

Slum as Theory



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_Vyjayanthi Rao

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Slums constitute a foundational trope in urban studies. From Friedrich Engels to Jacob Riis in the 19th and the early 20th centuries to the 2003 UN-Habitat Report on Slums and Mike Davis' recent book *The Planet of Slums*, the slum appears over and over as a theoretically productive spatial ecology. In contemporary urban studies, the slum represents an invitation to think through both the material aspects and processes involved in contemporary urbanism and the ethical and epistemological underpinnings of urban theory today. Both are matters of equal concern as urban growth explodes across the world but particularly in countries of the global South. If a large proportion of the world's population will be settling in cities in the global South, what does that imply for the location and the effects of urban theory? We must remind ourselves here of the intimate relation between theorising the city and the social and philosophical project of modernity. If London, Paris, New York and Berlin provided social theorists of the 19th and 20th centuries the rich, empirical basis for creating arguments about the project of modernity, what ground do cities like Mumbai, Sao Paulo, Shanghai and Lagos provide for a similar project today? In this essay I will explore the theoretical place of the slum today as cities of the global South begin to exert new material and ethical pressures on our understanding of global urban processes. In light of this exploration, I turn to the question of design action and its relation to the near and distant futures of urbanism.

Risk and the City:

Although urban settlement increased at a steady pace throughout the 20th century across the world, the phenomenon of mega-cities or cities with more than 10 million residents is a relatively new one, emerging as an object of theory, debate and policy intervention during the last few decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st. This period also coincides with global economic transformations and fundamental changes in governance policies, especially in policies connected with national growth and development strategies. As global capital markets have become the primary drivers of economic growth, the welfare-oriented biopolitics of many post-colonial, Southern nations have undergone a corresponding shift. Nowhere is this change more dramatically visible than in the spatial transformation of cities in the South. Alongside the construction of spectacular spatial products including office towers, malls, technology campuses and luxury housing projects in many Southern cities, there has been an explosion of so-called informal spaces of housing and work, including small, home-based workshops, street-vending and slum-housing. Characteristic of most Southern mega-cities is the dramatically uneven distribution of population across these spaces. In Mumbai, for example, it is estimated that more than 50% of the population occupies less than 10% of the city's land for living. These settlements often combine housing and work spaces resulting in a dense, heterogeneous spatial ecology.

A vast literature in disciplines across the social sciences has closely examined and explored the conditions under which these settlements have developed, the forms of life that have emerged and even the “relational ontologies” that characterise emergent forms of community, material infrastructure and politics in environments that are precarious, risky, unpredictable and unstable (Al Sayyad 2004, Canclini 2008, Davis 2006, Simone 2004a, Robinson 2006). While tropes of collapse, crisis and catastrophe dominate as terms justifying the theoretical exploration of favelas, barrios, zhopadpattis and kampungs, there is an equally rich literature focusing on the persistence of these forms of habitation and economy as forms through which marginalised populations are substantiating their presence in cities across the world (see especially Appadurai 2002, Chatterjee 2004, Simone 2004a, 2010). The slum, however, is not merely an empirical object or a spatial container of social processes and effects. Instead it is a discursive object, at once material and imaginary, that has significant theoretic effects. Thus far, however, the slum and its theorisation has yielded numerous critical insights but they remain to one side of an unstated dividing line – what architect Teddy Cruz refers to as a “political equator” – which has resulted in the reproduction rather than the breaching of numerous binary oppositions through which cities continue to be studied, such as “formal” and “informal,” “First-World” and “Third-World” and so on (Cruz 2005).

I would suggest here that exploring the historically specific effects of the slum in a theoretic register, while remaining close to practices on the ground has the potential for new ways of thinking through urban history and thinking about urban futures. Marxist geography and world-systems theory have both explored urban space as the expression of various economic and social processes, positing models of urban space such as the metropolis and the megalopolis corresponding to the imperial and post-imperial capitalist polities respectively (Wallerstein 2004). Yet such models fail to account for the coexistence of diverse models of spatial organisation within urban systems globally, not exclusively situated either in the North or in the South.

On the other hand, globally unifying theories of modernity also find themselves at an impasse as the failure of decades of state-sponsored planning to institute the goods – justice, equity and a purposeful “ethical life” in the Hegelian sense – to which the liberal project of modernity aspires, has become impossible to ignore. In response, architect-theorists like Rem Koolhaas propose to diagram and understand the functional dysfunction of cities like Lagos as a normative rather than pathological state and thereby shift the focus of the endpoint of modernity from one exemplified by the orderly and planned metropolis of happy consumers to the extreme geographies of cities across the globe which are nevertheless regulated by markets for resources, goods and capital (both human and financial) through the constant production and reproduction of volatility (Enwezor 2003, Koolhaas 2002). This position invites

a vigorous debate on the relationship between conditions and possibilities and, more specifically, draws attention to the limiting of possibilities for marginalised groups to options provided by market participation alone (Gandy 2005).

Despite their desire to make universal claims, I suggest that neither of these theoretical positions have tackled the slum as a concept in the philosophical sense in spite of its centrality to their arguments about power and modernity respectively. What are the ethical and epistemological implications of considering slum as theory for understanding contemporary urbanism as such rather than confining it to explaining particular geographies? By asking the question in this form, I posit an expansive understanding of “slum” as a set of conditions with social, political and cultural effects, derived from a set of material practices and forms situated in the world, which defy the fixing of their values by fiat. Thus, I am as much interested in the slum as a form of currency that enables redevelopment at a mega-scale in cities like Mumbai and Jakarta as I am in forms of settlement that serve to incarcerate and therefore render particular social and ethnic groups vulnerable to exploitation and disaster in cities like New Orleans as well as in those conditions that challenge received ontological understandings of the State by introducing new forms of political participation into circulation in places like New Delhi and Cairo. But first I return to the historical sketch I began earlier of the historically specific effects of slum as theory.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the effects of slum as theory are closely connected to the rise of the industrial city and the need for certainty, order and predictability in a world of expanding markets and industrial processes, guided by the conquering triumphalism of European capital and empires. The spatial grid that guides the growth of New York City could be viewed as a material artifact encapsulating these historically specific processes, as it seeks to fix value in relation to space (Boyer 1985). In a number of post-colonial societies, urban master-plans signify similar ambitions. In the late 20th and early 21st century, by contrast, if we closely examine slum as theory, particularly the role played by discourses about slums in framing urban policy at the global level, we perceive an emergent relation to risk and volatility rather than order and certainty. For example, surveys classifying cities as being at risk purely in relation to the ratios of residents participating in informal housing markets have enabled the deployment of “mega-projects” as solutions to such crises (Benjamin 2008).

“Mega” infrastructure projects including airports, roads, technology parks and shopping malls have become, in many cities of the South, a primary driver of not only urban but also national economies and economic value production. An imaginary of the slum provides the critical context for monitoring, measuring, assessing, evaluating and thereby manufacturing an appropriate quantification of risk that can be marketed to various

classes of investors. The subsequent displacement and resettlement of populations from neighbourhoods that are viewed as vulnerable, precarious and dysfunctional provides other cycles of evaluation, assessment and petitioning on the part of residents to participate and to be included in the processes of “formalisation” even as new urban economic value is being generated through the very process of their displacement which makes available “their” spaces to new markets and to new circuits of risk.

Thus, diagramming the mega-city as a space “at risk” where risk is understood as a sense of threat and vulnerability turns it into a space “of risk” where risk is understood as opportunity generated by volatility, flux and instability. In the realm of political action and participation as well, this relationship of the city to risk via slum as theory has been generative – numerous authors have stressed the emergence of new forms of political participation as a result of these assessments and the consequent application of mega-projects as solutions. However, such positions assume the inevitability of a particular form of global economic and political integration. The grid as an engine of value production and “slum risk” or the trope of the risky mega-city as a generator of new circuits of value are fundamentally different in that while the former operates through a regulating fiction, the latter operationalises value through the fiction of a lack of regulation that must be rectified. Yet because the fiction itself must be maintained, new forms of instability must be engineered, manufactured or otherwise discovered. Discourses around climate change and carbon neutral economies, for example, participate in this zone of risk valuation. More commonly, techniques of governance such as surveying, monitoring, documentation and evaluation are integral to the production of such instabilities since they determine, in a temporary and unstable manner, who is to be included and who is to be excluded in a shifting and perpetually mobile urban landscape. Such determinations are, of course, open to contestation, further extending the sense of instability engendered by transforming “slum power,” both material and popular, into financial instruments (Rao 2008).

Speculative Futures: Risk, Research & Design:

It might be argued that there is a parallel between the forms of mega-city redevelopment I have been outlining above and processes of gentrification in Northern cities like New York, Chicago and London. As I suggest above, it is possible to extract such processual similarities through time and across space, toward a unified urban theory rather than one that operates through dichotomies like formal/informal and North/South. Yet it is instructive to return to considering some specificities of the term “informal” and the limitless ways in which it haunts contemporary urban theory and practice. In particular, there are two ways in which theories about the informal create a relationship to the formal through reference to the formal as “modern.” As Bruno Latour describes it, “...the present historical situation is defined by a complete



disconnect between two great alternative narratives – one of emancipation, detachment, modernization, progress and mastery, and the other, completely different, of attachment, precaution, entanglement, dependence and care...” (Latour 2004) Drawing on this succinct distinction between the modern and the non-modern, the two prevalent forms of relation between the formal and the informal can be characterized as following – the one relation describes the informal in temporal terms as the ‘not-yet modern’ while the other position would describe the informal simply as the ‘not modern’, without evolutionary possibility, a terminal or steady state from which no transformation is possible.

Each theoretic position leads to a different kind of impasse when considered in relation to collective definitions of action. On the one hand, the idea that informality must be acknowledged as a fundamental, organizing principle while at the same time being cast aside leads to a set of inherently conservative urban design actions, seeking to preserve what are perceived as functional, communitarian ethics while re-designing their spatial containers. Such a position is generally taken by scholars and activists seeking to re-iterate certain conditions of possibility without fundamentally altering the prototype of community and integration that they perceive the slum to be offering (see Echanove and Srivastava 2009 for an example). On the other hand, when considered a terminal or steady ontological state – neither declining nor transforming but maintained in a paradoxical stasis by constant volatility – radical design actions are often proposed as the only available, and, ultimately unviable solutions including, for example the transformation of people themselves into infrastructure (Simone 2004b is a critique of this position).

Each position, however, considers informality as an organising urban logic and yet as a state to be materially transcended. Thus, the slum or the informal is quintessentially a design problem as much as it is a research problem – in fact it is simultaneously a problem for design and research rather than a problem of theoretical framing first and design intervention afterwards. In other words, it is a problem both of collective definitions of action as well as of shared ethical visions. The detachment of the theoretic framing of the informal from its framing as a problem for design or rather, the positioning of design actions as an afterthought to a theoretical frame is a fundamental deferral that has haunted and continues to haunt all forms of urban action.

Throughout the 20th century, urban interventions drawing specifically on the informal and the marginal (that is to say, not the spectacular spatial products and projects of modernisation) have also been haunted by the constant blurring of lines between necessity and art. Inventive urban forms have inspired artistic practice and vice versa. The reason to value this kind of blurring is so that we may acknowledge the informal simultaneously as organising principle and as substantive form rather than defer and subordinate the one to the other. In doing so, the theoretic

imaginary acknowledges design practice as itself a form of research, with certain special characteristics. In particular, positing design as a form of research might speak to an anti-foundationalism, an act that seeks to intrigue in a disinterested way as well as to persuade the receiver of a particular position. Yet the work of design also unleashes “the inexhaustible potential of sensible events” to quote Jean-Francois Lyotard, which has the potential to resituate the theoretic imaginary itself.

I began by addressing the effects of the informal in a theoretic register – what I refer to by the concept ‘slum as theory’. By focusing on a desire to acknowledge, while materially transcending, the organisational logic and rationality of the informal that has haunted urban practice, I explored how in fact the problem of the informal is quintessentially a design problem. In my understanding, design, as a set of practices and protocols constitutes a set of relations with time – being circumstantially faithful to the argument it promotes and therefore necessarily ephemeral but rooted to the present rather than the absent past or future – and with speculative thinking. In particular, design action is constituted by speculations about the public it addresses – “the combination, endlessly unmade and remade, of temporary sensibilities...”³ as Lyotard puts it. By positing that we understand the informal as a design problem rather than a theoretic one, I am also suggesting that we frame the informal in the speculative terms offered by design action rather than in the normatively certain terms offered by the perspective of planning. What does this repositioning advance? In the reading I offered of the dichotomous relationship between formal and informal, we can see that it is precisely the framing of a theoretic object from the normative perspective of planning rather than the perspective of the occasions offered by circumstance that leads to a peculiar impasse of not being able to fully grasp the problem of the informal as a problem of design first. To be a problem of design first means to be able to grasp the inherently speculative nature of norms rather than assume their fixity and certainty⁴.

“Slum as theory” has offered much by way of understanding how mega-city discourse operates, how new forms of governmentality have emerged around risk as a framing device through which people are constrained to claim and negotiate their rights to the city. Yet the approaches gathered under a theoretic register obscure a variety of spaces and forms in which politics and the political unfold in a lived relation to these discursive milieus. To illuminate these fleeting and ephemeral arguments for collective action, research must turn more seriously to design actions, which depend fundamentally upon the continual articulation of the living and their milieus. Thus, research itself must begin from designs for living on the ground rather than those viewed from the air, as does Koolhaas in his work on Lagos and resist the tendency to approach these substantive forms of participation as merely interpreting assumed norms (Koolhaas 2002).

A triad of development, productive citizenship and planning within the ambit of global capital seems to lock urban collectivities into particular visions of urban futures, ones that are resolutely modernist. Planning theorist Kanishka Goonewardena writes that “even a rudimentary awareness of the practice of planning – in urban development as much as international development – today leaves us with the unmistakable impression of the pervasive influence of neoliberalism on our cities, regions, nation-states and international institutions.” (Goonewardena 2003:188) He then “identifies for progressive planning, the role of extending radical democracy to the realms of the state and the economy,” transcending the fundamental contradiction within neoliberal thinking between capitalism and democracy. Perhaps one way to approach this problem is to adopt a different understanding of knowledge production than one that dominates social theory today which is a way of thinking that reverses the relationship between research and design, breaking down the existing circuit between research and design by positing design itself as a research method, as a method for probing the provisional and for discerning as well as positing emergent states and forms of normativity from the contestation between the living and their milieu. For Bruno Latour, the emergence of norms is closely connected with the movement of things from being objects or “matters of fact” to becoming “matters of concern.” Becoming “matters of concern” suggests the building of new arguments for intervention, ones that pay attention to the speculative, innovative and productive potentialities of emergent collectivities rather than assuming what such collectivities are and therefore what they desire as outcomes. This constant risk-taking that characterises design action invites us to think beyond “slum as theory” and to think the contemporary mega-city beyond the “slum problem.” To remain within the theoretical paradigm of the “planet of slums” is to treat design merely as a universal solvent for eternal, modern problems.

Endnotes

1. From the Surrealists to Duchamp to the Situationists and Gordon Matta-Clark to name only the most well-known of such experiments, interventions that are inspired by interpretations of urban situations are growing apace, especially in cities of the South. For some recent examples, see the work of the African Center for Cities in Cape Town and the artistic collective Chimurenga who work with the scholars at the Center.
2. Writing about graphic artists, Lyotard says that the “absence of a people is what obligates graphic artists to wager and also what leaves the field wide open for them... it cannot be said that they commune, or even dialogue, with “their” people. On the contrary, they are banking on an unsure, unforeseeable, perhaps impossible communication...” (Lyotard 1997: 45).
3. For an argument about “non-representational theory,” see Thrift 2008. Thrift states that “non-representational theory tries to capture the ‘onflow’... of everyday life. It therefore follows the anti-substantialist ambition of philosophies of becoming and philosophies of vitalist intuition equally – and their constant war on frozen states.” (2008: 5).
4. Here, I would distinguish this speculative position from a relativist one. The latter still assumes the fixity and certainty of norms, only suggesting that they are applicable under particular circumstances. Speculative thinking, on the other hand, is distinct insofar as it proceeds from a set of assumptions that are not necessarily constrained by the particular but rather proceeds from a wager on the circumstances themselves.

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