

The Metonymic Slum: *Home* in the Developing World

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ABSTRACT

The following paper maintains that the global housing problem undertaken by the developing world bypasses a fundamental issue. Overall it ignores the relationship between two simple terms – that of house and home. This relationship is not merely one of semantics; it also has a huge impact on concepts of efficiency and sustainability. While the literature on housing is legion, the term retains a predominantly functional relationship to building technologies and the construction process, particularly in regard to current concerns over sustainability. This leads inevitably to the idea that because slums are poorly constructed they should be demolished. In the process, ‘sustainable development,’ usually deletes the psychological, spiritual, symbolic and material qualities of home as having an unquantifiable and therefore extraneous relationship to housing problems in general. As a result, much intrinsic efficiency encompassed in the term home is ignored, and the true nature of sustainability in housing is subsequently reduced in effectiveness and quality of life. This paper suggests that the defining criteria for sustainable housing should be expanded to include social relations, belief systems and other factors, concluding with the observation that true sustainability must include life as part of the equation.

KEYWORDS: house, home, slum; sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

"Within the overall context of an enabling approach, Governments should take appropriate action in order to promote, protect and ensure the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing" (1: paragraph 61).

Understanding the political economy of slums is indeed a massive and complex task. However, necessarily brief account of this dilemma is required to contextualise the problem, prior to addressing housing issues and the concept of home. This context involves international finance, politics and agencies; non-governmental organisations (NGO's), national and local governments, civil strife, ethnic tensions, starvation and war. Then there are the vexed issues of what people actually experience – poverty, despair, disease, crime and violence in all of its forms. At the largest compass, it is no exaggeration to say that the economic system of the entire world is involved (2, 3, 5). But the globalisation of wealth in the space of flows, also involves the globalisation of poverty and the recycling of oppression in the material spaces of third world deprivation (4). Hence "What appears to be a global phenomenon is the growth of poverty, and particularly extreme poverty" (6: 81). Extreme poverty can be defined as anyone living on a consumption less than one US dollar a day.

In recent years, the economic crises of the capitalist world system have forced the developed nations to look after their own house first. Nuclear disasters, tsunamis, earthquakes, corruption, economic meltdown from Thai, American and Icelandic banks, corrupt practices, collapse of housing markets and other causes, result in commitments to the poor being overlooked. After several major shocks, the global economy remains on the edge of a precipice, and at the time of writing, default by Greece on its massive debt threatens the existence of the Euro and a meltdown of the entire world system. Neither have the wealthy nations survived unscathed. For example, one in seven Americans are currently destitute due to the collapse of the housing market. (7). In Europe 14% of Italians is living in poverty (8).

Consequently, the rich countries of the north have had to focus on domestic problems, so far without much success. The net effect has been that in order to stimulate their economies, funds have been withdrawn from the effort to combat global warming, but notably with serious undermining of human aid programs—a process that has actually been going on for years (9).

"The analysis showed that the scope of austerity was severe and widening quickly. Of the 128 countries (contributing to the International Monetary Fund) 70 reduced spending by nearly three percentage points of GDP during 2010, and 91 planned cuts in 2012" (10: 1).

So in 'the global south' where most of the world's poverty exists, rapidly growing metropolitan areas and the concurrent GDP growth (Gross Development Product) of the developing world tragically

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coincides with stagnating or declining economies in many third world cities(11,12).One dominant characteristic of this new world system has been to create the global migrant, a person forced into economic migration due to underdevelopment, frequently enhanced by natural disasters, war and other catastrophes (13, 14, 15).This of itself is a human disaster, tearing families apart, criminalizing the unemployed, and encouraging human trafficking, smuggling, corruption and imprisonment.It has also had the effect of generating divided cities such as in Dubai where 82% of its population are economic migrants, predominantly from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Of this total 300,000 men live in labour camps on the periphery, with another half a million living in the city in highly segregated communities (16). Many are housed in what are called *Bidoon*, basically metal shipping containers that exist outside any humane habitat. Overall, it is safe to say that slum living will remain the world's housing predominant stock for the foreseeable future, and possibly in perpetuity.

2. The Housing Problematic

All of the above considerations exacerbate a global problem that is already on the brink of recession. The United Nation Human Settlement Programme Report published in 2007 predicts that as long as rapid urbanization, high urban poverty, inequality and wide income discrepancy, insecure tenure, and globalization continue to show no sign of pausing, slums will remain part of the world's urban living condition. From the above context, clearly this is a statement of fact rather than a speculation (17). Half the world's population now lives in urbanised areas, a more accurate term than 'cities' which is itself an indefinable term. Notably, record of two billion people will be living in slum areas by 2030(18). As Mike Davis comments that by 2015, black Africa will have 332 million slum dwellers, a number that will continue to double every fifteen years (19). This population will also experience ongoing deprivation in at least three of the United Nation's five descriptors of the term 'slum' (inadequate access to safe water, sanitation and other infrastructure; poor quality of housing; overcrowding; and insecure residential status)(1, 20, 21, 22). While current attempts, both at the international and national level, focus on developing immediate strategies and schemes to alleviate and redevelop slum areas, significant problems remain. But as Gilbert points out:

"Even more alarmingly, UN-Habitat (1) estimates that, in 2001, 99.4% of the urban population of Ethiopia lived in slums and 98.5% of those in Afghanistan. In the urban areas of virtually all of the 49 least developed countries of the world, the majority lived in slums" (23: 706).

For all practical purposes, we can see that already two entire states may be categorised as slum nations. As cities continue to grow, the extent of problems associated with urban life become more complex, and to a large degree they are infinitely less responsive to simple answers. Even urban planning systems which might hold some salvation, are frequently part of the problem, with corrupt management, deficient resources, inadequate legislation and enforcement, hence little authority and even fewer ideas. So planning frequently adopts 'policing the poor' as its mandate, where getting rid of slums is the first priority for improving urban life, as is currently the case in Lagos, Calcutta, Rio de Janeiro, Bangkok, Manila and many other cities that have vast reservoirs of slum living. So the concept of development is now conceptually challenged in both the first and third world, since even developed nations struggle to maintain growth. The global south is also poorly equipped and hence it tends to suffer more severely the impacts of burgeoning urbanisation, widening income discrepancy, insecure housing tenure, and chronic infrastructure both in terms of institutions as well as transport, water and power, and other services. Health is as big a problem as food and shelter, and The World Disasters Report funded by the Red Cross states that of the one billion undernourished people, 60% are women, and 175 million children have stunted growth as a result of partial starvation (24, 25, 26).

The United Nation Human Settlement Programme in its 2007 report holds that the above are the main grounds for the onset of slum living. The report further emphasizes that urban poverty and slums will remain part of the world's urban living condition if there is no serious endeavour, firstly to slow down rural to urban migration; second, to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor; and third, to forcibly decelerate the impact of globalization, perceived by the rich nations as a benefit, and the poor as a curse. In addition, many of the programs set in place to assist slum dwellers such as flood control measures in Bangladesh actually reduce the livelihood of the poor even further (27). Hence Amin's assessment that the dispossessed 'experience actually existing capitalism as nothing short of savagery' (28: 125).

Considering all prior factors, it is therefore easy to argue that a new form of imperialism has arrived, one based not on physical colonisation but on economic domination tied to the global informational economy (29, 30).Amin refers to this situation as the five monopolies of the centre – technological monopoly; control of worldwide financial markets; monopolistic access to the planet's natural resources; media and communication monopolies; and monopolies over weapons of mass destruction. Given this environment, the chance that the global south will be able to encourage the global north into more equitable strategies would seem farfetched (31).All of this is what one expects to

hear, resulting for the poor in the standard cycle of the exploitation of the poor and dispossessed, necessary but illegal land appropriation, the construction of illegal environments, destruction of these same environments by urban planning and the displacement of the problem to another site in the megacities of today. In this context, slums are always defined as 'other' with no redeeming features, due to the fact that their existence is interpreted in terms of the dominant narrative of the times. e.g. the global capitalist system and its ideologies. These ideologies have even been adopted by the academy, specifically in mainstream urban studies and urban planning, where the replacement of slums has formed the dominant discourse for decades.

However, the new urban studies are currently focussing on an entirely different method of viewing slum environments which promise more hope than is usually recounted. Simply stated, they do this by totally reversing the existential focus from the bureaucrat to the dweller, thus reorienting research and dialogue on slum living. Originating in the work of GayatriChakravortySpivak (32), Chantal Mouffe (33), and Jennifer Robinson (34), and more broadly in the post-colonial theorists such as HomiBhabha and Edward Said, a new literature is emerging that recapitulates the idea of subaltern urbanism. This term was derived from a group of South Asian scholars who were interested in post colonialism, and the recounting of history from below rather than from the voices of political elites. Similarly, subaltern studies reify the real life of ordinary people, recounting their experiences as having equal weight to that of domination in all of its forms. In this context, slums and mega – slums become productive categories within urbanism and the megacity, “where writing takes place against apocalyptic and dystopian narratives of the slum, subaltern urbanism provides accounts of the slum as a terrain of habitation, livelihood and politics” (35: 224). Stated simply, urban studies has tended to follow economic orthodoxy where slums are considered unnatural, undesirable, illegal and contaminated, rather than viewing them with some hope, as creative working environments with pre-existing social capital and the capacity for economic production :

“The slum, Bayat argues, may not be characterised by radical religiosity, but it does engender a distinctive type of political agency: ‘informal life’ (36). For Bayat (36), ‘informal life’, typified by ‘flexibility, pragmatism, negotiation, as well as constant struggle for survival and self – development’ is the ‘*habitus* of the dispossessed’. This idea, of ‘slum *habitus*’ is a key feature of subaltern urbanism” (35: 224).

The term *habitus* is, however, somewhat difficult to define, issuing as it does from French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, who used the term in much of his work. But for our purposes we can take it to mean the social capital acquired by slum dwellers from their experiences of everyday life and the productive capacity this entails (37). It is this positive perspective on the slum and super-slum within megacities that I wish to retain in this paper - the political reality of the subaltern life of the poor and the *habitus* that the slum offers.

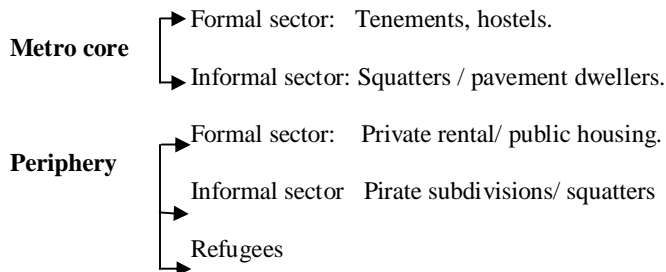
3. Slum Functionality

Arguing from this new perspective, it is clear that the actuality of the slum is contentious, and there has been much recent debate over the apparently irresolvable issue of defining what a slum is in the first place (38, 23, and 15). In the book *The Return of the Slum* Gilbert remarks that “The use of the word slum will recreate many of the myths about poor people that years of careful research have discredited...the campaign implies that cities can actually rid themselves of slums, an idea that is wholly unachievable” (23: 619). Much of this debate revolves round the incredible diversity of factors bearing on the concept. In wealthy nations, poverty is defined in relation to the prevailing standards of living, which by most third world standards would constitute luxury. In the poorest of countries, with almost everyone living in a slum environment, there are no other standards to relate to. Geography, climate, culture and economy all affect our conceptualisation of slum (39). So we can see that the physical properties of slums will vary from place to place, and that their definition can be related to a basket of conditions that will vary both qualitatively and quantitatively across such factors as the elementary protection from nature, the presence or absence of basic services such as water, electricity, fuel for cooking, sanitation, the provision of the public realm, such as it might be, and the overall security of the settlement in terms of crime and violence (40). All of these qualities are significant and will vary across all geographic regions.

So rather than defining the term slum for this paper, which will serve no useful purpose, and is possibly unhelpful, I maintain the idea that overall the term slum may be seen as counterproductive – an externally imposed standard that people themselves might not experience. Because of the massive variation across the geographic, economic and political conditions that contextualise slum environments, it is transparent that the concept slum is a relative rather than an absolute term and it is this basic idea that permeates subaltern studies. This may be seen from many of the more graphic studies of slums, and what becomes clear from all of them is that this relativity expands the potential of slum environments rather than limiting them (25, 35). Nonetheless, it is useful to locate the concept of slum in relation to

other forms of housing. For example, at the highest level of tenure, come those persons who actually own their own house/home outright, descending from there into those persons who are refugees and for whom the right to exist does not apply, let alone what form of housing they occupy, for example: owner-occupiers; mortgage payers; public housing tenants; private sector tenants; tenants in purpose built public housing; owner occupied but sublet to tenants; council tenants in slums (waiting demolition); renters of rooms; squatters; refugee camps.

Adding to this list, Mike Davis has even suggested a typology of slums, where certain categories may overlap with those above in terms of the form of tenure, making the problem of appropriate typologies of housing even more arcane, particularly when most countries have their own localized patois for slum areas e.g. *kampung* (Indonesia), *pueblos jóvenes* (Peru), *gececordas* (Turkey), *bidonvilles* (France) etc. Davis classification would apply to most of these and the following is a simplified version of his typology (38):



The point to be made here is that it is extremely difficult to generate any meaningful typology given the sheer diversity of economic, cultural and climatic factors across the slum phenomenon. Among the best studies of slum environments are those of Breman (41) and Maier (42), whose account of *PhongNuy* in Bangkok is a classic. The point to be made here is that the concept slum is not unrelated to how people feel about where they are living, which frequently bypasses any objective standards of quality. If the feelings associated with home are present they can compensate for many of the actual material benefits that slums lack. If people are comfortable with this, then the slum is in fact a successful environment albeit deprived in many ways. Notably, it is in this intersection between experience and abstract measurement that the concept of home becomes significant.

Rather than pursue the idea of defining such environments it seems more useful to focus on the dimensions of the concept of home, a topic which is not included in any of these considerations, yet is vital to the understanding of home that the term slum might encompass. Insight in to these associated and frequently hidden qualities is demanded prior to the development of a strategic framework in re-housing slum dwellers. Such an understanding will ultimately enable policy makers not only to propose technical solutions – to eliminate slums – but sound and socially sustainable approaches in doing so. It also seems a reasonable proposition that if some effort is made to incorporate those dimensions of home that people hold most dear, efficiencies beyond those of simple physics would arise, frequently at no material cost. In addition, significant support would be harvested by policymakers in achieving their goals, rather than enduring resistance and rejection from the slum communities the schemes are dedicated to at the first place. So after examining at the idea the subaltern slum, where the concept of home dominates that of house, we must now raise the idea of sustainability and the domination of function (house) and that of form (home).

4. The vexed Question of Sustainability

The concept of sustainable development now pervades every aspect of human life, since an awareness of the earth's finite resources is slowly being recognised by governments and corporations alike, and the idea of sustainable cities and sustainable architecture permeates the literature (43, 44, 45, 46, 47). At the macro level of global development, population expansion means necessarily increased production measured in GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Mechanisms of production based in transnational corporations mean that Darwinian laws of competition prevail. No company will willingly reduce profits or sacrifice market share to competitors. So the merciless exploitation of natural resources continues. To this extent the new term '*ecocidal*' does not seem unreasonable to describe the process. Not only this but the word sustainable has been co-opted and politicised by big capital and has been rendered meaningless, with sustainable formula one race cars, sustainable banks, sustainable or 'green' transport etc. For example the 'green' Toyota Prius car is only green insofar as it reduces petrol consumption, which still remains a non-renewable resource. More importantly, it continues to use exactly the same wasteful forms of production as any other vehicle. So there are massive differences in how the term sustainable should be understood, measured and applied. (48, 49, 50, 51, 52).

At the micro level, similar circumstances exist, and in our area of concern – housing- there are now singular attempts to give the term sustainable some substance. In most countries, developing and aspiring, there is a growing awareness for sustainability in housing development. While this is of itself laudable, it does not go far enough. There are two interrelated reasons for this. First, I argue that sustainability is too narrowly defined since the material is stressed over the existential. Second, since the former is statistically easier to regulate, the quantitative dimension of most research dominates the qualitative. So what we find is a singular concern with the material properties of buildings rather than the physical, psychological social, symbolic and other needs of the occupants (53, 54). To this degree, all developed countries will have standards for sustainable building design, and in Asia, particularly South East Asia where the author is located, similar concerns now prevail. Despite the chameleon-like qualities of the word sustainable, all developed countries have quantifiable standards across the entire spectrum of building activity, enshrined in planning and building standards, development controls, design guidelines etc., but without any real or effective political context (e.g. carbon emissions, global warming) (55). A lack of clarity is therefore reflected in policy guidelines. Nonetheless it is fair to say that by now no developed country lacks standards for virtually every dimension of sustainable development in the housing arena, and even those countries on the cusp between development and underdevelopment such as China are greatly concerned (Idrus and Siong(56). In Planning Cities for People the problem of urbanisation is laid out in great detail, with the development of low carbon eco-cities noted as a priority (57). Here eight dimensions of the problem are considered which we do not have to go into here, except to say that the process clearly has to start with sustainable planning practices at the macro scale, and sustainable urban design at the meso scale, prior to any feasible sustainable housing emerging (It is important to note also that many countries even in the developed world do not begin to recognise urban design as a critical part of this process (58, 59, 60). As indicated above, sustainable housing adopts the concept of efficiency defined exclusively in quantitative terms.

In Asia where interest in sustainable development is gathering speed, many countries already possess energy efficient building codes, where the same standards of sustainability and efficiency apply to housing development.

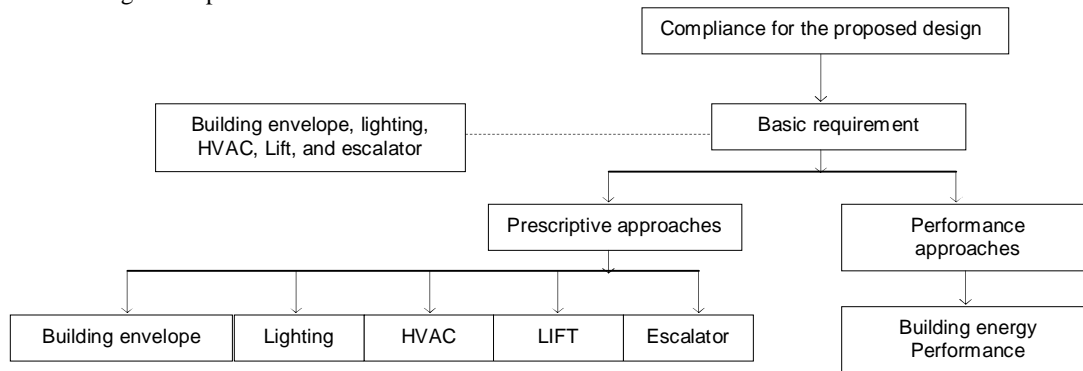


Figure 1, Compliance Framework for Hong Kong Building Energy Standards (61)

Already China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and India have well developed codes of practice for energy efficiency (61). Overall however, compliance to these standards has been problematic. While the larger cities have greater surveillance, standards decrease in relation this hierarchy, where in the smaller towns and villages, no standards prevail. The level of control shown by some agencies is demonstrated by the detailed consideration given e.g. by the Hong Kong Government. I will not dwell further on this issue, since for the purposes of my argument, the above situation is sufficient to demonstrate not only that quantitative housing standards prevail in determining standards of efficiency, but also that the word house can be confused with the term home, thus obviating the qualitative properties of home as contributing to the overall domestic efficiency of family life and the domestic sphere of production.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued two main points. In the new context of subaltern urbanism, mainstream urban studies have proved inadequate to the task of perceiving slum environments as they actually function. It has instead chosen to support the mainstream position of urban planning and the state, namely that slum environments are basically unproductive, treacherous places, rife with crime and disease, and therefore should be eliminated. While the first part of this statement may be true, the

second does not necessarily follow, unless it is in support of private capital or the developmental policies of the state. Increasingly frequently these interests coincide in the context of state neo-corporatism, where business practices have been adopted. More significantly, the private sector, previously confined to advising governments on policy, is now in many cases responsible for making it as well, thus writing the rules it lives by.

Second, I have suggested that existing concepts of efficiency applied to housing, both existing and new, represent the mechanical, functional and material aspects of construction, and that a massive contribution to housing efficiency is being ignored. Stated crudely, and as a matter of speculation, it is reasonable to assume that efficient housing could be constructed on the basis of a detailed, considerate and enlightened interpretation of the above criteria, in the absence of any mechanical definitions of sustainability being applied whatsoever. Given the fact that a considered body of knowledge suggests that slums are now a permanent part of the megacity, urban policy should be reoriented to the enhancement of slum areas taking into account the above debate, although even this idea has its critics. Nonetheless, the dominant narrative would suggest a policy of slum improvement in all cases rather than elimination, the restructuring of property rights and tenure, and the provision by the state of basic services such as water, electricity, health and education. While this might require some expansion of the illegal public realm within slum environments, the benefits would far exceed the costs. Life must be considered as part of the equation in any consideration of slum environments worldwide.

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