Review:

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Robert Neuwirth (2005). Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World. New York: Routledge, 335 pages, ISBN 0 415 93319 6 (hardback), $27.95

Abstract: Urban development history has been replete with competing claims to legitimacy in land ownership and use. An estimated one billion people currently live in urban communities without legal claim to the land. These *squatters* and the built environment that they inhabit have been the subject of much concern, yet there has been a relative shortage of study dedicated to the issue. In particular, the view from within squatter communities themselves has often been excluded or de-legitimized. In a recently published book, Robert NEUWIRTH (2005) presents a study of four squatter communities in large cities (Rio de Janeiro, Nairobi, Mumbai, and Istanbul) on four continents. Importantly, rather than discussing the communities from afar, NEUWIRTH conducted the study by living in each squatter community for several months. This review discusses the book in terms of its utility for development theorists and practitioners. While the methods and organization of the book leave much to be desired for this audience, there is enough valuable, original research to make it essential reading. Although the book raises many more questions than it answers, these questions may now be addressed in more sophisticated ways in future research. Perhaps most importantly, the book demonstrates the need for creative solutions that involve the squatters themselves in the decision-making process.

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1. General Overview

Adequate housing for poor residents of urban areas is an enduring and intensifying issue across the world. Nowhere is this more evident than in the large cities of developing countries. When no housing is affordable or available, people are left to find shelter on land to which they often bear no legitimate claim. If they are not immediately evicted, they begin the survival and development processes that characterize human settlement, at whatever pace possible. The result is physical-environmental development ranging from crude mud huts to multi-story buildings with utilities, varying by the length of time that the squatters have occupied the land and the levels of income they have been able to generate. Thus, the "squatter community" is a highly heterogeneous category. Several such

communities are examined in more detail in the recent work of Robert
NEUWIRTH (2005), *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World.* [1]

A part of the recent increase in interest in legal systems that exclude the poor
from land ownership has been raised by the work of the economist, Hernando
DESOTO (2000). Arguing that capitalism can only work when excluded
populations are brought into the market as full participants, DESOTO calls for
sweeping legal reform in the developing world—reform that would allow, among
other things, recognition of property rights to some who are now considered
squatters. The popularity of this theory in many scholarly circles and multi-
national organizations has produced urgency to work toward understanding
competing claims to land ownership. NEUWIRTH's work is particularly timely in
that the data are collected through first-hand experiences in squatter
communities. His claim (in the prologue) that "the world's squatters offer a
different way of looking at land" (p.22) is particularly intriguing. The book looks at
multiple interrelated issues through conversation with some of the world's
greatest experts on squatters—the squatters themselves. [2]

A former community organizer and student of philosophy, NEUWIRTH has also
worked extensively in journalism, reporting on cities, politics, and economic
issues. For the research detailed in this book, he conducted on-site investigations
in four squatter communities. The book also contains historical research on
squatting and a general discussion of squatting, property rights and urban
housing strategy. The four case studies were conducted in the communities of
Rochina (which has an estimated 150,000 residents) in Rio de Janiero, Brazil;
Kibera (between 500,000 and 1,000,000 residents) in Nairobi, Kenya; several
squatter communities, including Sanjay Gandhi Nagar and Dharavi, in Mumbai,
India (where it is estimated that 6 of the city's 12 million residents are squatters);
and, Sultanbelyi (with around 300,000 residents) in Istanbul, Turkey. The book's
second section provides brief descriptions of the history of squatting in the
ancient world, several European cities, Shanghai and cities in the United States
as well as an entire chapter on the history of squatting in New York. The author
then devotes the final two sections to the discussion of competing ideas
regarding squatting, the squatters themselves and potential changes for the
future. [3]

This review discusses the work substantively, methodologically and in terms of its
value for urban community development theory, policy and practice. The next
section summarizes and briefly discusses each of the four case studies.
Following this is a methodological and organizational critique. The final section
looks for theories emerging from the work. [4]

2. Case Studies

In the portion of Rio de Janeiro known as Rocinha ("little farm"), NEUWIRTH finds a highly developed squatter community. The initial residents, about two decades ago, formed mutual construction societies and helped each other build an urban neighborhood that today has paved roads, elected leadership and several residents' associations. As the community has grown, businesses have been eager to capitalize on the expanding market and have begun to offer services—such as film developing and cable television—within the squatter community. There is even a McDonald's kiosk in Rocinha (p.45). As commercialization increases, however, many residents perceive that the "self-reliant spirit of the community" (p.47) is in decline. In a process similar to gentrification, NEUWIRTH shows that squatter communities can suffer from invasions of capital. Still, the community simultaneously endures illegitimacy in many ways; for example, the post office will not deliver in some parts of the neighborhood. Predatory lending, anti-poor bias and sporadic urban renewal programs threaten to drastically change the way of life in Rocinha. [5]

The chapter on Rocinha is rich with interesting observations. The original Brazilian squatters, referred to as "land invaders" (p.59), had success, in part, because of the complicated Brazilian system of property ownership. They faced hardships in establishing themselves, but as squatter neighborhoods grew in number and size, a sense of security pervaded. The security that today's residents feel (p.55) allows them to invest in their houses. The Rocinha community has a distinct identity (p.58), and residents recognize frauds. The understanding of the Brazilian squatter community is incomplete, however, as it is presented in this chapter. Another side of the story is taken up in the eighth chapter (close to the end of the book), in which the reader learns that the neighborhood is virtually completely controlled by violent drug gangs. This is one of several questionable decisions regarding the organization of the material in the book. Additionally, the reader learns very little about the author's process in gathering the information in this section. Although it is clear that many of the conclusions are based on experiences or subjective opinions, there is no narrative disclosure of this fact. (More of this discussion will be taken up in the section on methodology). [6]

NEUWIRTH spent three months studying (and, presumably, living in) the neighborhood of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya. The British governed Kenya until the 1960's. The author identifies the British as having particularly oppressive land ownership laws. The situation in Kenya is much different from Brazil. The squatters live in fear of having their homes torn down by the government (p.97), even though they typically pay rent for the land on which they build (p.98). There is, however, a very strong sense of community solidarity, or social capital (p.97). Plagued by crime (p.78), corruption (p.98), scandalous rip-offs (p.81) and tribal conflicts (p.95), the residents are not even successfully aided by the non-profits that claim to be working with them (p.82). Describing a non-profit organization that conducted a study in the neighborhood, NEUWIRTH says, "There was only one bunch of people who never saw [the published brochure about] the study: the

residents of Kibera"; quoting the operations analyst for the study, he adds, "Anyway, maybe it's better not to publicize this; there could be riots" (p.82). [7]

The nuances of the legal structure in Kenya are highlighted. The country has preserved much of the structure from British colonial rule:

> "Local elders and chiefs preside over every neighborhood, and all of them are employees of the national government ... the chiefs and elders in most urban neighborhoods get paid to do almost nothing ... this yields a very strange and horridly corrupt allocation" (p.93). [8]

NEUWIRTH reports that most of the squatter communities are built on government lands, with or without temporary licenses. The law forbids the residents from upgrading the structures beyond mud huts, removing all incentive for real investment in property. Besides this, the fact is that most mud huts are actually the investment properties of people who live outside of the slum and look to it for additional rental income. Perhaps because of these difficulties, the residents of Kibera place great importance on "community" and "society". NEUWIRTH quotes one resident as saying, "People in Kibera, they like being together. Community is a part of them" (p.97). [9]

The third case study in the book was carried out in Mumbai, India, where it is estimated that six of the twelve million residents are squatters (p.142). "As in Kenya, Mumbai's slums are also in part a product of British influence. Mixing of Asians and Europeans was frowned upon during the 300 years of British control of the country" (p.128). Much of the chapter focuses on the fascinating history of the squatter community known as Sanjay Gandhi Nagar. The original community of around 300 families in temporary construction tenements survived through fire and rebuilt, only to have their homes demolished by the police. The former residents moved to the sidewalk to protest in 1986 (p.106). Their hunger strike, combined with the activism of celebrities, led to the relocation of the community to a site that had been a dump—essentially a large crater in the ground. Today, the community has constructed an estimated 300 homes, a third of which have indoor plumbing. The community still expresses solidarity in its functioning, with a co-op system and collective lending practices. [10]

NEUWIRTH writes about the huge squatter community of Dharavi, which is home to somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million people. "[Dharavi is] sprawling and dense, it is hard even for a Dharavi resident to know all its alleys" (p.120). Public and private sector ideas about the future of Dharavi are used to show how interests can collide where squatters' communities are concerned. What the private sector sees as potentially valuable real estate, the squatters and their advocates see as necessary for continued survival. Through interviews with private developers as well as the head of India's National Slum Dwellers Federation and Slum Dwellers International, the case study in Mumbai explores more political ideology than it does physical terrain. Questions about savings, incumbent upgrading, organizing, empowerment and gentrification are raised, if not discussed thoroughly. [11]

The fourth case study in *Shadow Cities* is Istanbul, Turkey. Turkey has legal systems that benefit squatters by forcing landowners to take squatters to court before evicting them from any permanent structures that they have constructed. As a result, there is more security in established squatter communities. The relatively stable community of Sultanbeyli is explored, largely through the author's retelling of the stories of his friend, Zamanhan Ablak. In the community of Sarigazi, the author describes families living in small, old-fashioned homes with beautiful gardens. "The squatter way of building, the squatter way of life, has lots of advantages for poor people" (168). The brief chapter ends with a conversation in which the author is dining with 14 Turkish men who encourage him to abandon his life in New York and move to their community. "'You can come and build there', he told me. 'The land will cost you nothing and you can put the money you save into the home you build ... If you do this,' he said, 'you will be free'" (p.173). [12]

3. Methodology & Organization

Although methodology is only discussed in sparse, disconnected sections throughout the book, it is possible to gain some insight into the study methods. This section of the review synthesizes methodological information from the book, discussing the study design and presentation according to their usefulness to the social sciences. Methodologically, NEUWIRTH's study is conducted in general accordance with the naturalistic or constructivist paradigm (ERLANDSON, HARRIS, SKIPPER & ALLEN, 1993). A caveat is that the book clearly addresses a broader audience than a strictly social scientific one. The critiques in this section, then, should be understood as specific to the book's value to an audience interested in contributions to existing knowledge and theory. It is more difficult to judge the book's potential usefulness to professionals in political, legal or non-profit organizations. [13]

For the reader interested in the details of the specific methods the study employed, the book leaves much to be desired. It is difficult to understand the unfolding of events that led to the collection of the information. How much time did the author spend in each city? How did he choose who to interview or how to spend his time? Was he able to speak the languages in each of these countries? How many people did he talk to and what questions did he ask? Disclosures like these are essential in building the *trustworthiness* of a qualitative study (LINCOLN & GUBA, 1985). This book also contains clear cases of researcher bias that are not clearly exposed as such. These methodological questions devalue the information contained in the book. Adhering more to journalistic norms, quotes from squatters and others are used in the text without any indication on how these quotes were chosen to the exclusion of others. For this reason, an appendix that specifically describes methods would be helpful. If the methods used to collect data were not simply haphazard, the reader should be able to find that information. [14]

Additional concerns for the reader are possible due to the organization of the book. Selected historical examples of squatting in multiple cities are explored in varying depth after the case study chapters. Then, the book moves to a

somewhat inconclusive discussion on a variety of interrelated questions and concepts—interspersed with stories. The voice of the author is sporadic. He seems to switch between storyteller, reporter, sociologist, historian and polemicist. Parts of the book are jargonistic, using italicized terms from multiple languages that, in some cases, are never defined (i.e. *caixa*, p.53). Finally, anecdotes are overemphasized. For instance, a large portion of the chapter on Istanbul is dedicated to discussing the point of view of one man with whom the author clearly felt a great deal of affinity. "Zamanhan was one of the few people I met in Turkey's squatter areas who enjoyed reading and was familiar with works beyond popular literature. He read socially concerned novels and had pored through many iconic Communist texts" (p.159). The use of the names of people with whom the author came in contact is, at times, excessive and confusing. It also raises ethical issues of exposing the identities of a population that could certainly be considered at-risk. [15]

These critiques, however, do not stop the work from being of importance. Many of these issues are difficult to avoid when considering such a broad topic as "the world's squatters" with very few specific questions. The book is rich with insights and observations that may allow theory to emerge that can be examined more specifically. A few examples are taken up in the next section. [16]

4. Emergent Theories & Conclusions

Both the scope of the study and the background work by the author provide many interesting insights. Squatting is a historical norm, and the book explores this idea in some depth. Before oppressive, colonial forces claimed land, often, it was simply available for use. Squatters played a crucial role in the development of most cities in the West. Most land, it seems, has been the site of contest at some point in history. National political and legal structure appears to have more to do with the plight of squatters than individual characteristics of the squatters themselves or even local policy. Additionally, what some powerful entities view as only illegal slums are actually stable communities. The book demonstrates the potential that squatter communities represent. In addition, it shows how similar these communities are to others on "legal" land. The book provides the insight that, many times, squatters give evidence of caring much more about their communities than those not living in *Shadow Cities*. Commercialization and legitimacy, in some ways, constitute a threat to the solidarity and cooperation that exist in these places. [17]

The book begins with an assertion: "We can learn from their [squatters'] example. The world's squatters offer a different way of looking at land" (p.22). It ends with more questions than answers, calling for "more focus groups, more debate, more discussion, more conversation" (p.315). The chief contribution of this book is that it has provided a voice to a group of people that has typically been excluded from debates and discussions. As these issues of land ownership and community development policy are addressed, more community development practitioners and researchers should follow NEUWIRTH's example and include the perspectives of those most impacted by these complex situations. Even the most

reluctant reader of this book should (at least) be convinced that these perspectives are worth considering. [18]

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