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## Shacking Up

### 'Shantytowns' are a practical response to a world ruled by speculative real estate.

by Carol Lloyd, special to SF Gate

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A hillside of hovels controlled by drug gangs. A mud shantytown inundated with fly-swarmed open sewage. A string of forlorn shacks erected under a polluted overpass.

We've seen the images from the pages of magazines or on television, or from an airplane when descending into a Third World city -- neighborhoods that seem to have been cobbled together from spit and dirt, housing only the poorest of the poor. The slums. The last place anybody would choose to live, the last place to learn about how to build better cities or to develop a saner relationship to real estate, right?

Wrong on all counts, says [Robert Neuwirth](#), author of "Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World," a provocative new book that explores the global growth of squatter colonies around the world.

Squatters are not some small number of people living in the margins, eking out a meager living in the shadows of American freeways or in Berlin tenements. In fact, one in six people on the planet is now considered a squatter or a slum dweller, typically living in bustling urban neighborhoods of Third World cities on land they don't own. Neuwirth contends that they build more housing than any government or developer. They have also spawned a massive unseen economy -- of landlords and tenants, merchants, professionals, investors and, yes, even quasi-real estate brokers. And because their neighborhoods are growing prodigiously as developing nations grow increasingly urbanized, Neuwirth argues, they offer an alternate vision of private property and its role in creating civilization.

Last week, Neuwirth flew in from New York to give a lecture for Stewart Brand's Long Now Foundation and spent a couple hours hashing out his ideas with me over Mexican food. Neuwirth's idea for the book came to him while he was a reporter in New York covering real estate, architecture and housing.

"I was doing a lot of 'god shots,' he says of his profiles of superstars such as Donald Trump and Frank Gehry. "And I read that one in six people in the world is a squatter and that by the end of the century, estimates are, it will be one in three. I thought, 'Why am I writing about developers who are doing so little but being so self-aggrandizing, when [squatters] are doing so much?'"

So, after a few years of procrastination, he quit his job, left New York and, over the course of a year, rented dwellings in illegal neighborhoods on four continents. He lived in a spacious one-bedroom with a panoramic view in Rocinha, a century-old neighborhood of 150,000 in Rio de Janeiro, and a hut in Kibera, Africa's largest mud shantytown, with 500,000 to 1 million people, in Nairobi. He let a room in an "upper-class" squat in Mumbai, where more half of the city's 10 or 12 million residents are squatters, and an apartment in Sultanbeyli, a bustling independent city of 300,000 outside Istanbul with apartment buildings, stores and even a squatter city hall.

"What do we do when we think of a 'slum'?" asked Neuwirth, who prefers the phrase "squatter community." "We think it's intractable -- there's nothing to be done about it. We make these places emblems of misery, instead of seeing them as problems to be solved."

"Shadow Cities" is a slim book that tackles a sprawling and unruly topic. We hear about of the squalid conditions -- open sewers, violent crime and extreme poverty -- residents of Kibera must tolerate to keep their affordable mud-hut homes and the corrupt political system that prevents them from improving their living situations. We watch as residents in Rocinha look the other way, in exchange for relatively low street-crime rates by day, as drug gangs control the streets at night. We learn about the hierarchy of social classes within the squatter communities in Mumbai -- where "pavement dwellers" build two-story wood huts on the sidewalk and other families have claimed land by hacking through the jungle in Borivali National Park. And, amid it all, we meet dozens of ordinary men and women living and raising their families in squats -- and working as tomato sellers or waitresses or real estate agents -- negotiating the world of illegal occupation with grace and ingenuity.

These details of squatters' daily lives alone could fill volumes, but Neuwirth's point is, well, much more pointed. In his visits, he discovered that not only do many of the squatters love their communities, but they are also working to turn them into functioning urban neighborhoods. Despite the lack of title deeds, and despite the fact that deep-pocketed developers are planning their cities for them, some communities are doing the unthinkable: inventing cities without speculative real estate.

In Turkey, for instance, the squatter city of Sultanbeyli has developed a formidable infrastructure -- bus service, piped gas, water and a sanitation department for its mostly mid-rise apartment buildings -- that bests some of Istanbul's legal neighborhoods. In Rocinha, the city grows gradually as residents sell their roof rights to other resident who build on their homes, who in turn sell their roof rights; if there are disputes between neighbors, the neighborhood holds a meeting -- there is no discretionary hearing before the planning commission.

In a sense, Neuwirth has an ax to grind -- or at least sharpen a little on the American soft spot for private property.

"It's so hard for us to even consider a world without private property because we are wedded to it, addicted by the legalistic terms of ownership," Neuwirth told me when I asked what he thought this

world of squatters could teach those of us still living in the land ruled by real estate. Despite his lefty leanings, though, he admits to being a typical American in this way. When he first began interviewing residents, he repeatedly asked squatters who owns the title to their land. The universal response? Laughter. It's not as if these people would turn a title down if you offered it to them, he said, but the deeds don't exist, or the owners are a mass of thousands of people who together own a huge tract of land.

"If people in Brazil and India are able to improve their homes without titles, without permits, with only handshake agreements, who's to say that's worse?" he mused.

Most developers and urban planners have a stake in building cities in orderly, profitable ways. But Neuwirth insists that though these squatting communities are fraught with complexity and their own sorts of dysfunction, they offer us a vision of another way to look at urban development. He champions the squatters' ability and willingness to build gradually as the need arises and as the money becomes available. Sure, this system doesn't use economies of scale, but it doesn't create debt or put the hands of massive development decisions into a few powerful hands, either. And Neuwirth underscores that many people prefer the squatter neighborhoods because they provide not only affordable housing but also freedom from government control, plus a sense of community spirit.

For Neuwirth, the existence of these vibrant squatting communities (and, in the case of some, their gradual evolution into full-fledged urban neighborhoods) proves that the received wisdom about the importance of private property is simply wrong. It's the right of possession -- not the right of property ownership (which allows speculation) -- that builds strong communities filled with enterprising businesses and vibrant street life. In this sense, he simply wants to challenge his First World readers to think differently about private property.

"In cities defined by scarcity and disempowerment, is this a more equitable way to organize the use of land?" he asks.

Lingering over an overpriced Chilean relleno, surrounded by multimillion-dollar properties in the middle of San Francisco, it was easy for me to dismiss such ideas as the stuff of utopian dreams. It's easy to frame squatting as a stage of urban evolution toward a higher order: legally titled property and well-planned cities. But perhaps assuming that the Third World squatter metropolises will mimic First World civic development is unrealistic as well. In many cities, such as Mumbai, where more than half the residents are squatters, illegal colonies are surrounding legal neighborhoods, and they show no signs of disappearing anytime soon. They are humanity's answer to a global market of unaffordable housing. They are an unideological, practical response to a world ruled by speculative real estate. For them, a home is not an asset, and that challenges us to ask, should it be so for us?

[Carol Lloyd](#) is currently at work on a book about Bay Area real estate. She teaches a class on buying your first home in the Bay Area, and another class based on her best-selling career counseling book for creative people, "Creating a Life Worth Living." For more information, email her at [surreal@sfgate.com](mailto:surreal@sfgate.com).

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