

Self-service city. Squatter citizens

To understand why this is true, it's necessary to confront some common myths about the world's squatters.

Myth 1: "slums" are emblems of human misery

Jose Gerardo Moreira is a squatter success story. Moreira, known to his friends as Zezinho, came to Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro's largest favela, with nothing. Today, three decades on, this modest favela fruit vendor lives in a three-story townhouse built of reinforced concrete and brick, with water, electricity and a view of the ocean. His community – on the steep incline of Two Brothers Mountain between the wealthy neighbourhoods of Gávea and São Conrado – is proof that squatter communities need not be miserable places.

Like most squatter outposts, Rocinha started small. In the 1950s, it was just a scatter of families hiding on the hillside, more an encampment than a community. When Zezinho arrived in the 1970s, Rocinha was extremely crude. The forest-dwellers had an unwritten rule: no permanent structures of any kind. So, for decades, favela families lived in wood or mud shacks. They hauled water up the steep hill and, if they were lucky, pilfered electricity from far-away poles.

But, as the community grew, residents understood that their illegal neighbourhood had become a fixed part of the city. That was when, like Zezinho, they started to build. Bricks jutting out at odd angles, partial floors framed in concrete, walls that rise only to end abruptly in a tuft of rebar against the soft blue of the sky: Rocinha today is haphazard but dynamic. The homes seem to twist towards the sun, crowding each other for light and air.

Christine, Maria, Michael and Joachim cannot afford a flat. So they live in the mud hut metropolises.

All around the world, squatter communities are as economically, politically and socially diverse as any other communities on the earth.

Myth 3: squatters are the enemy of civil society

In almost every country, the comfortable classes view squatters as outlaws who reject the traditional social and political structure. But this isn't true. In fact, squatters patiently work within the system, taking every opportunity to involve government in their lives.

"We are realistic," says S'bu Zikode, president of Abahlali base Mjondolo, a community organisation in the shack communities of Durban, South Africa – a city where the authorities still beat squatters and shoot at them with rubber bullets when they become too vocal. "We start where we are but we fight to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. We fight to make those who are blind to poverty able to see the poverty that we see. We work to show those who are blind to the power of the poor the strength of the poor."

The first thing squatters need in order to improve their communities is a **guarantee against arbitrary eviction**. Though nothing is enshrined in law, the residents of Rocinha and most of Rio's 700 other favelas no longer face the threat of eviction. Society accepts that favela-dwellers have a legitimate right of possession. This gives them the confidence to build and invest. By contrast, things are different in **Mumbai**. Makbul Khan, a tailor, has lived in Mumbai's Geeta Nagar, a small

Life in the community is just as dynamic. Rocimha today has a population of 150,000. There are few mud or wood shacks. Every home has access to water. And the local utility has been installing legal electricity, with the proviso that anyone who wants the service must take a meter. With its swarms of empowered residents, Rocimha has even become a desirable location for businesses from outside the squatter realm – and several major Brazilian chain stores have opened branches on its largest commercial streets.

Myth 2: everyone in the world's squatter communities is impoverished and starving

Kibera is a community of between 500,000 and a million people with no water, sewers or sanitation. Yet, despite the deprived conditions, it is one of the most commercially vibrant neighbourhoods of Nairobi and is home to thousands of businesses and a wide variety of people. Christine Nduku owns a major downtown employment agency but lives in a mud-walled room in Kibera. Maria Kathau David and Michael Owaga are clerks for the Nairobi City Council, yet they, too, live in the shantytown. Joachim Maanzo holds a law degree but also lives in Kibera.

They all reside in the shantytown because of the brutal economics of housing in the Kenyan capital. Here, the cheapest apartment in the worst neighbourhood in town costs 2,500 or 3,000 shillings (between \$30 and \$40) a month. A room in a mud hut in Kibera, by contrast, costs between 700 and 1,500 shillings (between \$10 and \$20 a month). Even with their education and good jobs,

squatter colony at the tip of the Colaba peninsula, for 26 years. When he arrived, Geeta Nagar had no electricity and no water. The huts were mere bamboo and straw shelters with thatched coconut palm roofs. The community was actually below sea level, so Khan and his fellow land invaders hauled hundreds of loads of stones to bring the land level up. Toilets were nonexistent and residents simply squatted in the waves, using the Arabian Sea as their impromptu septic field.

Over the years, Khan has rebuilt his home as a multistorey concrete structure, investing several thousand dollars. Now, however, he worries that the house he built is threatened. Colaba is desirable turf and the rumour is that the government wants his home to create a helipad for the nearby navy installation, or to sell to a luxury hotel. "There is nowhere to go," Makbul told me as we sat in his sunny kitchen. "I have no idea what to do. If I invest in this place, I have no idea whether I will be able to stay. We all know this land is very valuable and we are hoping the government will work with us."

Barrio Norte, M



Barrio Humboldt, San Bernardino, Caracas, Venezuela



Photo: Robert Newirth



Which brings up the second point: to be successful, squatters need access to politics.

Government controls the goodies of civic life – and when squatters have no access to government, it is difficult for their communities to grow. Rocinha, for instance, has access to politics. Indeed, the city government has an administrative office, a health clinic and a public school inside the favela.

By contrast, though there are four city council districts that encompass parts of Kibera, Nairobi's shanty-dwellers have little connection to local politics.

Here's the highest example of the lift that political involvement can give squatter areas: a generation ago,

Sultanbeyli was a tiny hamlet on the Asian side of Istanbul that was just beginning to attract immigrants from the east. These early arrivals lived in hovels, pirated electricity, and survived without water or toilets. But as more people came, the citizens of Sultanbeyli pursued political rights – and this has made for an amazing transformation in the community.

In Turkey, if squatters build overnight without being caught, they cannot be evicted without being taken to court. This is why Turkey's squatter areas are known as *gecekondu*, meaning "it happened at night". Further, once a *gecekondu* community has 2,000 residents, it can petition to be recognised as a legal municipality.

Sultanbeyli became a municipality in 1989 and a district (a designation with more power and independence) in 1992. This gives squatters the faculty to organise their own governments.



Photo: Alexis Marguin/Photos

Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2005

Barrio Norte, Mexico City, Mexico 1996



Photo Stuart Franklin/Magnum Photos

Barrio Humboldt, San Bernardino, Caracas, Venezuela 1998



Photo Thomas Hoepfer/Magnum Photos

Today, Sultanbeyli's popularly elected mayor can sit in his air conditioned office on the top floor of the 7-storey squatter City Hall and look out on a city of 300,000 people, none of whom fear eviction. Fatih Boulevard, Sultanbeyli's main drag, is lined with multistorey buildings full of stores, offices, restaurants and banks. And the municipality has used its newfound political might to force the Istanbul government to bring water, sewers and electricity to every home in the district. Sultanbeyli is now a permanent, stable, self-governing, independent squatter metropolis. The way forward for S'bu and Eloy and the billion others on the planet who are living as squatters is not a question of fancy architecture or sophisticated planning. It is a simple question of whether we will treat squatters as citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities that implies.