

Preface

Out of the Shadows

I have no past, and an excess of future.

— Martin Adán

Four of us edged into the room, our knees knocking against the small table that served as tea tray, desk and impromptu kitchen. Elocy Kagwiria Murungi scratched a match and lit a lantern and a small kerosene burner so she could cook us supper. The uncertain light bounced off the corrugated metal walls, casting wild shadows on our faces and on the meager belongings around us. “I act like lice, the way lice act,” Elocy said as she rinsed a pot. “I burrow in and scrape out an existence.”

Like most of her neighbors, Elocy came to Kibera, the largest mud hut neighborhood of Nairobi, Kenya, with nothing except a willing-

ness to work. At first, she thought Kibera was sickening, ghastly, terrible—an open sewer, not a community. But it was the only place she could afford. So she sold stationery on the street for a few shillings. She washed dishes at a local eatery for a few shillings more. Now she is a teacher in a school for street children located right inside the squatter community. The pay is not great, but the work is challenging and important. Here in Kibera, Elocy has improved her life and opened up new horizons for herself and her young son Collins.

Yet this spirited, intelligent and hard-working woman describes herself as a parasite.

January 2005: Officials in Mumbai pushed forward with a brutal scheme to demolish squatter communities around the city. The goal, authorities said, was to transform Mumbai into Shanghai, to chase away the chaos of the shantytowns and produce a city open for development. The politicians didn't care where the 300,000 people they evicted would go—as long as it was outside the city limits.

May-June 2005: Zimbabwe followed Mumbai's lead, embarking on a ferocious anti-squatter putsch. Police and soldiers ejected 700,000 people from their informal abodes in Harare and Bulawayo, the country's two largest cities. President Robert Mugabe christened this program Operation Murambatsvina—Operation Drive Out Trash. And these citizens were treated like trash, some left to sleep in the open in the middle of the winter, others trucked to the countryside and dropped at the side of the road with a warning that if they returned to the cities they would be killed.

December 2005: The Nigerian government evicted thousands and smashed their homes in Abuja and Lagos. These were not shanties or shacks. These were concrete and brick houses that people had labored mightily to build. But their sin, according to authorities, was that they did not get proper planning approval. So the homes had to go and the people were forced onto the street.

Despite the hardships, newcomers are still seeking their future in the world's cities. Every year, close to 70 million people leave their rural homes and head for the cities. That's around 1.4 million people a week, 200,000 a day, 8,000 an hour, 130 every minute. And the migration does not seem likely to stop. By 2030, there will be 2 billion squatters. And, by the mid-point of this century, there will be 3 billion squatters—more than 1/3 of the people on the globe.

If the world's cities want to keep pace with the influx, the United Nations says, they must build 35 million homes a year. That's 96,150 a day, 4,000 homes an hour, 66 homes a minute, one every second. And this would only maintain the equilibrium. It would not house the billion who are living as squatters today.

Even the UN doesn't believe this can happen. So it has proposed a stripped down approach: to prevent the formation of huge new squatter communities all over the globe, the world's cities should build homes for 670 million people over the coming 15 years. This, the UN estimates, would cost \$294 billion. A mammoth amount, to be sure. But some simple math brings the number down to earth. We could raise that sum by collecting \$3 a year from every person on the planet. Even Elocy and my other squatter friends might be able to swing that.

But the problem, of course, involves more than money. Developers have no interest in building for the poor. Neither do local and national leaders. Squatters are neglected and disrespected by governments, politicians, the press, and even much of the public. And, like Elocy, squatters often neglect and disrespect themselves, as well. They judge themselves as useless, as parasites, as drains on society, as people who don't deserve a seat at the policy-makers table or a piece of the political pie.

In their early days, most squatter communities remained furtive, existing under the political radar. Indeed, this was their principal survival strategy: to build their homes on undesirable turf, places that allowed them to disappear from public view. But, as globalization has pushed the world's cities into frenzied competition for international tourist and development dollars while at the same time forcing more people to migrate to the cities, concealment is no longer an option. Now, if they are to secure their homes, squatters must assert themselves in a world that wants to deny their legitimacy and, in the most extreme cases, deny them the right to exist altogether.

To challenge this, squatters will have to mobilize and organize. They will have to learn how to engage the political system, how to strategize, how to take risks, and how to assess which risks to take. They will have to tap the strength they already have but don't yet see in themselves.

—RN, Brooklyn, NY, December 2005

Prologue

Crossing the Tin Roof Boundary Line

Let the wall crumble on which another wall is not growing.

— César Vallejo

Tema said it with a sigh. He spoke softly, with great fatigue, as if he was confiding something inexpressible, something sad, something he feared an outsider might never understand. I made him repeat the words: "Ai, Robert, o terceiro mundo é um jogo de vídeo." "The third world is a video game."

It was around midnight. We were sitting in Beer Pizza, a restaurant halfway up the Estrada da Gávea, the main drag of the illegal neighborhood called Rocinha, the largest squatter community in Rio de Janeiro. The neighborhood was boogying. There was a convivial crowd at the outdoor tables of the pizzeria, and a guitarist had

set up at one side of the courtyard. He sang bossa nova, Motown, and rock 'n' roll standards. Inches away, just beyond the curb, cars and buses and motorcycles jammed the roadway. A continual flow of people moved along the street. Scores of stores were still open, despite the hour. Just down the hill, six men were drinking *cachaça* and singing *pagode* at a small bar. One strummed a banjo while the others hammered the soft syncopated beat on their chairs as they sang. A few hundred paces farther up the slope, a dozen kids were playing soccer on a floodlit field, oblivious of everything around them except the black and white ball.

And then there were the homes. Little more than a decade ago, people here lived in waterlogged wooden barracks. When they wanted electricity, they stole it, looping long strands of wire through the trees and pilfering weak current from faraway poles. They hauled water up the hill in buckets and wheelbarrows and sometimes on the back of a burro.

But that is all in the past. Today there are thirty thousand homes in Rocinha spread across the sharp incline of Two Brothers Mountain. Most are two, three, or four stories tall, made from reinforced concrete and brick. Many boast shiny tile facades or fantastic Moorish balustrades or spacious balconies, which look out over the endless waves crashing on the beach at São Conrado, far down the hill. Electricity and water have come to this illegal city, and with them a degree of consumerism. Most families have a refrigerator, a color television (Jerry Rubin would approve), and a stereo. Rocinha today is a squatter village 150,000 people strong—the largest in Rio de Janeiro. It occupies its hilltop redoubt between the wealthy neighborhoods of Gávea and São Conrado with the confidence of a modern, self-built Renaissance hill town.

One-fifth of Rio lives like this. A million people. They don't own the land, but they hold it. And no one contests their possession. Their communities are called favelas.

I reveled in the contrasts. Smokey Robinson and samba. A sidewalk cafe in the squatter neighborhood. Illegal houses with the best views in town. Permanent buildings in an impermanent community.

Yes, it is a video game: the Marvelous City presented as a city of marvels, with a play of images and sounds as bright and diverting as in any Play Station or X-Box program. But for Tema, for the hordes on the hill, it was life, not display. They built their illegal homes simply because they couldn't afford anyplace else to live. And from that humble origin, against all odds, they produced something complex and sometimes harsh and unruly. They produced a new city.

The hut was made of corrugated metal set on a concrete pad. It was a 10-by-10 cell. Armstrong O'Brian, Jr., shared it with three other men.

Armstrong and his friends had no water (they bought it from a nearby tap owner), no toilet (the families in his compound shared a single pit latrine), and no sewers or sanitation. They did have electricity, but it was illegal service tapped from someone else's wires and could power only one feeble bulb.

This was Southland, a small shanty community on the western side of Nairobi, Kenya. But it could have been anywhere in the city, because more than half the city of Nairobi lives like this—1.5 million people stuffed into mud or metal huts, with no services, no toilets, no rights.

Armstrong explained the brutal reality of their situation. They paid 1,500 shillings in rent—about \$20 a month, a relatively high



The tin roof boundary in Kenya.

price for a Kenyan shantytown—and they could not afford to be late with the money. “In case you owe one month, the landlord will come with his henchmen and bundle you out. He will confiscate your things.”

“Not one month, one day.” His roommate Hilary Kibagendi Onsomu, who was cooking *ugali*, the spongy white cornmeal concoction that is the staple food in the country, cut into the conversation.

“We kneel before the landlord and his agent all the time,” Armstrong said.

They called their landlord a *wabenzi*—meaning that he’s a person who has enough money to drive a Mercedes-Benz. He lives in a wealthy area, a community called Karen, in honor of Danish Baroness Karen Blixen, who once owned a coffee farm there. Blixen left Kenya better than 70 years ago, when it was still a British

holding, but her memory lives on in a book—*Out of Africa*, written under the pen name Isak Dinesen—and in that shaded grove of colonial entitlement on the edge of the Ngong Hills where her manor was located.

Hilary served the *ugali* with a fry of meat and tomatoes. The sun slammed down on the thin steel roof, and we perspired as we ate. After we finished, Armstrong straightened his tie and put on a wool sports jacket. We headed into the glare.

Outside, a mound of garbage formed the border between Southland and the adjacent legal neighborhood of Langata. It was perhaps 8 feet tall, 40 feet long, and 10 feet wide, set in a wider watery ooze. As we passed, two boys were climbing the Mt. Kenya of trash. They couldn’t have been more than 5 or 6 years old. They were barefoot, and with each step their toes sank into the muck, sending hundreds of flies scattering from the rancid pile. I thought they might be playing King of the Hill. But I was wrong. Once atop the pile, one of the boys lowered his shorts, squatted, and defecated. The flies buzzed hungrily around his legs.

When 20 families—one hundred people or so—share a single latrine, a boy pooping on a garbage pile is perhaps no big thing. But it stood in jarring contrast to something Armstrong had said as we were eating—that he treasured the quality of life in his neighborhood. For Armstrong, Southland wasn’t constrained by its material conditions. Instead, the human spirit radiated out from the metal walls and garbage heaps to offer something no legal neighborhood could: freedom.

“This place is very addictive,” he had said. “It’s a simple life, but nobody is restricting you, nobody is controlling what you do. Once you have stayed here, you cannot go back.” He meant back beyond

that mountain of trash, back in the legal city of legal buildings with legal leases and legal rights. "Once you have stayed here, you can stay for the rest of your life."

Sartaj Jaipuri was evicted in 1962, pushed out of Bombay's seaside Worli neighborhood because the government had determined that it would be the city's next commercial center.

He vowed he would never be booted from his home again. So he relocated to a place he thought would be safe. It was a dozen miles further out of town, far from the sea, far from the center of the city. He moved his family to a steep unused plot near the tracks of the Western Railway in a scantily developed area called Malad.

It was rough living, but it was home. Sartaj and his fellow land invaders built their houses from bamboo topped with grass mats. The jungle was their toilet. They carried water from the public taps near the train station, a kilometer or so away. They christened their new community with an admirably straightforward name: Squatter Colony.

Squatter Colony developed with caution. The residents maintained a low profile for nine years before they took the risk of laying permanent foundations for their homes. Those who had money ripped out their original wood and mud platforms and laid down a brick base for their bamboo huts. Then they were quiet again for another decade, before they finally pooled their savings and paid a contractor to run water pipes and open communal taps. A few years later, they made another investment, again hiring the contractor to run the pipes directly into each home. In 1989, 27 years after they seized the land, they finally built something more permanent than their bamboo homes. They tore down the structures and the

foundations and built anew with steel and concrete. They waited seven more years for the final piece of the puzzle—electricity.

Today there are perhaps a thousand families in Squatter Colony. Their homes are permanent and some are quite spacious. Most have water and toilets built inside. Sartaj's townhouse is on the upper end of a narrow lane that is paved with tiles and cement. His home, though on a tiny plot, is built to maximize space. The ground floor does quadruple duty as kitchen, living room, bedroom, and bath. There's a steep staircase that leads to a mezzanine, used for storage or an extra bed, and on to a top floor where his youngest son, Aasif, bunks. Another son, Aarif, lives a few blocks down the hill, in a spacious, airy second-floor studio apartment. He's also a squatter.

"These houses are all illegal," Sartaj said. "Even where you are sitting right now is illegal." A slight, soft-spoken man who, among other professions, is a poet and lyricist, he sat cross-legged on the floor of his son's room and swiped one hand through his twist of white hair. He seemed, suddenly, too fragile and fatigued to be a homesteader. He sensed my skepticism and confronted it head-on: "These houses are made by us, by money of our own, and not by the government," he declared.

Mumbai, as the city has been called since 1996, is India's richest city. The city's metropolitan area accounts for 40 percent of the tax revenues of the entire nation. Yet approximately half the inhabitants—more than six million people—have created their homes the same way Sartaj Jaipuri did. They built for themselves on land they don't own. Mumbai is a squatter city. Still, Malad has gentrified over the years and land has become valuable. After more than 40 years in the home he built with his own hands, Sartaj Jaipuri finds himself wondering whether the future could be like 1962 all over again.

Yahya Karakaya came to Sultanbeyli in 1969. He was 4 years old, and all he remembers is a sleepy community of two dozen families in a wooded valley on the Asian side of Istanbul. The villagers raised cows, sold the milk to passing city-dwellers, and harvested lumber from the vast forest around them.

Today, Sultanbeyli is an independent squatter metropolis—population 300,000—and Yahya Karakaya is its popularly elected Mayor. From an oversized desk in a cavernous office on the seventh floor of the massive squatter City Hall, he presides over an empire that includes everything you thought squatters could never achieve: a planning department, a department of public works, a sanitation department, even a municipal bus service.

In Sultanbeyli, nobody owns, but everybody builds. Fatih Boulevard, the main drag, is 5 miles long and boasts a strip of four-, five-, and six-story buildings complete with stores, restaurants, banks, and real estate brokerages. This illegal city even has its own post office.

With this level of development, Sultanbeyli has taken the quaint notion of squatter construction to a new level. For years, Turkey's squatters built at night to take advantage of an ancient legal precept that said, essentially, that if they started construction at dusk and were moved in by sunrise without being discovered by the authorities, they gained legal standing and could not be evicted without a court fight. That's why squatter housing in Turkey is called *gecekondu* (the "c" in Turkish is like "j" in English, thus: geh-jay-kon-doo), meaning "it happened at night." Half the residents of Istanbul—perhaps six million people—dwell in *gecekondu* homes.

In Sultanbeyli, the squatters are no longer furtive. Gone are the nights of anxiety and sweat as families built under cover of darkness.

Gone are the tiny homes, designed to be erected quickly and to be hidden in sunken lots in order to escape official notice. Squatters in Sultanbeyli boldly proclaim their existence. Construction goes on in the open, 24 hours a day. "We are not *gecekondu*," the Mayor said with a smile. "We are *gunduzkondu*"—happening during the day.

Four cities. Four countries. Four continents. Four cultures. One reality: squatters.

Estimates are that there are about a billion squatters in the world today—one of every six humans on the planet. And the density is on the rise. Every day, close to two hundred thousand people leave their ancestral homes in the rural regions and move to the cities. Almost a million and a half people a week, seventy million a year. Within 25 years, the number of squatters is expected to double. The best guess is that by 2030, there will be two billion squatters, one in four people on earth.

As you might expect, with numbers like these, squatters are a pretty diverse bunch. There are those we are used to in the developed world, who intrude into buildings that are abandoned by their owners. There are those who build cabins in remote areas, farming land they don't own. There are those whose invasions are organized by a political outfit, like the Movement of Landless Workers, which is challenging the rule of the land barons in rural Brazil.

But these people are not the mass of squatters. The overwhelming majority of the world's one billion squatters are simply people who came to the city, needed a place to live that they and their families could afford, and, not being able to find it on the private market, built it for themselves on land that wasn't theirs. For them, squatting is a family value.

These squatters mix more concrete than any developer. They lay more brick than any government. They have created a huge hidden economy—an unofficial system of squatter landlords and squatter tenants, squatter merchants and squatter consumers, squatter builders and squatter laborers, squatter brokers and squatter investors, squatter teachers and squatter schoolkids, squatter beggars and squatter millionaires. Squatters are the largest builders of housing in the world—and they are creating the cities of tomorrow.

Three hundred people a day make the trek to Istanbul, three hundred more to Mumbai, and three hundred also to Nairobi. Nicodemus Mutemi was one of them. He came to Kenya's capital in 1996 from his family's home in the Mwingi district. The Mutemi family cultivates corn and millet on their small holding in the parched hills an hour's walk from the nearest village. The land is dry in Mwingi—locals call it semiarid—and the air is still and hot. Growing crops in the cracked earth is a struggle. The family supplements its subsistence agriculture with a small herd of goats and a group of chickens and roosters.

Nicodemus' father poured some home-made honey beer from his gourd into a well-used plastic container. The brew was slightly sour and amazingly refreshing in the heat. As the sun tilted toward the horizon, slipping behind the silhouette of a baobab tree, Nicodemus explained why he left his homeland and clan and moved to Nairobi. The problem, he said, is economic: You can grow enough to eat, but you can't grow enough to live.

Nicodemus hefted a burlap bag half filled with corn. That bag, he told me, would fetch five shillings at a local wholesale market. But to buy the corn back, in the form of *ungu*, the flour used to make *ugali*, would cost 45 shillings at the local store.

The farm economy doesn't work. A farm family can raise enough to eat, but the crops alone will not generate an income. So how will the family members buy clothes or water or school books? How will they pay for kerosene or paraffin so they can light a lamp at night? How will they get tea for breakfast? And what about greater expenses? How will they repair the ancient mud and thatch huts that have served for generations but are beginning to crumble? And, if someone in the family gets sick, how will they pay for a doctor when medicine is a cash business.

The Mutemi family struggled to give Nicodemus an education. He graduated from Form 4—the equivalent of gaining a high school diploma. He would have liked to go to college, but there was no more money. Thus it became his turn to provide for his family, to repay his parents' investment, to secure a future for his own children. So he came to the city.

To be fair, Nicodemus's story is nothing new. This massive migration from rural regions to the urban centers of the world has been going on for thousands of years. And always, once they got to the cities of their dreams, the migrants have become squatters.

In Ancient Rome, despite the astounding government investment in public works, waterways, and infrastructure, squatters took over the streets, occupied fountains, and erected crude lean-tos called *tuguria*, tucked up against the sides of buildings. They were brazen and often seemed to dare authorities to remove them, but there were so many of them that the government couldn't keep up. And it has been like this in almost every city. Some sections of London were squatter zones until the mid-1800s. Paris, too, had its squatters, and historians suggest that the Court of Miracles, immortalized by Victor Hugo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, was originally a squatter

colony. Even New York, the definition of the modern real estate city, was a squatter metropolis until the early years of the twentieth century. In fact, the word *squatter* is an American term, originating in New England around the time of the revolutionary war as a popular term for people who built their homes on land they didn't own. The first use of the word in writing came in 1788, by the man who would become the fourth president of the United States—James Madison.

At the same time Nicodemus was establishing himself in Nairobi, I was beginning my own journey.

It was 1996 and the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements—Habitat, for short—the world body that studies and works on housing issues, was holding a major conference in Istanbul. Habitat holds these meetings once every decade, giving bureaucrats and nonprofit organizations a chance to compare notes and promote enlightened policies.

Preparing for that meeting, the statistics fell into place. If seventy million people are coming to the cities every year, and neither governments nor private builders are prepared to handle the onslaught, then all the government bureaucrats and staffers from nonprofits who were gathered in the fancy hotels overlooking the Bosphorus were in the wrong place. They should have been in Sultanbeyli and other squatter neighborhoods, learning from the land invaders.

I began to wonder about the morality of a world that denies people jobs in their home areas and denies them homes in the areas where they have gone to get jobs. And I began to think about my responsibility. I have written scores of articles on real estate, housing, architecture, design, business, planning. Wasn't I guilty, too? Hadn't I focused too much on developers and tycoons and

architects, people who, despite the soaring ambition and ego contained in their buildings, have produced relatively little? Why wasn't I writing about the world's squatters, who have journeyed so far and produced so much without any noticeable self-aggrandizement?

After all, if society won't build for this mass of people, don't they have a right to build for themselves? And if they do, then isn't there merit in their mud huts? If they are creating their own homes and improving them over time, then isn't there something good—at least potentially—about a community without water and sanitation and sewers? And if that's true, then shouldn't the comfortable class stop complaining about conditions in the shantytowns and instead work with the squatters to improve their communities?

They have created tiny ridges in the earth, outlines that indicate what is yours, what is mine. The dividing lines are nothing—scarcely more than an inch high, but pounded hard so they cannot be easily erased. Each seam delineates a living space. This is where people cook, read, eat, wash, sleep. This is where they store their food and their clothes. For the past three years, Laxmi Chinnoo, her mother, and her three daughters, have lived in one of these imaginary homes, under a bridge that crosses the tracks of the Harbor Line Railway not far from the Chuna Bhatti station in Mumbai.

Aside from those lines in the dirt and a few rugs hung on ropes so her daughters have a private place to change clothes, she has not built anything. There are a dozen other families living here in the same circumstances.

Are these people squatters?

Or how about Gita Jiwa, a construction laborer who has lived with her three daughters in a makeshift bamboo and plastic tent on

the median strip of Mumbai's Western Expressway for the past five years? Fifteen families live alongside her. Are they squatters?

Or how about Washington Ferreira, who lives with his mother and younger sister in a two-room rental in Rocinha. They are tenants, not invaders. Are they squatters?

To me, they are all squatters. But their experiences reveal that there are many different types of squatters, with different needs, different incomes, different aspirations, different social standing, different stories.

I'm standing on a wasteland. Several hundred acres, vacant, home only to scrub and weeds and illegally dumped trash. In the fall, the wind whips across these desolate blocks and the air turns tart against your skin. In winter, the flat expanse becomes a tundra as ice crusts the top of the construction debris. In springtime, butterflies squat on the tufts of sand grasses, and the land seems alive with possibilities. On bright summer days, dragonflies sprint above the cracked pavement, seeming to be racing their own shadows. This is beachfront property, perhaps ten miles from the tip of Manhattan, a bit more than an hour away by subway—Sprayview Avenue on the Rockaway Peninsula in Queens. Fifty years ago, it was a bungalow community—a summer resort for the lower middle class. Then, in the 1960s, the government took it for urban renewal. It has been vacant ever since. The paved streets, the rusting hydrants, the sewers, the streetlights—all the services people could need—have been in suspended animation, waiting for someone, anyone, to see the possibility.

Every time I visit Sprayview Avenue, I think of the third world. I think of Rio and Nairobi and Mumbai and Istanbul. In each of those

cities, Sprayview Avenue would have life. People who needed it would have seized the land and built their rustic homes. They would not be anarchists or radicals or hotheads. They would not be people with a political ax to grind or an ideological agenda. They would, rather, be regular people. Working people. People with families. With young children. People who came to the city to find work. Mechanics and waitresses, laborers and salesclerks, teachers and taxi drivers. These city-builders would construct using the crudest materials—mud, sticks, scavenged cardboard, wood, plastic, and scrap metal. At the start, their Sprayview Avenue would be a severely unhygienic place. No water. No toilets. No sewers. No electrical connections.

Eventually, though, one resident would have seen the potential and opened a bar by the beach, selling beer out of buckets of chopped ice. Another enterprising squatter would have started a restaurant—perhaps a pizza joint. Various small-scale entrepreneurs would have fashioned home-made pushcarts and plied the nearby boardwalk, selling *churrascos* or *nyama choma* or *bhel puri* or *kofta*. A few years on, one canny fellow would realize that he could rent apartments at a nice markup (but still far less than in the surrounding legal neighborhoods) if he built with a degree of quality and style. So he would gather his neighbors, and they would rip down and build again, but this time with higher standards and nicer finishes. And then the neighborhood—self-built and self-governed but owned by no one—would have tenants, too.

Of course, we outsiders would find ways to discredit this free soil republic. We would call it a slum. We would warn our children: these are criminals, dirty people, thieves, muggers, prostitutes, gang leaders, disreputables, abusers. We would ignore the hard work it

takes to build a community and argue instead that these are people trying to get something for nothing, sponging off the system, ripping us off because they don't pay taxes. We would decry the density, the lack of adequate sanitation, the cacophony of construction styles, the sad-sack structural engineering. Politicians and real estate investors would call for inspections. Wealthy neighbors would clamor for police action. Together, we would make Sprayview Avenue a world apart. And ultimately, we would wipe it out.

Why do we have this animus against squatters? Why do we insist that there is something deeply wrong with their communities?

Favela, kijiji, johpudpatti, gecekondui: Brazil, Kenya, India, and Turkey have specific, descriptive, evocative terms for their squatter communities—in their own languages. It's the same around the world. From the *aashwa'i* areas of Cairo to the *barridas* of Lima, the *kampungs* of Kuala Lumpur, the *mudukku* of Colombo, and the *penglu*, or straw huts, of Shanghai in the 1930s, most languages have specific and even poetic names for their squatter communities. But in English, there's come to be one dominant term: slum.

Why slum? By the dictionary, a slum is simply an overcrowded city neighborhood with lousy housing. But the term is laden with emotional values: decay, dirt, and disease. Danger, despair, and degradation. Criminality, horror, abuse, and fear.

Slum is a loaded term, and its horizon of emotion and judgment comes from outside. To call a neighborhood a slum immediately creates distance. A slum is the apotheosis of everything that people who do not live in a slum fear. To call a neighborhood a slum establishes a set of values—a morality that people outside the slum share—and implies that inside those areas, people don't share the same principles.

Slum says nothing while saying everything. It blurs all distinctions. It is a totalizing word—and the whole, in this case, is the false. So, though it is the generally accepted term for squatter communities in both Kenya and India, I will avoid the word as much as I can.

I decided to do my part, to investigate the squatter communities of the world. At that point, each city made a case for itself.

Rio de Janeiro demanded that it be a focus because squatters there have a long and noble history. Their communities have existed for better than a century, and they have created permanent high-quality neighborhoods with high-rise buildings made from poured concrete and brick. Some of the city's squatter communities are so well-established that squatter houses command prices similar to those in legal neighborhoods of the city. Also, Rio's squatter areas have an impressive, dark subtext. For decades, national, state, and local governments steadfastly refused to provide services to these communities. And with that neglect came criminality. So most of Rio's favelas are now controlled by highly organized and extremely well-armed drug gangs. These gangs are both criminal and communitarian. They offer squatters a trade-off: In a city where assaults and violence of all sorts can be common, there is no crime in the squatter communities—as long as people look the other way when the dealers are doing their business. This, I thought, was an interesting story.

Nairobi claimed its place because two-thirds of its residents live in shantytowns, and, in the 40 years since Kenya won independence from Britain, the city's shantytown communities have remained unrelentingly primitive. What's more, Nairobi is the world headquarters of the UN's Habitat group, and I wondered why the agency had been unsuccessful in working to improve conditions for the

1.5 million people who live in the city's shantytowns—without water, electricity, sewers, or sanitation—just a few miles from its comfortable headquarters.

Mumbai insinuated itself because of its massive squatter presence. So many squatters live in the city that they have distinct class differences. Pavement dwellers—people who live in shacks built right on the sidewalks—are at the lowest end of the economic spectrum. People like Sartaj Jaipuri are at the higher end. Mumbai also boasts the largest squatter community in Asia, a neighborhood called Dharavi, which is now being eyed by developers because of its central location. In addition, Mumbai is where Jockin Arputham lives. A generation ago, Jockin founded a small community organization of squatters. Today, that group has become a multinational nonprofit organization active in a dozen countries. No story of squatters can be complete without spending some time with Jockin.

Finally, Istanbul leaped to mind. I knew the city had been the location of the United Nations meeting on housing in 1996. But, I would come to learn, Turkey has two notable laws that give squatters legal and political rights, and thus the chance to build permanent communities. If Turkey's legal system were in place in all the countries I visited, squatters would be in much better shape around the world.

They all laughed. Six men laughing because I didn't understand their concept of land ownership. We were in a teahouse in a dusty patch of Istanbul called Paşaköy, far out on the Asian side of the city. Here, the streets were dusty cuts hacked into the scrubby hills. Each home, too, was dusty, caked, it seemed, with red earth. Even the giant blue plastic water barrels that stood in front of each house were coated with dust.

The tea, the men joked, was exotic—it had come from far away. Sadik Çarkir, the teahouse owner, had hauled the water from a spring several kilometers away. As we spoke, several women strode down the street with five buckets in a wheelbarrow. They were making the run to the source.

"Tapu var?" I asked. "Do you have title deeds?"

They all laughed. Or, more accurately, some laughed, some muttered uncomfortably, and some made a typical Turkish gesture. They jerked their heads back in a sort of half-nod and clicked their tongues. It was the kind of noise someone might make while calling a cat or a bird, but at a slightly lower pitch. This indicates, "Are you kidding?" or "Now that's a stupid question," or, more devastatingly, "What planet are you from, bub?"

I blundered on.

"So who owns the land?"

More laughter. More clicking.

"We do," said Hasan Çelik, choking back tears.

"But you don't have title deeds?"

This time they roared. And somebody—I forget who—whispered something to my translator: "Why is this guy so obsessed with title deeds? Does he want to buy my house?"

You can't talk about squatters without talking about property. But talking about property involves different issues depending on where you are in the world.

In the developed world—particularly in the United States—many people still view property in the same absolutist terms that William Blackstone, the famed legal commentator, sketched out in the eighteenth century: Property, he wrote, is "that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in

the universe." What a revealing statement: property and despotism standing shoulder to shoulder. It's a distressing thought. Still, the United States maintains a hard-core devotion to property rights and free markets, which, many economists contend, are the roots of all our liberties.

Alexis de Tocqueville recognized this feeling during his mid-nineteenth century trip around the new nation in North America. "In no other country in the world is the love of property keener or more alert than in the United States," he wrote, "and nowhere else does the majority display less inclination towards doctrines that threaten the way property is owned."

Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto has adopted this hard-core attitude and advanced a hypercapitalist argument in favor of squatters. De Soto suggests that the countries of the developing world should legalize their squatters just as the United States legalized the settlers throughout the western states under the Pre-emption Act of 1841 and the Homestead Act of 1862. De Soto argues that giving squatters individual title deeds will liberate what he terms the "dead capital" inherent in their homes, and will automatically give them a place in the market economy.

It sounds so simple: send some law school-trained Johnny Appleseeds to trek through the cities of the developing world, handing out title deeds. Then step back and watch the communities blossom.

I wish it would work.

No doubt, some squatters would be able to access more money if they had title deeds. But the folks I met in Brazil, Kenya, India, and Turkey didn't go through the tremendous struggles of building and improving their homes to liberate their dead capital. They went through incredible privation and deprivation for one simple reason:

because they needed a secure, stable, decent, and inexpensive home—one they could possibly expand in the future as their families grow and their needs change. And title deeds—so natural to those of us who live in the developed world—can actually jeopardize this sense of security by bringing in speculators, planners, tax men, and lots of red tape and regulations.

This is in part why they laughed at me all over the world when I spoke of private property. They laughed in Brazil, when I asked who owned the land in Rocinha. They laughed in Kenya, when I asked who owned the land under the mud and steel huts of the sprawling shanty communities. And they laughed in India, too, when I asked who owned the marshland that today is Dharavi. They didn't laugh because they would turn down a title deed if it was offered. They laughed because private ownership is not their most crucial concern.

When squatters feel secure in their homes, they build, invest, and prosper—and they don't need a title deed to do so. Squatters in Brazil and Turkey have erected permanent buildings without title deeds. Squatters in India have created whole neighborhoods while knowing that the land is not theirs. They have accepted the unofficial lines that divide one person's home from another's. They buy and sell and rent their buildings. They negotiate with each other over their future plans for their homes.

The medieval Jewish sage Rashi proclaimed that being (or what it means to be a human being—to act, to live, to do things, even the most mundane things, in this world) is essentially having a standpoint, a position, a base of operations. A massive number of people around the world have been denied that right. So they have seized land and built for themselves. With makeshift materials, they are building a future in a society that has always viewed them as people

without a future. In this very concrete way, they are asserting their own being.


We can learn from their example. The world's squatters offer a different way of looking at land. Rather than treating it as an economic value, squatters live according to a more ancient notion: the idea that every person has a natural right, simply by virtue of being born, to have a home, a place, a location in the world. Their way of dealing with land offers the possibility of a more equitable city and a more just world.

Time Present

SHADOW CITIES

A BILLION SQUATTERS,
A NEW URBAN WORLD

ROBERT NEUWIRTH

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