

Squatters: the New Urban World

Poor is not Illegal



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Abstract

The role of the squatter in society has changed since the beginning of the humanity. Squatting is one of the oldest practises in our history and we all descend from squatters. The first inhabitants in the world had the necessity to occupy a territory where it was possible to establish a house, a family and a community. Nowadays, the necessity of occupying a territory without any property or ownership, has become one of the most important and unsolvable conflicts that any government can afford legally because of the economical private interests of the use of land.

Introduction

As the cultural knowledge says, “there is no powerful force without an enemy to enforce it”. In exactly the same way, in the most populated cities in the world, the squatter movement (understood in different ways according to the different realities) wouldn't be that important issue nowadays if there wasn't a strict society behind. Is for that reason that we can assure that the increasing number of slums (the most important type of squatters) in the world is the result of a growing reality in our society: a fast globalisation with a rapid urbanization.

*“Half of humanity now lives in cities, and within two decades, nearly 60 per cent of the world's people will be urban dwellers. Urban growth is most rapid in the developing world, where cities gain an average of 5 million residents every month. As cities grow in size and population, harmony among the spatial, social and environmental aspects of a city and between their inhabitants becomes of paramount importance.”*¹

¹ Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka - Executive Director - United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)
2008/2009 *State of the World's Cities - Harmonious Cities.*

1.1 World Reality

1.1.1 Origins

To begin with, we have to clarify that every country in every continent show different situations according to their realities if we look at them after the Second World War. Since the population started to move from the rural to the new urban reality, there was an imminent problem for the governments to deal with: the urban legislation. As we will talk later, the necessity of an urban regulation was one of the main goals of any government after the European colonial model was established in most of the countries worldwide. In fact, there was a lack of sensibility in all of these attempts to get an urban regulation in informal settlements. As fast as each government could recuperate its autonomy and normalize its economy, the law in terms of urban legislation and informal settlements was adapting to each reality.

1.1.2 Facts

“Today, there are one billion squatters globally, that is, about one in every six people on the planet. Consequently the estimate is that, in 2050 there will be three billion squatters, that is one in three people on earth. ”²

“The world’s urban population had doubled in only two decades. The developing world has been predominantly rural but is quickly becoming urban. In 1950 only 18 per cent of people in developing countries lived in cities. In 2000 the proportion was 40 per cent, and by 2030 the developing world is predicted to be 56 per cent urban. Future urban growth in developing countries will be absorbed by urban centres, which have a high average annual urban population growth rate of 2.3 per cent, in contrast to the developed world’s rate of 0.4 per cent.”³

2 Robert Neuwirth
2004 *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World*.

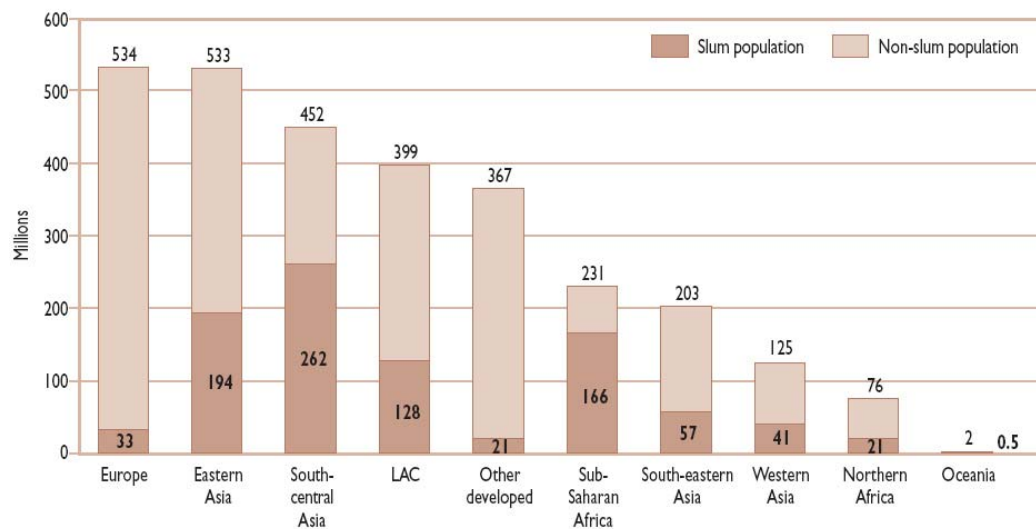
3 2003 *The Challenge of Slums – Global Report on Human Settlements*. UN Habitat

“The number of slum dwellers worldwide is projected to rise over the next 30 years to about 2 billion”⁴

“Close to 200000 people a day migrates from the rural to the urban areas, and that’s almost 1.5 million people a week, close to 70 million people a year, that means that 130 people every minute.”⁵

“The total number of slum dwellers in the world stood at about 924 million people in 2001. This represents about 32 per cent of the world’s total urban population. At that time, 43 per cent of the combined urban populations of all developing regions lived in slums, while 78.2 per cent of the urban population in least developed countries was slum dwellers.”⁶

Figure 1: *Proportion of slum dwellers in urban population by region, 2001*



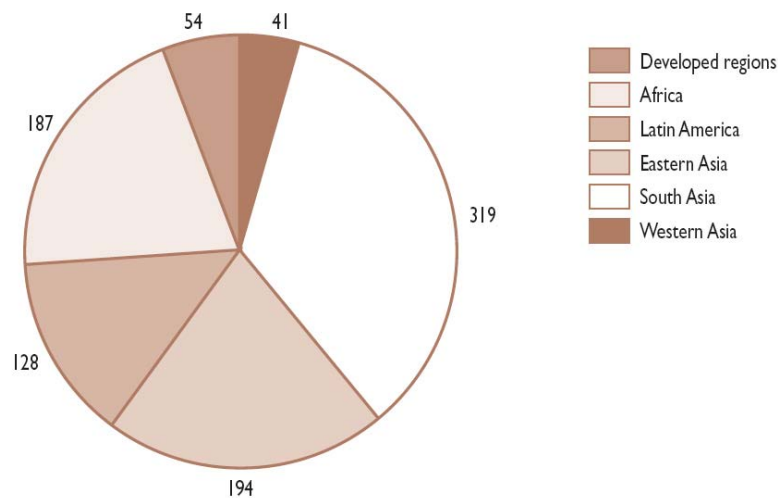
⁴ Kofi A Annan – Ex-Secretary General United Nations
2003 *The Challenge of Slums – Global Report on Human Settlements*

⁵ Robert Neuwirth
2004 *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World.*

⁶ Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka - Executive Director - United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)
2003 *The Challenge of Slums – Global Report on Human Settlements*

“Squatting is largely absent from policy and academic debate and is rarely conceptualized, as a problem, as a symptom, or as a social or housing movement”⁷

Figure 2: *World distribution of slum dwellers (millions) by region, 2001*



1.3 Types

In an international perspective, the squatting movement worldwide can be understood in several situations according to the urban reality that each city or megacity is involved in its political, economical and necessity context. If we look into the different continents in the world, each one has a different approach in relation to the growth that in the past decades has emerged and developed. Moreover, we shouldn't forget that the behaviour of informal settlement inhabitants can determinate the life perspective in which we can define them. Consequently, we consider squatters as progressing communities with self-built environments in a state of consolidation and improvement.⁸ At this point, we can resume all of these types in some definitions:

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Kesia Reeve

1995 "Squatting Since 1945: The enduring relevance of material need" Pp. 197-216 in *Housing and Social Policy* edited by Peter Somerville with Nigel Sprigings.

8

2003 *The Challenge of Slums – Global Report on Human Settlements*. UN Habitat

▪ Reclamation. Mostly in European countries, the squatting movement can be described as a pushing act to oppose the public opinion against the government decisions in terms of urban violence and speculation injustice of the public space. That reality can be shown in different ways, usually as massive public demonstrations occupying the public space. In the decision to demolish some cultural landmarks in the cities, people have appeared from different collectives and associations fettered to the site for an indefinite time, with the objective to keep alive the spirit and the amount of synergies that were taking place since years. In the same way as some environmental activists had been squatting some forests to avoid a complete deforestation of the natural resources for speculative plans, the reality in the cities can be shown in a parallel way.

In addition, protests can be focus in the citizen human right to have a real access to affordable housing. Nowadays, young people and workers, who have to spend their lives earning money to pay the mortgage and not considering any other way to enjoy a minimum quality of life, sacrifice the possibility of giving a proper education for their kids. As we can see in that point, the squatting revolution is a way to point out our direct housing necessities.



Figure 3: *Public massive demonstration in Barcelona called “No vas tener una casa en tu puta vida” (“You won’t have a house in your fuckin’ life”)*

▪ Reactivation. In a similar reclamation way, the squatter movement is a reality that society can take advantage to improve the condition of the public and private buildings. In many cities in Europe, there is a big amount of empty buildings that had an activity in the past and nowadays these spaces are just forgotten as empty holes in the city waiting to be reconsidered. We can understand squatters as active collectives of people who have the capacity to self-organize and rebuild new programmes adequate to the contemporary reality, they have the talent to give an activity that politicians usually not consider. Including this reactivating operation to our cities, our public spaces can be rich in a hand-made work and in a participation process of all the inhabitants that want to take part in, instead of the usual demolishing acts and the economical interests that just involved the private sector.

In addition, if we look into the housing policies of some cities in Europe where the government and some associations really give opportunities to access, this easier way of housing can create hundreds of abandoned apartments around the city. The reactivation issue in that sense let the squatters occupy these buildings to access and improve the living conditions in these places. The proper way to organize these collectives should be considered in a new governmental way to assure that squatters don't live under bad and unhealthy conditions. A regulation is necessary in this case and can't be forgotten as far as they receive help from public institutions to maintain their own houses in a minimum quality of life. Also, it is important that if we consider squatters as active people that survive with their own informal jobs and businesses, they can be able to pay an affordable fee of water and electricity supply.

- Requirement. That is the most extended type of squatting in the world. Slum, favela, shanty town, barrio or ghetto are the names that defined urban areas with inhabitants living in informal settlements. Basically, the location of this type of squatting is found in the megacities as the result of the “new urban revolution”. In this scenario, as fast as the cities grow and the economical power becomes stronger, slums are the only large-scale solution of providing housing for low-income people. It is the only type of housing that is affordable and accessible to the poor in cities where the competition for land and profits is intense, and the places where they must live if they have little income or no other options. Furthermore, the identification of an area as a slum is based exclusively on socio-economic criteria, not on racial, ethnic, or religious criteria.⁹

1.4 Cases of study

Europe

The squatter reality in some of the European countries is understood as a political conflict and a reclamation of a housing right. However, in many of the main cities in Europe, some of the buildings and areas which had been abandoned became active social and cultural projects which nowadays are known internationally.

- Copenhagen – Christiania. The reality in this strategical place in Copenhagen is one of the best examples to understand how a squatting project can become an alternative conception of the way of living in contrast with scrupulous governments. Since this project started squatting a military area, in the earlier 1970's, “Freetown” has been creating a lot of controversy around the world and particularly around the Danish government. In a period when there was a lack of affordable housing in the city, its creation became also a protest against the government. After the years, what we can learn about, is that the drugs trade have changed the conception of its creation when a community spirit was founded and where all kind of cultural, artistic and musical events were located. In that sense,

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2003 *The Challenge of Slums – Global Report on Human Settlements*. UN Habitat

a self-sufficient state can remain alive during the years if a community regulation between the citizens is created.

- London. The squatter movement in England can be considered inside the reactivation model of empty houses. Understood in the beginning as a direct radical action to inspire other people to follow their model, there is an idea that is important to consider “the poorest man hath as true a title and just right to the land as the richest man”.¹⁰ Nowadays, squatting is not considered a crime and there are free services that provide information about the status of empty houses in the city. The procedure to enter into a building can be protected by a legal warning¹¹ which shows that the people there have the legal right to do it. This method, also gives an indication to other squatters that this house is already occupied.

Western Asia

- Istanbul. After the Second World War, the legislation of informal settlements in Istanbul, was focused in a strategy for poor people that hadn't enough resources to get a house in the city. One of the strategies that they created was to allow the *gecekondu*, which means “built in one night”. This kind of squatters that would build their own houses before police realized, couldn't be evicted after the construction of the complete house.¹² Although these constructions were in some situations out of the legislation in public lots, the government couldn't demolish them for personal and economical implications. The *gecekondu* process was rapidly increasing till the point that the politicians had to include this scene in the current legislation and consequently improve the conditions of those informal settlements to assure a minimum quality of life. Nowadays, some of the *gecekondu* have been regulated and others just entered in private interests or urban speculation in the way that squatters had to move to different outside parts of the city. In addition, there is another phenomenon that exists in Turkey that recognises living communities of more than 2000 people as legal sub-municipalities. That means that an informal settlement can afford an elected government, taxes recollection and the municipal services provision for those communities. This example, gives one of the clues of that essay in terms of definition, because we are not talking about urban poverty anymore, we should consider a legitimate form of an urban development.

10 Wates and Wolmar

1980 *Squatting: The Real Story*

11 1994 *Section 6 Criminal Law Act 1977*

As amended by Criminal Justice and Public Order Act

12 Ase Yonder

1998 *Desarrollo de Asentamientos Informales en Istanbul*, in *Ciudades Ilegales – La Ley y el Urbanismo en Países en Vías de Desarrollo* by Eclésio Fernandes and Ann Varley



Figure 4: *Gecekondu in Istanbul, Turkey*

South-East Asia

▪ **Manila - Philippines.** Squatters became a very important topic in the Filipino reality since the time after the Second World War. Nowadays, over 2 million people in the Philippines are living in slums, and in Manila alone, 50% of the over 11 million inhabitants live in slums.¹³ Poverty and the consequences after the usual natural disasters make the squatters live in extremely bad and unhealthy conditions. Squatting as requirement in this case, as hard as it can seem, doesn't restrict a smile in their children's. Filipino squatters create their small businesses, their own houses and their own communities to protect their selves against the authorities. If we consider that squatters have been living in informal settlements for about fifty years, new generations have their own memory of the sites and families have established strong links with the people and the place. However, on one hand the government has shown very less efforts to improve their situation if we consider all the population that is squatting nowadays. On the other hand, there have been attempts to upgrade slum areas and to relocate the families in other places basically out of the city. These attempts have been managed by governmental authorities and NGO's that have been trying to give a solution to poor families without enough resources to survive. Nevertheless, if we look at projects like Smokey Mountain in Tondo, Manila, we can see how the government had to be forced by international pressure to solve the problem of squatting in dumpsites. There is no such direct solution to control the unhealthy conditions in which squatters are living in Manila but, one thing is for sure, the level of development that we can observe in their participation programs, strong communities and capacity of self-organization will be one of the living clues for the next century.

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United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT)

2. Necessity of Society

Squatters living in slums usually become part of strong communities that, through the existence of clusters, can self-organize and make front to the attempts of eviction that politicians would undertake for the property of land. Many of the most important movements in music, dance and politics have had their origins in slums. However, places in megacities where slums are located, usually present some characteristics in common that can define the state of their living conditions: the lack of access to water and sanitation, the structural quality of housing, the security of tenure and the level of overcrowding. The upgrade process of any of these areas depends exclusively on the strategy of the government to accept and affront the real problem of the inhabitants: the necessity of squatting. If we look into the strategies to solve these problems, we realize that in the past decades there wasn't any effort to regulate them in a sensitive way and the most were considered wrong. The main problem is that very few countries have recognized this critical situation and slums became the result of failed policies, bad governance, corruption, inappropriate regulation, dysfunctional land markets, unresponsive financial system and a fundamental lack of political will. At this point the question is, are squatters necessary for the society?

2.1 Illegality

The informal settlements are a way to provide housing in an urban plot to a large number of people in most of the cities in development. Recent studies say that is not necessary, and not enough, to provide a complete legislation to improve the living condition within people from poor areas.¹⁴ However, governments still focus in the idea of getting a complete legalization concerning about taxes and debts to supply electricity and water to all the urban areas and also to beneficiate the private sector. The process of including these informal settlements in the urban economy would improve the illegality perception problems to the politicians and it would adapt better to the existing reality. Instead, the solutions

¹⁴ Eclésio Fernandes and Ann Varley
1998 *La Ley y el Urbanismo en Países en Vías de Desarrollo*

proposed by the governments are insufficient and don't give any solution to the political complexity or the affordable housing either.

"Simple life, nobody is restricting you, nobody is controlling what you do, once you have stayed here, you can stay the rest of your life" ¹⁵

2.2 Informal economy

"About 20 people have lived here over the years and it's been a place for band rehearsals, art projects, people practising dance routines, bike workshops. Squatting gives you a chance to think about things other than how you are going to pay the rent and ways to contribute to the world." ¹⁶

The way how informal settlements can contribute to the society without any housing tax is with an informal economy. It is a mistake to think that slums are an unnecessary or extraneous part of the city, that slums are just for poor people or that they are all the same.¹⁷ In a moment when the massive production is creating the same culture stereotypes worldwide, these small businesses give the alternative to explore the authentic in all senses. Informal economy gives the chance to return to the artisans, to exchange products almost without the necessity of money because this bartering forces each individual to produce his own way of living. Also, these places in which there is a vibrant mixing of different cultures, frequently result in new forms of artistic expression. Out of unhealthy, crowded and often dangerous environments can emerge cultural movements and levels of solidarity unknown in the suburbs of the rich. We shouldn't forget that inhabitants in slums are active people and everybody needs to eat. All have to survive to pay the infrastructures supplies with their small resources but, between all of them, it exists a balance: the poor, and this, has not to be considered an illegal problem.

¹⁵ Squatter living in a informal settlement in Kitale, Kenya

¹⁶ Squatter Anonym

¹⁷ 2003 *The Challenge of Slums – Global Report on Human Settlements*. UN Habitat ISBN 1844070360



Figure 4: *Damayang Lagi, Manila, Philippines*

3. The role of the architect

Considering architecture in the squatter world can be, for many, the antithesis of architecture in the sense that recycling, spontaneous, self-constructed and unplanned are the words that basically define the constructions in slums. However, these words have a powerful meaning in our new reality and should be considered by architects in their designs for the cities of the future.

3.1 Self-Sufficient

Squatters have the capacity to build their own environment with their hands even without any knowledge of structures, materials or design. However, if we look carefully to informal dwellings, we realize that most of them have a brilliant potential sense of recycling the waste that the cities create. In a world where massive production creates a lot of construction garbage, the society needs to recycle all of these materials in a way that they can be reused. In addition, we can find a new type of vernacular architecture in this constructions as well as nature provided the resources to build in the past. The role of contemporary urban architects should be understood considering this potential in a way that cities need to let urban spaces for incoming natural growth. Also, architects need to provide the technical knowledge to let squatters create their own houses. One way to assure that kind of basic conditions can be understood as a construction handbook called: “do it yourself”. In the present, there are many architects that are aware of this new movement and concern about the problems of squatters in the world.

3.2 Legal gaps

In some countries where the restrictions in law are unfair and legal procedures don't adapt to the urban reality, architects found ways to avoid these problems through the consideration of legal gaps in law. Santiago Cirujeda, a Spanish architect with his studio *Recetas Urbanas*, has been researching in this scenario with collectives that assist him to recycle materials from construction sites and sometimes avoiding the law to create new reconsiderations of the urban space. These kinds of examples should be considered for architects as a way of answering to the urban reality problems that our cities experience in our time.

3.3 Urban Shelter

The urban reality that contemporary cities experience in our times, are far from the dream from modernist urban planners who imagined designing "garden cities" of harmony and light, or who speculated about ultra-high-rise futuristic cyber cities. The process to transform quantity into quality through abstraction and repetition has been a failure. "The" city has no longer exists.¹⁸ Dissatisfaction with the contemporary city has not led to the development of a credible alternative but, our reality has much more complexity and slums are one of the examples that make us reconsider the new strategies for the future. To survive, urbanism will have to imagine a new newness where many multidisciplinary processes should be considered as small interventions in the city fissures that already exist.

¹⁸ Rem Koolhaas
1995 *What Happened to Urbanism?* from *S,M,L,XL* Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau

4. Conclusion

There is one common aspect that better defines the squatting communities: self-independence. That characteristic, easy to relate with anarchism, shouldn't be considered as an ideological movement to inhabit our planet. As we said before, the squatter movement is the result of a new world that has been growing in a vertiginous velocity. Slums are the waste created by political and economical interests to foundate a world based in high technologies, massive production and unsustainable globalization. However, we shouldn't forget that we can't stop the world evolution in terms of multi ethnicism and remix of cultures in the human movements worldwide. But, what we can learn about all of this is that we are entering in a new generation of urban inhabitants that will occupy the world. This new status will be defined by a new community behaviour that will consider more important our education and our coexistence with the others. A closer natural behaviour will make us understand that there is no private owner of the land and we have to respect and balance our direct living with the earth. Our perspective to affront the new reality have to be considered in our ideas, designs, talks, reviews, global meetings, strategies and basically, the politicians should get closer to the public opinion and offer real solutions to the social problems. A new world is possible if we all become squatters of the cities.

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