York Centre for Asian Research

Asia Research Brief

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The 2017 Housing Occupation in the Philippines: A Counter-Project for Livable Homes and an Alternative Lifeworld

The homeless in the Philippines navigate housing in various ways and in different capacities. To survive the elements, they build makeshift dwellings alongside creeks, railroad tracks or garbage dumps. To claim their right to housing, they negotiate with state agencies as individuals or as part of a neighbourhood association. To defend their dignity, they band together and barricade against demolitions. But these separate and dispersed initiatives have not been enough to secure them proper housing. On 8 March 2017, in what would become known as 'Occupy Bulacan,' the urban poor group KADAMAY and thousands of its organized members from different cities and towns occupied 5,300 idled government-built socialized housing units in Bulacan, a province immediately north of the Philippine capital of Manila. Their goal was to claim, defend and survive—all achieved in one radical move.

While the occupiers scored tangible results, government officials and online commentators branded them as "thieves," "lazy" and "rabble-rousers," which the media amplified. Despite the attack against the poor, the occupation exposed the existence of thousands of empty and deteriorating public housing units while millions were homeless and resulted in a Congressional inquiry. The occupation created a complex narrative of contested victories, harsh criticisms and ongoing negotiations.

KADAMAY-occupied socialized housing units in Bulacan, Philippines. Hazel M. Dizon photograph, 2017

Occupy Bulacan was a counter-project against neoliberal state housing. Henri Lefebvre conceptualized 'counter-projects' as mass initiatives that thwart the plans and programs of the powers-that-be in executing their economic and political interests. Occupy Bulacan had demonstrated that the political power of the urban poor movement can uncover and unsettle the dynamics of neoliberal state housing. It illustrates that:

Housing is regarded as a commodity and not a basic right. Profit-laden amortization schemes, public-private construction contracts for unhabitable housing in remote rural areas, stringent processes of socialized housing application, and narrowly targeted beneficiaries culminate in homelessness. The idea of housing being a commodity has been so deeply entrenched in people's minds that the occupiers are regarded as criminals deserving of vilification and punishment.

Radical collective actions from the grassroots are necessary to compel the state to act. Months before the occupation, the homeless applied for socialized housing and staged demonstrations and dialogues with state housing agencies, but to no avail. Weary of unkept promises, they took the matter into their hands. The Philippine

President was obliged to address the issue and signed a joint resolution prompting the state housing agency to distribute the houses to qualified beneficiaries.

Women are in the forefront of the housing struggle, transforming spaces of social reproduction into spaces of resistance. Occupy Bulacan took place on International Women's Day. The urban poor women chose this day to demand their right to housing. It was easy for them to grasp the concept of housing as a right as they were the ones who spent most of their time at home keeping it in order and augmenting the family income with community-based employment. They felt the brunt of inadequate space, poor ventilation and leaky roofs.

Abandoned by the state, the poor turn their desperation into possibilities of a commons. Not only did the occupiers claim the idled units but, by necessity, they also created an alternative lifeworld. The absence of documents signifying rights over the houses also denied them access to basic utilities and social services. But with the help of their allies from other people' organizations, they gathered their resources and set up their own water pump, power generator, day care centre, first aid brigades and vegetable gardens. They continued to educate and organize themselves, which were the very same strategies that made the occupation successful.

As of April 2020, the occupiers were still anticipating the actual implementation of the signed joint resolution. Concurrently, acts of political harassment, including malicious rumours and trumped up charges against the occupiers, were undermining the occupation's successes. Occupy Bulacan is a continuing counter-project that unravels the impacts of increasingly neoliberal policies and practices on social services as well as the power struggle between the elite and the poor.

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Asia Research Briefs

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