

The Inhabited Borders of Babylon: A Prelude to the Silent Borders Workshop

We can't do Mickey Mouse feel-good projects - digging latrines and helping 54 families to get a better toilet. This will not solve the problem. We need to focus on education, on the next generation of decision makers. We need to change minds, not build water pumps¹



HELIÓPOLIS II, ©DIONISIO GONZÁLEZ, image courtesy Novalis Contemporary Art Torino

When looking at the landscape of extreme poverty and human suffering of slums the first reaction is to think how to “stop the bleeding”: to start working on the urgent, immediate needs of slum-dwellers and improve their conditions. This approach is highly necessary and desperately needed, yet by focusing exclusively on strategies and instruments to upgrade slums we risk to transform the overwhelming feeling of urgency, inspired by the dramatic living conditions of billions of people worldwide, into the lens through which such a condition is understood.

The sense of emergency is not unlike that caused by major catastrophes - earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, just to name a few - and could suggest a reading

¹ Lars Reuterswärd, Director, Shelter and Sustainable Human Settlements Development Division, UN-HABITAT, as reported in: “*Architects aren't ready for an urbanized planet*”, By Amelia Gentleman. Published: Monday, August 20, 2007 on: www.nytimes.com/2007/08/20/world/asia/20ihtletter.2.7182262.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=architects%20aren't%20ready&st=cse

of slums as exceptional events too: a temporary, extreme condition of suffering that requires healing to recover and get well.



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This is not the case: if we look at urban dynamics, at least since 1950, rapid urban growth accompanied by the even faster growth of slums and informal settlements is a persistent, global trend². The behaviour pattern of urban dynamics is that of a far-from-equilibrium system, and slums are an integral part of a current, dissipative and powerfully attractive urban model³. If we take this perspective into consideration we are forced to reconsider the act of healing existing slums to stop them growing and getting worse: parallel to first-aid emergency actions aimed at upgrading existing slums, strategies must be found to affect the behaviour of contemporary urban growth models.

² “Cities growing faster would be expected to generate more slums. This general assumption is empirically confirmed by the analysis of a certain number of selected countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Based on a sample of 10 countries per region, composed of five with the highest slum prevalence and another five with the lowest proportion of urban slum population, it was determined that over a period of 51 years (1950-2001) urban population growth was a crucial factor for the development of slums.”, in *Slums of the World*, Edited by UN-Habitat and available at: www.unhabitat.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=1124.

“The growth of slums in the last 15 years has been unprecedented. In 1990, there were nearly 715 million slum dwellers in the world. By 2000, the slum population had increased to 912 million and to approximately 998 million today. UN-Habitat estimates that if current trends continue, it will reach 1.4 billion by 2020.” Eduardo Lopez Moreno and Rasna Warah , *Urban and Slum Trends in the 21st Century* , article available at www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2006/issue2/0206p24.htm

Updated data and figures about urban growth can be found in the *World Urbanization Prospects The 2009 Revision*, edited by UN-Habitat and available at: www.un.org/esa/population

³ “One of every three city dwellers lives in slum conditions; some slums become less visible or more integrated into the urban fabric as cities develop and income improves, while others become permanent features of urban landscapes”, Eduardo Lopez Moreno and Rasna Warah , *Urban and Slum Trends in the 21st Century* , article available at [ww.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2006/issue2/0206p24.htm](http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2006/issue2/0206p24.htm)

Looking closely at the growth trends of cities - no matter how complex the subjacent dynamics – only a few paths of action remain to alter the overall system behaviour: to reduce the disequilibrium that fuels the growth, or to increase the resistance of the city to informal dwelling.

The latter form of action, overtly oppressive and inhuman, continues to be widely applied despite its proven inefficacy, while the former would require a concerted action which converges political, economical, technical and social decisions at global and local levels. Too much time and too many “enlightened decision makers” to be found. Slums are here to stay⁴



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Yet this apparent defeat lies again on a consolidated but misleading notion of developing cities: that their growth can only be effectively controlled through top-down policies and big decisions. Quite the opposite, if we fully engage with the idea that urban growth is based on complexity and systemic behaviour⁵ then we must embrace the idea that instead of drastic measures we need a set of instruments for adaptive strategies to cope with urban growth as an incremental process, driving it through continuous interactions and adaptation rather than fixed boundaries and prescriptions. Within this

⁴It should be also noted that since the 2003 Revision of the “World Urbanization Prospects”, the UN-Habitat studies started outlining the fact that interventions against extreme poverty are often made easier and more effective in urban than rural conditions, therefore the idea that simply stopping the slums is a good strategy against poverty altogether could be a completely misleading one

⁵ Micheal Batty, *Generating Cities from the Bottom-up: Using Complexity Theory for Effective Design*, in *Cluster 07 – Transmitting Architecture* available at: www.cluster.eu

framework, slums must be understood as a basic form of urban growth, responding to needs that the "official" city has no place left to host; slums can be considered as true, thick city borders: growing envelopes wrapping and infiltrating gentrified urban cores⁶.

In this context the initial question becomes "how can we enable potential slum-dwellers to give rise to more acceptable living environments?" rather than "how can we stop slums?"

Learning from strategies that have proven successful in upgrading existing upgrading slums⁷ through community empowerment and limited external intervention, to draft new strategies for growing cities which focus on flexible tools able to support ad hoc actions; these can range from localized injections of resources and services to innovative more dispersed and less centralized forms of infrastructure⁸. Borders between the formal city and existing or potential slums could become structured interfaces rather than walls and fences, harnessing growth in safe areas and discouraging settlement in dangerous geologic conditions.

⁶ "In the absence of competent authorities, it is the poor who develop and build the cities of today and of the twenty-first century. The capacities, experiences and activities of the poor themselves point the way to an alternative form of urban development that is characterised by self-organized communities. Critical to any large-scale realisation of this alternative form is the involvement and commitment of the urban poor themselves. As important is an increase in the capacity of grassroots organizations to represent themselves to the powerful professional agencies who control state resources and who set official policies. Equally important is that they both represent and are accountable to the needs of local residents. Understanding how these changes can be achieved is critical to ensuring that the cities of the future address the needs of their poorest citizens", Sheela Patel, Joel Bolnick and Diana Mitlin in *Squatting on the global highway*, available at: www.sparcindia.org

⁷ A general overview plus a case-study discussion and several references about slum upgrading can be found in: Sundar Burra, *Towards a pro-poor framework for slum upgrading in Mumbai, India*, in *Environment&Urbanization*, Vol 17 No 1 April 2005 also available at: www.sparcindia.org/docs/sbupgrading.pdf and in Sundar Burra, *Cities Alliance Project on pro-poor slum upgrading framework for Mumbai, India*, final report submitted to Cities Alliance and UN-Habitat in 2003 and also available at: www.sparcindia.org

⁸ A short discussion and several references about distributed electricity generation in slums as an example of dispersed infrastructure can be found in: David Schaengold, *Clean Distributed Generation for Slum Electrification: The Case of Mumbai*, available at: www.princeton.edu/~mauzeral/wws402d_s06/Schaengold.pdf



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Border instruments could be imagined in several forms depending on urban conditions, local community assets and available resources. “Service packs” for settlers, support-structures to be completed and inhabited by dwellers, networks of dispersed and basic user-managed infrastructure are only a few of the examples open for investigation by architects, city planners, decision makers and activists.

The task is to find strategies based on radical incrementalism⁹ - experimented in the upgrading of existing slums - to improve the evolution of forthcoming and growing settlements.

The photographs illustrating this article are by the artist Dionisio González from the series *Arquitetura da sobra* a project carried out over several years of traveling throughout the internal world of the shantytowns of Sao Paulo and Río de Janeiro. The images are protected by copyright and published courtesy of Novalis Contemporary Art Torino

⁹ Edgar Pieterse, *Deciphering city futures*, in *Cluster 07 – Transmitting Architecture* available at: www.cluster.eu