

Attractive Eyesores – The image of slums in the world's cities

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1. The world is becoming urban. Urban populations are multiplying especially in regions, that have only lately been urbanized. The new phenomena require that the terms "urbanity" and "urban life" need to be redefined. The concept of Citizenship the way Max Weber phrased it a century ago or the urbane lifestyle Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth were so eager to describe as a new way of life for humanity—they are all obsolete today. Looking at the emerging Mega Cities in the Developing World, one can find a wide range of new urban-life forms that brings Eurocentrism not only in quantities into a marginal position. We will soon have to share our concepts of the city with the rising urban societies in other parts of the world—i. e. the parts we used to call "the rest of the world".

2. Within the next 40 years or so, some 9.4 Billion people will live on this planet—and this data is driven from reliable statistics and contain an even moderate vision of population growth. UN bodies estimate that in 2050 around 6 Billion citizens will form the world's urban population and most of them will live in agglomerations in the South. With this dominance, hence abundance, of urban spaces, urban images in the world will proliferate. These will not necessarily be new images, but overwhelming in their quantities and amount of combinations. We already know though, what is to be expected. The global media provides us with the visual concepts of Megacities such as Bombay, Shanghai, Sao Paulo or Lagos. These represent our common global future much more than we do: if



Fig. 1: City of God, Fortaleza

there is no sea change in international and urban politics, in 2050 half of the urban population will live in slums.

3. Global media is full of images of third world cities, that we absorb with growing interest. We learn about the affluence of growing economies and the striking poverty. However, they hardly succeed to combine the contrasting pictures they offer, to one comprehensive mosaic. The segregation of the formal and the informal urban world exists even in our mind. Though we fear to look closer, there is yet a growing interest within Western societies in these Southern cities. The modern version of the noble savage—the urban slum dweller—stimulates our fantasies. Self-help and informality are seen as crucial for the production of new urban concepts.

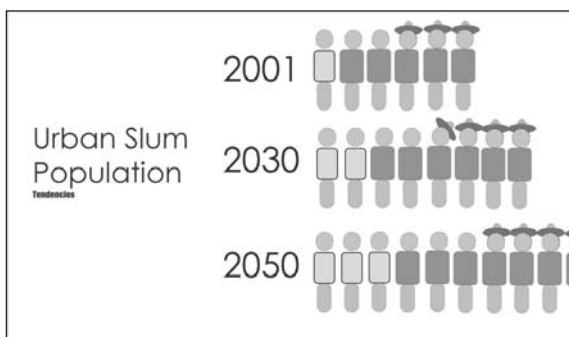


Fig. 2: Urban Slum Population



Fig. 3: Global Media

4. Spaces and images participate in the constitution of a society, as they are always embedded in as well as generated from a social context. It is a peculiarity of the city to be created through social process and actions hard to monitor. A sustainable, liveable city can only be the product of the joint action of all stake holders involved. Urban utopia does not need planning and strict rules, such as Morus' Sun-State Dictatorship. In the real world, urban development needs negotiations and compromise, it should intermediate between different interests and groups and stimulate the exchange of ideas, ways and life forms. The unique architecture of consolidated settlements, sometimes mistaken as "vernacular", convinces us of their efficiency and simplicity. Even in the worst slum, one can find impressive constructions invented by illiterate people. But do these images of built environment constitute the "urban realities"?



Fig. 4: Urban Realities

5. I argue that urban societies constitute themselves in informal settlements as well as anywhere else. We will only understand the cities in our modern world by trying to gain more knowledge about the world of slums. Informal settlements are an outcome of our ignorance. We should regard these urban life styles much more as part of the real world, as they do not represent a contemporary problem that can be rapidly solved, but are an expression of the state of our society. The transformation of urban realities is quicker than our perception of them.



Fig. 5: Squatted Football Ground