belt that runs from the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to the enormous rail yard east of Downtown Los Angeles, and directly south of the industrial cities of Vernon and Commerce. For that reason, vast numbers of low-wage industrial jobs were created in this area over the past 40 years, even as large-scale, unionized plants were shutting down and moving away. The area has attracted many immigrants, many of them undocumented, and they've had to rely in many cases on extralegal housing to find a place to live.

Another part of my approach was to deliberately stay away from large cities. I figured that if I tried to study Long Beach or the City of Los Angeles, it would be difficult to get interviews with politicians, and the issue of extralegal housing would get buried amidst the other major issues taking up oxygen in those places. By contrast, in a city as small as Cudahy, the issue of extralegal housing is impossible to ignore.

JPB: What is your research question and hypothesis?

JW: My research question is, "What role does the extralegal housing market play in the wider housing market and political economy of Southeast Los Angeles County?" My hypothesis is that despite, or perhaps because of, its invisibility in political and other forms of discourse, the extralegal housing market has reshaped both the housing market and local politics even without being widely acknowledged. I'm beginning to think that the extralegal housing economy – that which dare not speaketh its name – is how the contradictions between sky-high housing prices, absurdly restrictive land use restrictions, a dearth of official affordable housing, and low wages among the vast ranks of the working class are resolved in Los Angeles.



Unpermitted garage conversion in unincorporated South Central Los Angeles

JPB: What are your study's methods?

JW: I have four big methods and two little ones. Starting with the little ones, I use Census data, including public-use microdata, to analyze changes in the housing stock and demographics of the area I'm studying. I also use historic [Sanborn maps](#) and contemporary aerial photography to compare the extent to which residential rooftops cover the landscape now as compared to 40-50 years ago. My first big method is a survey of [code enforcement officers](#) throughout Southern California. My second and third big methods use online information harvesting to build a database on, respectively, the rental housing market and residential sales market for 1-4 unit houses in Southeast Los Angeles, so that I can analyze the effect that extralegal units have on both. My last big method, and perhaps my most important, is qualitative work, in which I interview and engage in direct observation (such as "[ride alongs](#)" with code enforcement officers) with a variety of people. These include code enforcement officers, planners, everyday homeowners and renters, property appraisers, city managers, politicians, real estate agents, and others.

JPB: What are your findings to date? And what do these findings indicate?

JW: My dissertation is still a work in progress, but I have preliminary findings to share:

- Code enforcement, for a host of reasons, is unable to completely stop the extralegal housing market. However, code enforcement *reshapes* the market. For instance, virtually nothing extralegal (permanent structures at least) gets built in the front yards of houses, and this is purely a result of code enforcement. Code enforcement, in this example, helps communities preserve the image of a suburban community (rows of apparently single-family houses with spacious front yards), even if the reality is radically different from 1950.
- The future of the communities I'm studying is very uncertain. The trends that radically transformed them through the 1970s, 80s, and 90s began to slow down in the last decade. The population is growing more slowly, immigration is down, and family sizes are shrinking. What this means for these areas I have not yet puzzled through.
- The political boundaries of the City of Gateway are helping to prevent it from grappling with its present and future. Because the area is chopped up into tiny, weak city governments and unincorporated areas with little accountable political representation, and because jobs and the revenues they bring are overwhelmingly concentrated in Vernon and a few other cities, marshaling the resources to start a dialogue about extralegal housing, much less respond to it, seems very difficult. At present, with the extreme [corruption scandal in Bell](#) and similar recent scandals in [South Gate](#) and [Huntington Park](#), it's difficult for the civic dialogue to turn away from emergency situations that scream for immediate attention.

JPB: Any surprising findings?

JW: I was completely floored that, as far as I can tell, political organization around the issue of extralegal housing units is almost totally absent in the City of Gateway. In shantytowns in the developed world, there are NGOs aplenty that organize local residents and help them organize politically. They may not always be successful, but they work at it and sometimes make real gains. In Southeast Los Angeles, civil society has dropped the ball on extralegal housing, even though it likely affects tens of thousands of families in the area. I think this has something to do with the way that extralegal housing here is built on top of the traditional "American Dream" of single-family homeownership, but I'm still puzzling through it.

This has real consequences. For instance, I was astonished to learn that South Gate continues to downzone residential property, making it less, not more, likely that the city can adapt its physical fabric and legal ownership patterns to its new reality as a high-density neighborhood. While thousands of homeowners would benefit financially from legally adding or regularizing extra dwelling units on their properties, they were nowhere to be found in the political debates. So predictably enough, the self-appointed defenders of the traditional American Dream swung the outcome to their side.

JPB: Lastly, what have been your impressions of Los Angeles?

JW: I've been struck by the tremendous vibrancy of the network of young Latinos from working-class backgrounds in Los Angeles working in the interconnected areas of urban planning, community organizing, labor movements, transportation, housing advocacy, and others. Many big cities have similar networks, but usually most of the participants are from middle-class or upper middle-class backgrounds, and many of them grew up somewhere else (both are true for me). This means that in Los Angeles, many of the people working towards a more progressive, just, and environmentally sustainable city have both professional and personal knowledge of the working-class neighborhoods that have pressing needs they're striving to address. There's a richness in that combination that I'm not sure exists anywhere else. There's something special happening in Los Angeles in progressive urbanist circles, and

I'm lucky to have experienced it, even as an academic working from the outside. People from this network have been helpful and welcoming to me, supportive of my work, and willing to give me needed contacts. For a place that's often stereotyped as being impersonal and unfriendly, this particular academic outsider from Berkeley has seen a whole other side of Los Angeles.

All photos by author.

Further reading: For research on planning enforcement in the U.S., see the work of [Raymond J. Burby](#), emeritus faculty at UNC-Chapel Hill. For an international perspective on planning enforcement, see the work of [Neil Harris](#) at Cardiff University and [Stephen McKay](#) at Queen's University Belfast.

Notes

1. For example, see Vinit Mukhija, Dana Cuff, and Kimberly Serrano, "Backyard Homes & Local Concerns: How Can Local Concerns Be Better Addressed?" (Los Angeles: cityLAB, University of California, 2014), http://citylab.aud.ucla.edu/files/publications/2014_BYH%20Report%20cityLAB%20UCLA.pdf (accessed June 15, 2014); "The Informal City" (paper session at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Los Angeles, CA, April 9, 2013), <http://meridian.aag.org/callforpapers/program/SessionDetail.cfm?SessionID=18832> (accessed June 15, 2014); Vinit Mukhija, "Outlaw In-laws: Informal Second Units and the Stealth Reinvention of Single-Family Housing," in *The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor*, eds. Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Peter M. Ward, "The Reproduction of Informality in Low-Income Self-Help Housing Communities," in *The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor*, eds. Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Per-Johan Dahl, "Shadows of L.A.," *Critical Planning*, 17 (Summer 2010): 124-139, http://citylab.aud.ucla.edu/files/byh/PJD-Shadows_of_LA.pdf (accessed June 15, 2014); Clarrissa Cabansagan, "Project Homesafe: From the Bay to LA. Lessons of Granny Flat Legalization in Daly City" (M.A. in Urban Planning comprehensive project, UCLA, 2011); Aron Chang, "Beyond Foreclosure: The Future of Suburban Housing," *Design Observer*, September 14, 2011, <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/beyond-foreclosure-the-future-of-suburban-housing/29438/> (accessed June 15, 2014).
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3. Martin Gellen, *Accessory Apartments in Single-Family Housing* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985).
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5. Steven Leigh Morris, "Invasion of the Granny Flat," *LA Weekly*, December 9, 2009, <http://www.laweekly.com/2009-12-10/news/invasion-of-the-granny-flat/> (accessed June 15, 2014).
6. Steven P. French, "Plan Making and Implementation: AICP Exam Review," (Atlanta: American Planning Association-Georgia Chapter, 2012), https://georgiaplanning.org/presentations/AICP_exam_reviews/2012_AICP_Exam_Prep_Plan_Making.pdf (accessed June 15, 2014).
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14. Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, eds., *The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

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About Jonathan P. Bell

Jonathan Pacheco Bell is a proud public sector professional with over 17 years of diversified experience spanning the fields of urban planning, architecture, and information/library science. Since 2006, Jonathan has worked as an urban planner at the County of Los Angeles, Department of Regional Planning – the municipal planning agency for L.A. County's unincorporated communities. From 2006 to 2014, Jonathan served in the land use regulation division where he implemented policies and zoning codes to abate unpermitted land uses and improve quality of life, mainly in South Central Los Angeles. In March 2014, he joined the advance planning division to take on long-range planning initiatives in South Central Los Angeles, East Los Angeles, and for L.A. County's Airport Land Use Commission. His background includes work in architect's offices, public and private libraries, and university research centers. Jonathan received his M.A. in Urban Planning from the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and studied political science and architecture as an undergraduate. He is currently completing an MLIS with an emphasis in public library leadership through San Jose State University.

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