

DOES THE CITY AIR REALLY MAKES FREE?

Cesare Ottolini *

In medieval Europe, moving to the city to settle **for a year and a day** was one way for peasants to rid themselves of their feudal bonds. **As a result, most cities would tend to grow over time as more people moved in and became permanent residents.** It seems this is no longer the case: urbanisation causes poverty, inequality and economic slavery.

The UN-Habitat report¹ mentions a billion people currently homeless or living in poor housing conditions, a figure which could double by the year 2030, with over 374 million people amassed in 23 megalopolises by 2015.

But what lies behind these statistics? What is really going on in the globalised cities? What are the real social dynamics and the true stories unfolding in the areas of the city affected by globalisation in the form of real estate investment, transformations in the urban environment and functional differentiation in human mobility?

There are now many networks operating in urban domain. (i.e. Shack and Dwellers International, Huairou Commission, Habitat International Coalition, COHRE, International Alliance of Inhabitants.). Thanks to their geographic and social level roots it is possible to have a more accurate understanding of the nature of the impacts and consequences derived from the urbanistic transformations of the cities.

In fact, these networks have their antennae tuned to the social earthquake which is taking place in the cities struck by the tidal wave of economic globalisation and new geographical and political divisions. At times, this earthquake remains hidden beneath the surface, at others, it makes its dramatic appearance, aggravated along with the inextinguishable foreign debt, cuts in the welfare state for the sake of fulfilling monetary parameters and the quest for profits even in the social services sectors. This leads to the privatisation of public sector housing, increasing therefore insecurity in housing tenure, while plunging millions of families into poverty.

Privatisation is at work both in the west and in the post-communist east. In Italy, for example, to tackle the public deficit the government did not hesitate to sell off the meagre public sector housing in existence. In Moscow, 60% of publicly-owned apartments have been sold off, with a sharp increase in rents, and no adequate subsidies available from the local administration. In Bucharest, 95% of tenants have become owner-occupiers, but cannot afford the cost of maintaining their dilapidated dwellings. In the former Yugoslavia, the abolition of the ancient "tenants' rights", a sort of "shared property", affects hundreds of thousands of tenants threatened with eviction by property speculators.

In both east and west, the beneficiary and perhaps even the brains behind these schemes is transnational financial capital, in particular international pension funds; after the collapse of the stock exchange, the possibility of speculating in bricks and mortar, thanks to state relinquishment of that sector, becomes highly attractive.

In addition, social exclusion is at work in the loathsome form of 'housing apartheid', with immigrants, nomads and refugees particularly affected.

What other term can be used to describe the ethnic cleansing carried out in the Balkan wars? Hundreds of thousands deprived of their homes and forced into exile in a fatal game of geopolitical dominoes whose victims are as always the common people. What other term can be used to describe the building of a wall to divide Palestine, destroying villages and lives? How else can you define the evictions and low-cost expropriations being carried out in Athens and Beijing to give the city a face-lift before the forthcoming Olympic Games? Among the first to be affected are residents in the Alexandras Avenue estate and the Dourgouti quarter, built in former times to house the Greeks who fled from Asia Minor. Now it's the turn of working class areas such as Wali and Datun, where the word 'chai' (to be demolished) scrawled on the ancient Siheyuan (square courtyards) and numerous other buildings is wiped off only by the demolition itself².

* *International Alliance of Inhabitants, September 2004*

¹ http://www.unhabitat.org/report_celebrates.asp

What else can be called the urban renewal in Barcelona for the forthcoming Cultural Forum, the driving force behind property speculation in Poble Nou and elsewhere?

And the evictions in Paris? Here the victims are not only the homeless, mostly immigrants, who have 'requisitioned' empty houses, but also families who have lived in Courbevoie or Saint Denis, for example, for many years, but must be sacrificed to the property speculators of La Defense.

What else can be called the lack of any housing policy, let alone any multicultural policy, which compels immigrant workers to live 10 to a room or build shanty-dwellings and ghettos in the rich capital cities of the north?

Serious monitoring by Habitat Agenda would point out these items and show the widening gap between the legal undertakings contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights³ and the reality of precarious housing conditions.

So many real life stories lie behind the statistics produced by FEANTSA⁴, which estimate that at least 18 million people are badly housed and 3 million are homeless in Europe. Deprived of decent and secure accommodation, these are just the vanguard of a much larger army, if the free market is allowed to continue undisturbed in its pursuit of profits without a halt being called.

We should be allowed to hear the voice of those directly involved: the inhabitants themselves and the associations engaged in trying to oppose the intrusion of unbridled modernity into their homes. Then we would discover that in the centre of Lima over 17,000 dwellings considered "hovels" unfit for habitation will shortly be demolished to make way for offices and luxury residences financed by foreign investors, and that the inhabitants are fighting the evictions caused by contractual deregulation.

We would also hear about the 300,000 inhabitants of the slums of Nairobi, threatened with eviction because they are "illegal", i.e. forced to build shanty-dwellings by the side of the railways, under electricity pylons and along the path of the new bypass⁵, thus disturbing the free flow of investments. As well as many other stories in Mumbai and New Delhi, New York, Dhaka and Karachi ...⁶

This situation is no longer sustainable and is provoking counter-reactions aimed at safeguarding inhabitants' rights to the city, as well as the cities' right to self-preservation and freedom from outside pressures.

Because of this widespread attack on housing rights and the city, those worst hit by the negative effects of globalisation, i.e. the inhabitants themselves, learn how to develop relations and exchange experiences of solidarity which go beyond national borders to prefigure an alternative possible world.

These new inhabitants' strategies seek to avoid being confined to the local situation, but rather appeal to international solidarity, because the step from local to global is getting shorter and shorter, and the exchange of information is getting faster and faster. All this is occurring against a background of conflicts involving the growing power of transnational, a-democratic institutions (the IMF, the World Bank, NATO, WTO, etc.), compared to those which arose at the end of the Second World War.

So, the associations and the international networks are opening the season for super-national platforms in support of public housing and town-planning policies, by drafting reports to the United Nations Committee on Rights, demanding the inclusion of housing rights in the super-national constitutions in the pipeline⁷.

They also propose a swap between the cancelling of foreign debts and new public housing and urban policies, freeing resources otherwise unavailable to this end, to be managed instead by a

² *Sara Meg Davis and Lin Hai, Demolished: Forced Evictions and the Tenants' Rights Movement in China (2004) Human Right Watch, at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/china0304/>*

³ Art. 11 provides that the States will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right and improve housing conditions.

⁴ European Federation of organisations for the homeless www.feantsa.org

⁵ See the iW Nairobi W!i campaign at www.habitants.org/LAI/

⁶ See the COHRE report *Forced evictions reach crisis levels leaving millions homeless worldwide* at www.habitants.org/LAI/

⁷ See the appeal for the insertion of housing rights in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights at www.habitants.org

People's Land and Housing Trust Fund, favouring therefore slum-dwellers and the control of all the parties involved⁸.

In parallel with this, some independent local authorities, left to their own devices by administrative decentralisation, react by espousing the cause of an alternative possible world and projects such as the IAI's Zero Evictions campaign, in some cases declaring their territory an 'eviction-free zone'⁹.

In other words, the conflict is dealt with and regarded as a positive factor in the fight against gentrification and expropriation to which the inhabitants/builders of the city are subjected.

Such a development would have been unthinkable without the World Social Forum which has spread new ideas and new practices of participatory democracy¹⁰, including the participatory budget, participatory town-planning, support for the social production of the habitat, as well as new rules for guaranteeing security of tenure.

Dealing with the political hot potato of funding for public housing and urban policies, a number of alternative sources have been suggested: the introduction of some form of Tobin tax on land and property left unlet for speculative purposes, using part of the \$100 billion per annum brought in by the Tobin tax, or a theoretical 1% of the \$13 trillion in the pension funds¹¹, or part of the cancelled foreign debt.

These issues cannot just be passed on down to grassroots networks or local administrations to decide. They are far too important for that. The future of our cities is a matter of concern for all. Without a working partnership between subjects capable of intervening on an equal footing¹², the future would be shaped by the free market entirely at the service of the financially powerful.

To avoid such a scenario, it seems possible to build a new, vast and varied front, consisting of inhabitants associations, NGO's, co-operatives, trade-unions, and local administrative bodies.

These issues should be included and discussed in our everyday work at all levels.

It's well worth while because there's a good chance that this atmosphere of global solidarity can really make the city's inhabitants free.

⁸ This proposal was put forward at the Social Forum of the Americas (Quito, 25-30 July 2004): to set up a People Land and Housing Trust Fund; see www.habitants.org/IAI

⁹ See "Extension des zones anti-expulsion" at www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/2004-03-24/2004-03-24-390647

¹⁰ Cabannes and o. (2004) "Respuestas a 72 preguntas frecuentes sobre presupuestos participativos municipales" at www.pgualc.org/siteminder/index.php?sv=&category=Presupuesto%20Participativo&title=Preguntas%20Frecuentes

¹¹ Proposed by "The Hassan Fathy Project to Help Resolve the Global Housing Crisis"

¹² See the Salvador Declaration at www.alliance21.org/caravan/en/2/pg15-21.htm

International Alliance of Inhabitants, 2004



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