

*Inventing Informality / Shantytowns across the Mediterranean*

abstract

Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America

November 2018

Sheila Crane

The slum, the shantytown, or, more broadly speaking, urban informality—a term that claims to be more inclusive and less (immediately) imbued with an explicitly moralizing agenda—have long been subject to the waxing and waning of varied forms of external engagement, whether directed towards political, social, architectural, urbanistic, theoretical, or other ends.

We might consider the decade around the turn of the twenty-first century as one such recent, significant landmark moment, which might be bookended, in a convenient shorthand, by the launching in 1999 of the ambitious “Cities without Slums” initiative, with the initial support of UN-Habitat and the World Bank (an effort that has fallen far short of its goals), and by Mike Davis’s assertively provocative 2006 publication, *Planet of Slums*, written in direct response to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.<sup>1</sup> Davis insists on radical rupture as he posits an entirely new scale of urban change that has led to what he describes as the “shantytownization” of the planet.<sup>2</sup> In his view, “rapid urban growth in the context of structural adjustment, currency devaluation, and state retrenchment has been an inevitable recipe for the mass production of slums.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Davis insists that mega-slums, particularly as they have reconfigured cities across the so-called global south, from Rio to Mumbai and beyond, are visible symptoms of a radical new stage in the operations of late global capitalism even as they constitute *the* defining architecture of the twenty-first century.

*Planet of Slums* not only served to propel an extended debate amongst commentators and policy makers of various stripes, but it might also be seen in relation to a broader recognition of the shantytown’s ubiquity in cities around the globe. The popular success of the film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, which received the Academy Award for best motion picture of the year in 2009, is a vivid example of how the “mega-slum” came to register in popular culture, simultaneously as a dystopian urban

---

<sup>1</sup> Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006). With funding from UN-Habitat and the World Bank, the “Cities without Slums” initiative has been overseen by an umbrella organization, the Cities Alliance, and was identified as one of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals in a report entitled, “We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” released in March 2000 under UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. [http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/We\\_The\\_Peoples.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/We_The_Peoples.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> In a report on the Urban 21, a group appointed by the World Commission in 2000, Sir Peter Hall and Ulrich Pfeiffer framed the crisis in slightly different terms, suggesting that the leading urban problem was “informal hypergrowth”: Hall and Pfeiffer, *Urban Future 21: A Global Agenda for 21<sup>st</sup>-century Cities* (London: E & FN Spon, 2000). For further discussion of this report, see Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Towards an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 71: 2 (2005): 147–58.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, 2006, 17.

reality (along the lines that Mike Davis and others elaborated) and a site of untapped creative potential.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, architects and architectural critics have also been on the front lines of these debates. There are innumerable examples I could invoke here of architects, planners, and instructors in design studios in schools of architecture across the United States and Europe who suddenly trained their attention on urban informality as a formative site for design interventions around this same time. For urban theorists, informality likewise became a key empirical and theoretical terrain through which one might better understand contemporary urban forms, processes, and politics.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the slums of Mumbai, the shantytowns in Cape Town, the *favelas* of Rio, the *gecekondu* in Istanbul, the *'ashwa'iyyat* of Cairo, and the *bidonvilles* of Casablanca have been conceived at once as globally distributed symptoms of distinctively 21<sup>st</sup>-century urban conditions and as productive paradigms for urban theory and design practice. In either iteration, the longer-term processes through which these urban landscapes emerged—as material forms within distinct geographies and as theoretical constructs—have been largely occluded.

My current book project, tentatively entitled *Inventing Informality*, and the related research I am undertaking at the Italian Academy, began from the observation that recent debates about informality and urbanization largely share a presentist orientation focused on current forms and processes. A critical history remains to be written of abiding obsessions with the shantytown. Tracing the emergence of the *bidonville* in the late 1920s in Casablanca and its subsequent transformations between the Maghreb and France through the 1970s, I consider how the *bidonville* became the focus of debates about the city, rapidly increasing rural-urban migration, the ethics of the everyday and the aesthetics of precarity, as well as the pitfalls and potentials of auto-construction and seemingly unplanned urbanization. At the Italian Academy, I am expanding my research to consider similar developments across the Mediterranean and the challenges these landscapes pose to current practices and discourses of cultural heritage. Built landscapes defined by precarity, exclusion, and decidedly non-monumental constructions raise potent questions about the efficacy and ethics of preservation that merit further consideration.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tanden, 2008, 120 minutes. For an analysis of how the film documents and critiques the transformation of Bombay into Mumbai in the 1990s, see Vendana Baweja, “Architecture and Urbanism in *Slumdog Millionaire*: From Bombay to Mumbai,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlement Review*, 26:11 (2015): 7–24.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Vyjayanthi Rao, “Slums as Theory: Mega-Cities and Urban Models,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, edited by C. Grieg Crysler, et al. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 671–686; Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzmirsky, *Dharavi: From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013).