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# The makeshift city: Towards a global geography of squatting

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## Abstract

This paper introduces a set of analytical frames that explore the possibilities of conceiving, researching and writing a global geography of squatting. The paper argues that it is possible to detect, in the most tenuous of urban settings, ways of thinking about and living urban life that have the potential to reanimate the city as a key site of geographical inquiry. The paper develops a modest theory of ‘urban combats’ to account for the complexity and provisionality of squatting as an informal set of practices, as a makeshift approach to housing and as a precarious form of inhabiting the city.

## Keywords

inhabitation, precarity, squatting, urban geography, urbanism

## Introduction

The cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay. (Davis, 2006: 19)

So writes the historian and urbanist Mike Davis. In *Planet of Slums*, Davis provides both a searing indictment of the ‘brutal tectonics of neoliberal globalization’ and a detailed catalogue of the deleterious conditions that characterize and shape the everyday lives of the majority of the world’s urban dwellers (2006: 174). The cities of the Global South, so Davis argues, have become the dumping grounds for surplus populations condemned to informal housing and employment, poor and limited access to infrastructure and sustained exposure to a host of

ecological risks. While Davis paints an apocalyptic vision of the contemporary city, readers are left to contemplate a system of dispossession and exploitation that leaves little space for acts of resistance and refusal. As Edgar Pieterse rightly points out, such a ‘register of urban implosion’ makes it impossible to imagine possibilities of resistance or inhabit sites of liberation and empowerment (2008: 2).

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**Editorial note:** PiHG has taken the unusual step of publishing two papers by Alex Vasudevan consecutively in the same hard-copy issue. While the papers can be read independently, they are also explicitly designed as companion pieces that merit being read as a pair. Initially submitted as a single paper, it was at the explicit suggestion of referees that we encouraged the author to split his material into these two companion pieces.

This paper seeks to append a corrective to Davis's totalizing vision. Building on the work of Ananya Roy and others, the paper questions *how* the slum has become the most common site through which the Third World city is recognized and worlded (Roy, 2011: 225; see McFarlane, 2008, 2011b). At stake here, for Roy in particular, is the articulation of a subaltern urbanism that not only explores the slum or squatter settlement as a 'terrain of habitation, livelihood and politics', but as a key theoretical frame for rethinking the 'epistemologies and methodologies of urban studies' (2011: 224, 223). While Roy applauds recent attempts to examine the various forms of popular agency developed by the urban poor, she is also at pains to highlight the limitations of such an approach and the need to interrogate and recast the epistemological categories through which informal forms of living are narrated and theorized.

In the end, Roy proposes a more nuanced epistemological itinerary that stresses the 'heterogeneity of Southern urbanism' and a move beyond the familiar categories of megacity or slum (2011: 231). If there is much to recommend in Roy's position, my own aim is nevertheless to shift some attention back to the squatted settlement *sensu lato*, insisting that it is still plausible and in fact desirable to build a conceptual model of the city from the perspective of squatters and slum-dwellers (Pieterse, 2008: 109). In the remainder of this paper, I develop a close reading of the practices of survival and endurance that have come to characterize the squatted neighbourhoods of the contemporary city. I have chosen to focus on the practice of squatting with two main targets in mind: first, to examine what theories might be deployed in order to advance histories of precarious city life that have come to be increasingly *shared* across the North/South divide; and second, to recognize the lived materialities of squatters as emergent forms of dwelling, sociality and cooperation.

It is not my intention here to resuscitate the 'slum' as an epistemological category, nor do

I wish to revive a version of subaltern urbanism rightly impugned by Roy for romanticizing the *habitus* of the so-called 'slumdog city'. To do so only transforms the complex geography of squatted communities into a site of 'home-based entrepreneurialism' (Nijman, 2010: 13) and 'neo-liberalism populism' (see Roy, 2010). The object of this paper is to return, in part, to the original framing of subaltern politics as set out by the Subaltern Studies Collective in the 1980s. As Ranajit Guha and others have argued (see Guha, 1982; Chakrabarty, 1988), the figure of the subaltern represented a direct challenge to the many varieties of elitism that shaped colonial and neo-colonialist historiography. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that Roy's own approach to urban theory places particular emphasis on the subaltern as 'an object of representation and knowledge' (2011: 229). My own aim, however, is to connect an epistemological concern for *how* we think about and inhabit the city with a renewed commitment to *marking* the 'concreteness' of subaltern political action (Guha, 1988: 5). The question that animates this paper is this: in what way are the practices of squatters constitutive of the city? How, in other words, can the global geographies of squatting – makeshift and experimental, precarious and informal – help us to 'see like a city' (Amin, 2013)? Or to put it somewhat differently, to what extent can practices that were designed for the purposes of survival and the extension of often highly precarious forms of life offer a touchstone for other alternative imaginings of cityness (Pieterse, 2008: 14)?

In what follows, I examine the uneven material geographies of urban squatting across the globe, focusing on their informal, makeshift and precarious character. It would be easy to dismiss such a project as unworkable let alone too idealistic, by pointing to the differences between political acts of occupation in cities of the North and the sheer scale and intensity of struggle in the Global South (Amin, 2012). And yet, my claim here is that an optic is now needed that

seeks to work across this divide while still acknowledging the differing purchase that certain political-theoretical constructs can and should have in dealing with squatting in different places. It is with this in mind that I explore, in a companion piece to this paper, the relationship between recent occupation-based practices and the making of a critical urbanism (see Vasudevan, 2015a; see also Vasudevan, 2011a). The main purpose of this paper is to identify and develop a set of analytical frames that seek to imagine and inhabit the possibilities of conceiving, researching and writing a global geography of squatting. This is a challenging task. As Richard Pithouse (2006) reminds us, any 'adequate theory of the squatter settlement needs to get to grips with the fundamental ambiguity that often characterises life in these places'. The conceptual armature required must, to a large extent, mirror the very provisionality of squatting itself. In the remainder of this paper, I thus re-examine recent work on squatting according to three interlocking frames of reference: as an *informal* set of spatial practices and tactics; as a *makeshift* approach to housing and shelter; and as a *precarious* form of inhabiting the city. The paper offers, in this way, a close reading of the wide literature base on global slums and squatting and urban informality in order to open up a critical space for reconceptualizing how the most precarious of urban lifeworlds are pieced together. To do so, the paper concludes, is also to offer a modest theory of urban 'combat' and 'struggle' that is not only more alive and attentive to the everyday efforts of the urban poor, but also recognizes the emergent possibilities for the development of 'more inclusive, sustainable and equitable city futures' (Pieterse, 2008: 15; see McFarlane and Vasudevan, 2013).

### The squatted city

In the conclusion to his book on urban squatting, the investigative journalist Robert Neuwirth (2004) remarks on how 'the world's squatters

give some reality to Henri Lefebvre's loose concept of "the right to the city"'. 'They are excluded so they take', he writes, 'but they are not seizing an abstract right, they are taking an actual place: a place to lay their heads. This act – to challenge society's denial of place by taking one of your own – is an assertion of being in a world that routinely denies people the dignity and the validity inherent in a home' (2004: 311). For Neuwirth, the seizure of place by squatters is itself an exercise in *place making*: 'squatters, by building their own homes, are creating their own world' (2004: 306). This process of 'dwelling-through-construction', as Neuwirth shows, is a product of countless everyday acts of adjustment and assembly, negotiation and improvisation (McFarlane, 2011a: 656). The lived city of squatters is, after all, a city structured by the shifting inequities that have come to characterize contemporary urbanization. More often than not, to squat is to give form to a basic need for housing and shelter.

While the majority of the world's squatters continue to live in the Global South, the hidden history of squatting is a global history. This is a history of makeshift rural cottages, precarious and informal urban settlements, experimental housing initiatives and radical autonomous communities. It is a history shaped by a complex patchwork of customary beliefs and rights and epitomized in the widespread view 'that if you can build a house between sunset and sunrise, then the owner of the land cannot expel you' (Ward, 2002: 5). The concept of the 'one-night house' has, according to Colin Ward, 'an astonishing *global* distribution, sometimes as folklore, sometimes, it is said, as customary law, or even as statutory law' (2002: 6). Ward is one of many scholars who have contributed to the reconstruction of this 'hidden history' as a global history (and geography) of occupation, settlement and eviction (see Cooper, 1980; Hardy, 2000; Owens, 2008; Péchu, 2010; Perlman, 1976; Simone, 2010; Waits and Wolmar, 1980). As Ward rightly suggests, the place of the squatter in the history of

housing is far more significant than is usually realized, and it would be wrong to subsume or equate the act of squatting with the term 'slum'. If the latter's pejorative connotations are well-established, the former's connection to a complex range of practices merits further scrutiny (McFarlane, 2008; Pithouse, 2006; Roy, 2011). This is borne out by the rich and evocative nomenclature for squatted communities across the globe, from *favela* in Brazil to *barriadas* in Peru, from *kijiji* in Kenya to *jodpadpatti* in India (Ward, 2002; see also Neuwirth, 2004: 16).

Squatting can be defined, in these contexts, as 'living in – or using otherwise – a dwelling without the consent of the owner. Squatters take buildings [or land] with the intention of relatively (> 1 year) long-term use' (Pruijt, 2013: 19). Squatting, to be sure, represents only one example of the many different strategies of shelter adopted by the urban poor that include more formal options such as 'hand-me-down' housing, hostels and purpose-built tenements, as well as informal forms of settlement from 'pirated subdivisions' to irregular peri-urban townships and other zones of extreme biopolitical abandonment (see Davis, 2006; Biehl, 2005; Roy, 2011). Unsurprisingly, accurate statistics are difficult to come by as the number of urban squatters is often deliberately undercounted by officials. It is estimated that there are anywhere from 600 million to 1 billion people squatting globally, with the vast majority located in cities and towns in the Global South (Davis, 2006: 23; Neuwirth, 2004; Tannerfeldt and Ljung, 2006). Even the UN's own restrictive definition identifies at least 921 million slum-dwellers in 2001, with the number rising to over a billion by 2005, a high percentage of whom are squatters (Davis, 2006: 23). Set against this backdrop, the squatting movements that emerged in cities in the Global North in the 1960s and 1970s were admittedly smaller in scale – numbering in the tens of

thousands – although they still played a significant role in the development of new forms of grassroots urban politics (SqEK, 2013).

Scholarly interpretations of squatting also vary. The literature has traditionally tended to privilege two main lines of enquiry and to see squatting either as the expression of housing precarity or as an attempt to construct a radical alternative to more traditional forms of dwelling. At the same time, others have shown that un-met housing needs are, in fact, central to all forms of squatting (Davis, 2006; Neuwirth, 2004; Ward, 2002; Waits and Wolmar, 1980). Housing inequality, after all, has not only depended on recurring cycles of creative destruction, but has also repeatedly condemned significant numbers of people in both the Global North and South to misery and prompted many to seek informal forms of housing and shelter. As Friedrich Engels noted in the bloody aftermath of the Paris commune in 1872, the only way capital was able to solve the 'housing question' was to 'continually reproduce the question anew' (Engels, 1995 [1872]). While the main target of Engels's critique was the 19th-century Paris of Baron Haussmann, David Harvey reminds us that 'accumulation by dispossession' has also become a defining experience for contemporary low-income populations in cities like Mumbai, Cairo, Jakarta and Lagos (2008: 34).

The disagreeable materialities of dispossession and displacement are not, however, limited to the rapidly expanding cities of the Global South. They also extend to the ever-splintering urbanisms of the Global North (Graham and Marvin, 2001). In each case, life for a growing number of city-dwellers has been reduced to a permanent state of emergency characterized by an inadequate supply of basic resources and/or absence of discernible infrastructures and institutions (Simone, 2004: 4, 13). At the same time, this 'state of emergency' also describes an unstable process of adaptation and improvisation that 'enables, however fleetingly,

a community to experience its life, its experiences and realities, in their own terms' (Simone, 2004: 5). To squat is, in this context, to open up a space for piecing together an alternative urban life. While academics and policymakers have historically tended to zoom in on the iniquitous geographies of urban squatting, I seek also to remain alert to the endless adaptability and capacity for improvisation and invention that has characterized the long history of squatted housing (Pieterse, 2008: 32; see McFarlane, 2011; Vasudevan, 2011a; Ward, 2002). For the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, these practices were tantamount to a form of *bricolage*. The bricoleur, he opined, 'is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he [*sic*] does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with "whatever is at hand"' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 17).

If Lévi-Strauss's description risks romanticizing the precarious nature of squatting, it does nevertheless chime with AbdouMaliq Simone's recent work on the heterogeneous *engineering* of urban life. As Simone so ably demonstrates, this is a process that increasingly depends on the productive deployment of sensibilities, practices and materialities that are themselves 'made possible by the very uncertainties incumbent within cities' (Simone, 2008a: 13). Simone's own work has contributed, in particular, to the development of a conceptual framework for documenting the contingent specificity of urban experiences in the Global South (see McFarlane, 2011a, 2011b). For Simone (2008b), the very capacity for adaptation – especially among the urban poor – must be set against a backdrop punctuated by fragmented infrastructures, social divisions and partial forms of urban governance. These are indeed not, though, conditions that are limited to a select group of cities in the Global South. As Simone intimates, they speak to an emerging architecture

of experience – precarious, temporary and often violent – that is global in its articulation.

Squatting represents, according to this view, just one important example of the provisional and incessantly mutating practices required to 'make do' viably in urban settings dominated by the logics of capitalist accumulation (Simone, 2008a: 13). For squatters, 'making do' denotes a mode of composition that is constitutively precarious and informal. It also *opens* up the city to the production of new autonomous geographies and the making of 'times and spaces for alternative living' (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006: 743). It is to this end that I have attempted elsewhere to develop an *autonomous* understanding of urban squatting in the Global North that identifies a series of practices, skills and tactics which, taken together, provide a critical lens for linking occupation, urban squatting and radical infrastructure (Vasudevan, 2015a). In the remainder of this paper, I pursue a different, if complementary, itinerary that seeks to register a more 'planetary' form of urbanization, albeit in a minor key (Merrifield, 2013).

In the next three sections, I develop a reading of squatting that is both globally expansive and attentive to the informal and precarious set of practices that make life worthwhile and meaningful in settings of extreme deprivation. What ultimately matters here is recognition that squatters 'live in actual homes in communities in places with actual histories that collide with contemporary circumstances to produce actual presents . . . Even within the same parts of the same cities the material and political realities in neighboring shack settlements can be hugely different' (Pithouse, 2006). The ontological resonance of squatting is, in this way, modest. It depends on a constellation of shifting practices (tenure, work, infrastructure) rather than any single global mode of urban insurgency. There can therefore be no strict homogeneous theory of squatting and this paper, if anything, sets out to provide some modest conceptual signposts for building alternative approaches

to shared city life that resonate both *within* specific settlements and across a broader translocal landscape. While I have chosen to focus here on urban squatting, I do not mean to diminish the enduring significance of rural forms of ‘occupation’. These developments are admittedly beyond the compass of this paper, although they have been central to the emergence of landless peasant movements from Brazil to India to South Africa (see Greenberg, 2004; Wright and Wofford, 2003). An emphasis on the processual makeshift qualities of squatting also shifts attention away from accounts that hypostatise urban marginality and exclusion. While I appreciate that my own work is squarely located in the practices of squatters in the Global North (see Vasudevan, 2011a, 2015a), it is absolutely imperative that any attempt to explore the global geographies of squatting attends to the sheer plurality of practices and trajectories. Squatting, seen in this way, depends on a provisional urban politics that is continuously made and remade, where marginalization can be ‘read differently’ as a zone of association and possibility, survival and subversion (Pieterse, 2008: 3).

## The informal city

In a recent article, the urbanist AbdouMalik Simone reminds us that ‘cities remain critical domains for engendering new collectivities which, in turn, continuously remake the potentialities of life’ (2008b: 186). This is a view of city life that has prompted Simone and others to study cities ‘that have been at the periphery of urban analysis or which embody urban processes and realities that have largely been left out when these cities are taken into consideration’ (Simone, 2010: 14). From Dakar to Lagos, Johannesburg to Mumbai, substantial attempts have been made to document and develop theoretical frameworks that attend to the specificities of urban experience in the Global South (McFarlane, 2011b; Ong and Roy, 2011; Pieterse, 2008; Robinson, 2005; Roy,

2011; Simone, 2010, 2011b). Much of this work has also challenged crude attempts simply to ‘include’ Southern urban life within the orbit of traditional urban studies (see Robinson, 2002). For Simone, this has depended on an understanding of ‘cityness’ that tracks the countless everyday situations and tactics that facilitate the adaptation by diverse urban residents to the ‘vast heterogeneities of urban life’ (Simone, 2008b: 200). At stake here are the often informal circuits of association and assemblage that make urban life at least minimally viable.

The study of squatted housing has, unsurprisingly perhaps, occupied a key place within the evolution of scholarship on urban informality. This has focused, in the first instance, on the mass migration of rural residents into the cities of the Global South in the post-Second World War era and the unmet demand for affordable low-income housing. If large informal settlements became a defining feature of Southern cities, the prevailing orthodoxy within academic and institutional circles stressed the importance of property rights and security of tenure as ‘the necessary basis for the accumulation of resources needed to make urban life viable for low income residents’ (Simone, 2008b: 187). At the very same time, groundbreaking studies by Janice Perlman (1976, 1986), John Turner (1976) and Manuel Castells (1983) sought to challenge and recast the dominant mythology surrounding the capacities of the urban poor to constitute their own urbanism. What Perlman described as the ‘myth of marginality’ reduced squatting to a pathological expression of crime, poverty and radical politics. Perlman and other scholars highlighted, in contrast, how the urban poor were not in fact ‘marginal’ but fully integrated into society, if on precarious terms that often caused them to be ‘economically exploited, politically repressed, socially stigmatised and culturally excluded’ (Al Sayyad, 2004: 9; see Bayat, 2000). While Perlman (1986) singled out six misconceptions

surrounding the everyday geographies of squatting, she also drew particular attention to the necessarily experimental and makeshift nature of informal housing. For Perlman, housing is a *doing* rather than a finished product (see also Turner, 1972). It depends, she argues, on an incremental process of improvement, adjustment and adaptation.

If the work of Perlman and her contemporaries established a new common sense about the nature of urban marginality (Roy, 2009: 82), recent scholarship has sought to extend and rework the conceptualization of ‘informality’ in light of new urban developments in the Global South. Simone has cautioned against attempts simply to impose strict conceptual categories – terms like ‘irregular’, ‘provisional’ and ‘informal’ – on the complex textures of adaptation, experimentation and improvisation that sustain life in the city. For Simone, these efforts have often tended to ‘oversimplify, normalise, or occlude methods of composing everyday life that entail much less stability or calculation than those terms would seem to connote’ (Simone, 2011b: 269; see also Varley, 2013). What is needed, he argues, is a more modest use of informality as a tactical operational field rather than as an overarching logic that structures action (Simone, 2004: 14). Simone’s own work on African cities has therefore shifted attention to the ‘city as a thing in the making’ and to the ‘emergent forms of social collaboration’ that have come to operate in a context where large parts of everyday life, including housing and infrastructure, have been informalized (2010: 3; 2004: 6). What animates Simone’s analysis is a grounded consideration of the multiple practices – the ‘below-the-radar’ set of small actions – that are required provisionally to sustain life in precarious informal conditions (Pieterse, 2008: 113). ‘It is another thing’, he writes, ‘to insist that this notion of the city is “proved” by its most vulnerable inhabitants – thus equating vulnerability and the exigencies of constant compensation and adjustment with some “essence” of urbanity’ (2011a: 250). The kind of urbanism that Simone,

in contrast, has in mind ‘does not so much exist as *occurs*’ (McFarlane, 2011b: 48; emphasis in original).

A concern for the ‘liveliness of urban dwelling’ has also been taken up by Colin McFarlane, whose work on housing construction and maintenance within informal settlements in Mumbai has focused on how residents ‘learn’ to operate in ‘contexts of profound urban inequality’ (2011b: 48; see also McFarlane, 2008). For McFarlane, ‘learning the city’ is never a formal, linear cognitive process. It is, he argues, an incremental mode of attunement and immersion that features prominently in the contested production of the everyday city. Such an incremental urbanism, according to McFarlane, depends on a ‘cumulative process of assembly’ (2011b: 36). A squatted house or shack, as McFarlane argues, may well be built, but it is perhaps more accurately described as something *dwelt* (2011b: 38; emphasis in original). This depends quite understandably on a precarious process of accretion and assembly where materials and infrastructures are incrementally added and continuously altered and reworked in order to satisfy new needs and possibilities. While this is, of course, a process shaped by relations of class, gender, race, age, religion and ethnicity, it also encompasses the ‘various actors that the poor must negotiate in order to get access to different infrastructures and services, not to mention the labour and costs involved’ (McFarlane, 2011b: 37).

As an incremental form of urban dwelling, squatting must undoubtedly be seen as a form of adaptation to the ‘crisis ordinariness’ (Berlant, 2011: 10) that characterizes urban life in contexts of extreme iniquity. At the same time, McFarlane’s work on Mumbai also reminds us that such everyday geographies of adjustment can also take the form of more ‘exceptional’ interventions with the potential to develop into an alternative set of political tactics. For settlements threatened by eviction and demolition, more recognizable forms of organization and



dissent often supplemented a micro-politics of improvisation. The residents of informal settlements in Mumbai often found themselves collaborating with urban social movements, sharing the aim of 'extending the formal security that mainstream residential groups in the city experience to a neighbourhood with precarious rights' (McFarlane, 2011b: 59). As McFarlane shows, this depended on the collaboration between grassroots activists and local inhabitants in order to raise awareness of existing rights and procedures, and thereby to transform the domain of the law into a set of workable tactics of resistance.

While the work of McFarlane, Simone and others has prompted a more nuanced engagement with the everyday geographies of urban informality, it remains tempting, according to Roy, simply to 'interpret the tactics and struggles of the urban poor in the cities of the global South as instances of rebellion and insurgency' (2009: 84). 'Are these "shadow cities" not revolutionary, examples of a "globalization from below?"', she asks (Roy, 2009: 84, see Appadurai, 2002). Do they not, she continues, provide an example of a 'politics of patience' set against a backdrop of constant precarity? Roy's own response to these questions is to acknowledge the importance of informal urban processes for recognizing an alternative right to the city (Roy, 2005: 148), but she also argues that the relationship between insurgency and informality is far more complicated. Drawing on her own work in Calcutta, Roy shows how squatters and sharecroppers have been 'captured' within the circuits of conventional city politics in lieu of more radical modes of dissent. For Roy, such forms of oppositional politics 'do not and often cannot call into question the urban status quo; they can imagine but cannot implement the just city'. They represent, if anything, a more traditional form of urban populism, where tenuous access to shelter and services are exchanged for political and electoral loyalties (Roy, 2009: 85).

If Roy points, in part, to a recrudescence of traditional forms of political representation,

Solomon Benjamin (2008) offers a different reading of the 'vote bank' politics through which the urban poor in India in particular have come to lay claim to public investments in basic services and infrastructure. For Benjamin, this is a messy, uneven and fluid process that challenges, in his view, the activities of powerful real estate lobbies and a 'civil society arena that seeks to restrict political activity to those deemed to be "legitimate citizens"' (Benjamin, 2008: 721; Roy, 2011: 228). Benjamin thus introduces the concept of 'occupancy urbanism' as an oppositional mode of political agency that encompasses the complex constellation of para-legal arrangements used by squatters and other slum-dwellers in order to secure land tenure and access to public services. 'Occupation', according to this view, poses a serious threat to urban capital where occupancy 'refers not just to physical space but also to the appropriation of real estate surpluses made possible by the "embedding" of municipal government into popular society' (Benjamin, 2008: 724–5). It is, however, important, as Benjamin argues, to see occupancy urbanism as more than a form of resistance *sensu stricto*. As his work in Bangalore shows, it also operates as a conceptual lens that unsettles conventional notions of informality while focusing on the everyday practices that reconfigure dominant understandings of law and property.

It is, of course, the case that the very terrain of occupancy urbanism is also the territory of 'development mafias' and 'local crime syndicates' that often operate in tandem with elite real estate interests, the state and the police to produce an occupancy urbanism of the *powerful*. 'Informal urbanization', adds Roy, 'is as much the purview of wealthy urbanites as it is of slum dwellers' (2011: 233). And as Ayona Datta's (2012) excellent new book on squatters in Delhi shows, informality and illegality are not one and the same thing. In her own words, 'squatters now find themselves subordinated to and subsumed within the regulatory frameworks

of formal and legal mechanisms in the city, and therefore the meanings and consequences of being “illegal” have become important in their lives’ (Datta, 2012: 8). For Datta, this generates anxiety and insecurity among squatters such that they are forced to translate their experiences of law into public demands for access and rights to the ‘legal’ city and into private concerns around the very nature of home and family. ‘Local politics’, Datta argues, ‘becomes precisely about the reworking of power in those spaces where daily struggles and anxieties around living in the “illegal city” are experienced’ (2012: 9). It is therefore, according to Datta, a focus on the intimate spaces of the home that reveals the ‘complexities of how squatters actually relate to the “state” and the “law” in registers of hope, cynicism, apprehension and moral appeals for inclusion into wider society’ (Datta, 2012: 177).

The complex relationship between informality, illegality and insurgence is also a recurring theme in recent work by the anthropologist James Holston (2008) on the differentiated legal processes that have come to shape planning and construction in urban Brazil. Holston’s main focus is on São Paulo and the gradual and uneven formalization of the city’s squatted auto-constructed peripheries. If this process represents, for Holston, an important example of an alternative urbanism, it also depends on the emergence of new ‘insurgent’ forms of citizenship and identity. As Holston shows, such struggles over territorial rights and political recognition brought the experiences of the urban poor into the mainstream and served as a solid platform for Brazil’s ‘right to the city’ movement. But for the majority of inhabitants living in the auto-constructed peripheries, insurgent citizenship ultimately remained ‘a form of propertied citizenship, one where the right to the city is expressed through home ownership and where politics is expressed through neighborhood or homeowner associations’ (Roy, 2009: 85). This manifested itself most forcefully

perhaps in the distinctions that were routinely made between newly legalized territories and the illegal plots of more recent squatters. In Holston’s own words, ‘far from holding apart the legal and the illegal, just and unjust, public and private, this regime of citizenship is based on managing their intersection’ (2008: 313). At stake here is an *insurgent city* that challenges the very conditions of informality only to become an *exclusionary city* that reproduces the same margins of legality and formality.

And yet, it would also be wrong simply to dismiss the role that residential illegality and squatting has come to play in the ‘insurgence of political and civil rights among the urban poor [in the Global South]’ (Holston, 2008: 204). If this strategy has been predicated on the transformation of legal struggles into political practices that secure social and legal legitimacy, it has also continued to provide resources for contesting the increasingly iniquitous geographies of contemporary urbanization (see Vasudevan, 2011b). In the words of Holston, ‘[this] is an insurgence that begins with the struggle for rights to have a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen’s dignity’ (2008: 313).

In the end, the trade-off between self-determination and legal recognition has always been a central feature of the global history of squatting, continuing now to shape occupation-based practices in both the Global North and South. While informal settlements and squatted spaces still tend to be seen by states and other international institutions as islands of resistance and/or outcast territories, they are also increasingly viewed as untapped markets and potential spaces for profit-driven development and new forms of speculative urbanism (McFarlane, 2012; see Goldman, 2011; Ong and Roy, 2011; Roy, 2010). Recent scholarship on the Global North has focused, for example, on the relationship between urban informality, radical politics and neighbourhood regeneration. There is now a large literature that explores the institutionalization and co-optation of urban movements,

alongside the particular role that squatting and other forms of urban ‘occupation’ have come to play in legitimizing a ‘neoliberal turn’ in urban development (Balaban, 2011; Holm and Kuhn, 2010; Mayer, 2003; Uitermark, 2011). There is also a long history of romanticizing slums in the Global South as sites of endurance and experimentation. If earlier accounts by Turner (1976) and others focused, in particular, on the improvised self-managed urbanism of squatter settlements, there has been a shift in the past decade to a narrow economic view that seeks to recast the squatter as an entrepreneurial subject and informal housing as a deep pool of ‘dead capital’ and a new frontier for surplus generation (De Soto, 2000; see McFarlane, 2012; Roy, 2010). And yet, attempts to marketize and discipline poor urban dwellers as financial subjects continue to connect up and intersect with other ‘collectivist practices that exceed the borders of entrepreneurial models’ (McFarlane, 2012: 2796). It is in this context that the next section attempts to shift some attention back to squatting as a *makeshift urbanism* that disrupts and extends our understanding of how we think about and conceptualize the city as a site of social transformation.

### The makeshift city

In a recent article in *Mute Magazine* (2006), Richard Pithouse of the South African Shack Dwellers’ Movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, describes the fundamental ambiguity and provisionality that characterize life in squatter settlements. For Pithouse, the constitutive informality of many such settlements is marked, on the one hand, by systemic deprivation and suffering and the absence of the basic necessities (water, electricity, sanitation, etc.) required for a ‘viable urban life’. But the relative absence of the state and traditional modes of governance can also, on the other hand, enable, as Pithouse (2006) suggests, a ‘rare degree of political and cultural autonomy’. If the everyday experiences of

squatters are thus shaped by a wide range of coping mechanisms and survival strategies, they also constitute emergent sites for the making of new social forms, often radical and militant but, in other cases, deeply reactionary (see Hansen, 2001). It is against this backdrop that this paper aims to question how we conceptualize and write about the lived materialities of squatters. How, it asks, are precarious forms of housing and sociality actually *assembled*? What kind of work is necessary in order to connect and arrange materials, resources and practices in ways that persist as housing or habitation? And to what extent might the activities of squatters offer a critical opportunity for the development of more just and equal urbanisms?

To answer these questions, I develop a reading of squatting as a *makeshift urbanism* that places particular emphasis on the dense matrix of practices that are central to how squatted spaces and communities are pieced together, secured and lived. In other words, I seek to extend the discussion in the previous section of this paper and rework the relationship between informality and urban squatting as a shifting process through which often precarious lifeworlds are assembled (see McFarlane and Vasudevan, 2013). A commitment to marking the makeshift informal infrastructures developed by marginalized and alternative urban groups can also, I argue, reveal important issues around the *making* of a different urban politics. In the Global North scholarship has tended, in the main, to focus on squatting as a tactic developed by progressive social movements (see López, 2013; Mayer, 2013; Pruijt, 2013). Squatting, according to this view, focuses on network building, with a range of social justice movements calling for affordable sustainable housing and other more radical solutions to the lack of housing and infrastructure. Crucially, as Margit Mayer argues, it uses the space of ‘occupation’ for both shared living arrangements and other forms of ‘collective self-organization and empowerment’ that transform squatted spaces

into 'self-managed social centers for political and counter-cultural activities' (2013: 2). At the same time, Mayer also suggests that the kind of stealth or 'deprivation-based squatting' most often carried out by or on behalf of homeless people and other desperate would-be squatters is not part of any transformative social movement (2013: 2).

While there is, of course, a danger in projecting particular political motivations onto specific acts of urban squatting, I seek to open up a critical space for *connecting* radical forms of urban insurgency with other necessary attempts in both the Global North and South to secure and sustain housing, however precarious and temporary. It is, after all, vital to 'find a way to valorise the many efforts that residents make to use the city as an arena in which to say something about what it means to be alive and to practice whatever form of aliveness they might eke out from the city. . . . If we are not willing', asks AbdouMaliq Simone, 'to find a way to live and discover within the worlds these residents have made, however insalubrious, violent and banal they might often be, do we not undermine the very basis on which we would work to make cities more livable for all?' (2010: 333; see also Varley, 2013).

This entails a recognition, in other words, that how squatted spaces are assembled and a commitment to urban transformation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, to conceive of a makeshift urbanism is to offer the promise of a different rendering of the global geographies of squatting that is ultimately more alive and attentive to the materials and practices through which everyday life is secured, contested and perhaps even remade (McFarlane and Vasudevan, 2013). If squatting has come to represent the political other to 'creative destruction', it ultimately does so by also encompassing an enduring and basic politics of inhabitation and infrastructure. Such struggles begin to point to a growing convergence between forms of squatting – predominantly located in cities of the

North – that are a direct product of broader political movements and a longstanding global repertoire of occupation-based practices that are predicated on fundamental metabolic inequalities (housing, sanitation and water).

Above all, to conceive of squatting as a makeshift urbanism does not depend on any single overarching framework that generalizes the different demands of putting together livelihoods, managing uneven infrastructures and developing patterns of social interchange. Rather, it recognizes the complex *material geographies* through which cities are differentially composed and re-assembled (see Pieterse, 2008; Simone, 2010; McFarlane, 2011; Vasudevan, 2011a; McFarlane and Vasudevan, 2013). To do so requires, in turn, a conception of the city as a dwelling process that continuously reshapes the ways in which people, materials, ideas and resources come together (Simone, 2010: 5). This view of the city as an assemblage resonates with a growing body of geographical scholarship that focuses on 'how city places and urban technologies are assembled incrementally and contingently' (Jacobs, 2012: 417; see Farias, 2009; Gandy, 2005; Jacobs and Cairns, 2011; Jacobs and Merriman, 2011; McFarlane, 2011a). While a close theoretical interrogation of this work is beyond the compass of this paper, a recognition of the makeshift character of urban squatting has the potential to bridge a radical political economy tradition with more recent post-structural approaches to city life. As McFarlane argues, this is a view that allows us to 'attend to why and how multiple bits-and-pieces accrete and align over time to enable particular forms of urbanism over others' and to *how* such processes may be 'subject to disassembly and reassembly through unequal relations of power and resource' (2011a: 653).

It is therefore possible to extend the concept of a makeshift urbanism to squatting in at least three ways. First, as an act or process of collective *world-making* through which an alternative

informal sense of ‘cityness’ is continuously made and re-made (Simone, 2010; see Vasudevan, 2011a). Second, as an *improvised materialism* that focuses on the everyday materialities within squatter settlements and occupied spaces and how residents and activists learn to use and adapt different materials in contexts of ‘daily survival, experience, inequality and possibility’ (McFarlane, 2011b: 163). Third, as a specific *political imaginary* characterized by a provisional and precarious openness to the possibilities of assembling and developing other alternative urbanisms out of the very matter and stuff of inequality, displacement and dispossession. In the end, what matters here is an approach to the realities of creative destruction and accumulation by dispossession that is both global and ‘intractably local’, and which also shows how the ‘deepening and extension of urban impoverishment’ has prompted squatters to develop other generative actions, connections and forms (Simone, 2010: x, 27).

Indeed, a new focus on lived practice in all its messiness and vitality has increasingly shaped recent work on the history of squatting in Europe, highlighting what squatters actually *did*, the terms and tactics they deployed, the ideas and spaces they created (SqEK, 2013; see López, 2013; Pruijt, 2013; Vasudevan, 2013). As I have argued in an essay (Vasudevan, 2011a) on the development of the squatter movement (*Hausbesetzerbewegung*) in Berlin, the very act of ‘occupation’ came to represent a precarious form of *worlding* through which counter-cultural practices took hold, autonomous spaces were built and new webs of solidarity were developed (Mayer, 2013: 3). For activists in the Berlin scene, this constituted a process that was characterized by both an ‘attack on the unjust distribution of urban goods’ and an attempt to link alternative forms of collective living with non-institutional grassroots urban politics (López, 2013: 871). In practical terms, this depended in no small part on a modest *ontology of mending and repair*.

Squatters in Berlin often confronted abandoned spaces that required significant renovation. As ‘rehab squatters’, they quickly adopted the motto *Instands(be)setzung* as a slogan for the movement – the term itself a clever combination of the German for maintenance (*Instandsetzung*) and squatting (*Besetzung*).

While DIY maintenance focused on the reconnection of utilities, including water and electricity, squatters also responded to normative assumptions about living and the ‘home’ through the re-assembling of its more basic spatialities. In many cases, the permeability of a building was increased and reworked to match the changing needs and wishes of the squatters (Vasudevan, 2011a). Walls were removed in order to increase the size of collective spaces while stairwells were created to produce a new geography of experimentation and movement (see Sheridan, 2007). These architectural experiments thus became a key process for exploring a new micropolitics of connection and solidarity (Simone, 2004: 12).

And yet, what often began as an insurgent form of ‘self-help’ or a small-scale urban intervention should not simply be held up as a model for a different approach to how we might inhabit the city. As I argue in the companion piece to this essay, it has also, in many cases, become a major mechanism in the appropriation and commodification of urban space (see Vasudevan, 2015a). We need, therefore, to be wary of the co-optation and redistribution of makeshift materials and resources as agents of dispossession and displacement. This should not, however, preclude a recognition of the necessary role that an *improvised materialism* continues to play in the development and organization of spatial practices that seek to extend and sustain precarious lives and livelihoods (Vasudevan, 2013). Self-built housing remains, after all, a key feature of squatter settlements, especially in the Global South where access to materials, resources and infrastructure is limited and structured by the unevenness of state intervention and the

inequities of land ownership. The makeshift qualities of squatted housing may point, in this way, to the improvised re-use of found materials (corrugated iron, discarded plastic, cardboard, etc.) and to a set of complex coordinating systems that respond to metabolic needs (water, sanitation, electricity) in settings of severe hardship and poverty. But they also reveal a ‘materialism of the *things themselves*’ that places particular emphasis on the changing role of materials – adaptive, improvised and incremental – and appreciates how this might provide a ‘potentially different lens for linking everyday life, uncertainty and the possibilities of [an] alternative urbanism’ (McFarlane, 2011b: 35, 163; emphasis in original).

A commitment to a makeshift imaginary ultimately depends, in part, on the development of finely-grained ethnographic accounts that not only document the different use of materials in diverse and contingent ways but that, in so doing, prompt us to re-orientate our theory-making. As the authors of a recent essay on urban political ecology have argued, ‘the base for theorisation here is the ordinary practices of city-making’ and how they come to situate and shape our understanding of specific urban histories, whether it be Dakar or Mumbai, Phnom Penh or São Paulo (Lawhon et al., 2014; McFarlane, 2011b; Simone, 2010). The emphasis on everyday practices also points to a shift away from a purely technological reading of material infrastructure to a recognition of the role that people also play as a means ‘through which materials flow in many cities’ (Lawhon et al., 2014: 506). A makeshift urbanism thus marks out the form of a different urban politics characterized by a constitutive *openness* to how alternative political imaginaries are actually made and remade in settings shaped by ‘the inextricable experience of possibility and precariousness that seems to now locate the positions and operations of the world’s urban majority’ (Simone, 2010: 332). This demands a greater appreciation of the ‘agentic force of

materials’ and a recognition of the ‘shifting social architectures’ that squatters and other urban residents piece together ‘using their time, their bodies, inclinations, tools, and all the material stuff that exists around and within them’ (McFarlane, 2011b: 163; Simone, 2010: 330). These are, of course, developments that take on a critical urgency in the urban South though a commitment to retracing the different tactics used by squatters as they seek to reclaim and build a sustained social world in increasingly uncertain urban environments. Such a move has, in turn, the potential to challenge the impasse between Northern and Southern urban studies. As I argue in the final section of this paper, such a responsiveness to precarity also opens up new possibilities for conceiving, researching and writing a global geography of squatting.

### The precarious city

In recent years, the terms ‘precarity’, ‘precariousness’ and ‘precarization’ have come to feature prominently in the emergence of a new European-wide social movement that has sought to challenge the conditions of late-capitalist work (Lorey, 2010; Molé, 2010, 2011; Muehlebach, 2011; Raunig, 2010). While the concomitant expansion of the conceptual field of precarity has resulted in considerable confusion over the meanings of key terms, the process of precarization has tended to converge around two primary meanings (Raunig, 2010: 75). On the one hand, it describes the production of deregulated and privatized labour regimes characterized by short-term semi-permanent work. On the other hand, it refers to the normalization of psychic uncertainty and hypervigilance amongst worker-citizens no longer guaranteed full employment (Molé, 2010: 38). Precarity has therefore come to describe both a subject position and the *experience* – affective, psychological and proprioceptive – of that position. It represents, in other words, both an economic and

political condition suffered by a population and the lived experience of that condition as a form of ‘ambient insecurity’ (Horning, 2012).

For many commentators, the use of precarity as a critical concept runs the risk of ‘romanticizing the supposed security of high Fordist economic conditions circa the 1950s and implicitly championing dirigiste corporatism’ (Horning, 2012; see Muehlebach, 2011). Others worry that a preoccupation with the ‘subjective’ experience of precarity only serves to sidestep the ‘objective’ realities of class composition. According to this view, the experience of living precariously does not affect ‘the underlying social relations of production that make possible “real” class relations’, nor can it substitute for the kind of ‘political work required to sustain a unity of class interests’ (Horning, 2012; see Seymour, 2012). And yet, many scholars have nevertheless drawn attention to a ‘spreading precarity’ as the ‘dominant *structure and experience* of the present moment, cutting across classes and localities’ (Berlant, 2011: 192; emphasis in original). For the feminist philosopher Judith Butler, precarity has become *the* central defining feature of contemporary neoliberalism. As she writes:

this process – usually induced and reproduced by governmental and economic institutions that acclimatise populations over time to insecurity and hopelessness ... – is built into the institutions of temporary labour, of decimated social services, and of the general attrition of social democracy in favor of entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximise one’s own market value as the ultimate aim in life. (2011: 13)

If precarization has intensified under neoliberal conditions, it does also represent, in my view, a ‘condition of dependency’ that has always been at the heart of capitalist activity (Berlant, 2011: 192). The term ‘precarious’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was first used in the 17th century as a legal

term to describe the situation wherein one’s tenancy is in someone else’s hands. The term is derived from the Latin *precarious* or that which is ‘obtained by entreaty, depending on the favour of another, hence uncertain’ (‘precarious, adj.’, OED online, March 2012). Precarity thus designates a state of insecurity that is not natural but constructed. It describes an economic or political condition ‘produced by a power on whose favor [one] depend[s]’ (Foster, 2009: 207). This is a process that can be further extended, as Marx makes clear in the *Grundrisse*, to the appropriation of surplus labour – appropriation ‘through and by means of divestiture and alienation’ (Marx, 2005: 196). This is, in other words, a process that is dependent on ‘the exploitation of living labour, the increase of its productivity, the exasperation of the intensity of labour, a total and totalizing drainage of working capacity’ (Negri, 1992: 90). At stake here, more than anything else, is the sheer ordinariness of mass precarity that capitalism inevitably induces and which has, if anything, assumed a heightened significance in recent years (Berlant, 2011).

For Butler, such precariousness must in turn be seen as an ontological condition that ‘characterises every embodied and finite human being’. According to Butler, ‘this is not simply an existential truth’. It is, she argues, a ‘feature of what we might call the social bond, the various relations that establish our interdependency’. ‘No one person’, Butler continues, ‘suffers a lack of shelter without a social failure to organise shelter in such a way that it is accessible to each and every person.’ What all of this means, Butler suggests, is that the individual experience of social and economic precarity also reveals the failures and inequalities of broader economic and political institutions (2011: 13). For Butler, there are differential ways of ‘allocating precarity’ and of ‘assigning disposability’ that are ‘clearly aims and effects of neoliberal forms of social and economic life’ (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 20, 21). And yet these forms of abandonment, dispossession and exposure are the

very conditions that establish us as relational beings. It is, in other words, through our exposure to precarity that we find that 'we are social beings, implicated in a set of networks that either sustain us or fail to do so, or do so only intermittently, producing a constant spectre of despair and destitution'. Precarity, as Butler therefore concludes, is a shared condition that situates and structures our economic and political lives. But more than this, it also establishes, in her view, the possibilities of a 'different social ontology' (Butler, 2011: 13; see Butler, 2004). In the words of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno – one of Butler's own points of reference – 'there is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one should go hungry anymore' (1974: 155).

Butler points to a reading of precarity that seeks to connect a sense of precariousness shared by all living beings with specific forms of vulnerability and exposure *induced* by political and social institutions. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the recent emergence of precarity as a social discourse has tended to focus on the 'effects and implications of neoliberal economic strategies and employment regimes' (Molé, 2010: 38). If precarity serves, in this way, as a useful placeholder for describing the conditions of late-capitalist work in Europe and North America, recent scholarship has also documented a more expansive attunement to how a set of factors including economic uncertainty and the loss of social welfare, but also new forms of violence, marginalization and injustice, have prompted people in many parts of the world to question the enduring possibility of 'life itself' (Muehlebach, 2012: 298). As Andrea Muehlebach has argued, from political activists in Slovenia to marginal workers in Thailand's informal economy, from survivors of the recent protests in Egypt to union activists in Wisconsin, a sense of insecurity as a 'more general existential state' has acquired a global distribution (2012: 298; see Collins, 2012; Hamdy, 2012;

Johnson, 2012; Razsa and Kurnik, 2012). This is not to say that such a 'structure of feeling' appears or is apprehended in the same form everywhere. If anything, what is characteristic of recent work is a desire to 'provincialise universalizing claims about precarity by pointing to how the contemporary sensorium is culturally and historically mediated – grounded in local vernaculars of labor, family, society, wealth, desire, and loss' (Muehlebach, 2012: 298). For Simone, what is really at stake here is a better understanding of how global trends toward the deepening of impoverishment and precarity are themselves spatialized and, in particular, urbanized. How, he asks, are urban dwellers able to come up with strategies for survival? What capacities, emotions, skills and vulnerabilities are, in other words, produced (Simone, 2010: 27; see Millar, 2014)?

Seen in these terms, the long history and complex geography of squatting represents, I argue, both a response to *and* an expression of housing precarity. As a number of studies have shown, squatted communities have traditionally formed as a necessary and pressing response to housing and infrastructural scarcity (Davis, 2006; Neuwirth, 2004; Ward, 2002; Waits and Wolmar, 1980). This includes the recent decision by the Occupy movement in the United States to occupy homes foreclosed by the global financial crisis and to refurbish them for families made homeless by the crisis. It also includes the mobilization of Occupy Wall Street to form Occupy Sandy in the wake of the storm that devastated New York area communities in October 2012. The various neighbourhood distribution centres that sprang up as part of the Occupy Sandy effort created a base for identifying acute housing needs. In so doing, they extended Occupy's work of 'creating and maintaining spaces that enable people to care for each other's needs while challenging the scarcity logics of capitalism' (Jaleel, 2012). And finally, it encompasses the emergence of the *corrala* movement in Spain as thousands of people who lost their homes following the financial



crash have responded to intensifying precarity by occupying and taking up residence in empty buildings and forming communities known as *corralas* (Stelfox, 2013).

In the end, it is of course the shack settlements and squatter communities in the cities of the South that speak most directly to a wider geography of precarity. As Simone has tried to show, precarity represents much more than an enduring state of material and social insecurity. For some, it offers an opportunity for translating the experience of temporary housing and infrastructure into a politics of radical social change. For others, it anatomizes a desire for permanence, recognition and a normal way of life in the face of conflict, violence and exclusion (Simone, 2010: 27; Varley, 2013). And for others still, it speaks to the fragile possibilities of squatting as an everyday site of adaptation and improvement, co-operation and connection, wherein we find, as Frantz Fanon once noted, ‘a mantle of unimagined tenderness and vitality’ (2004 [1961]: 78). So while Davis (2006) is left to lament the inability of squatters to generate a systemic wide-ranging mode of resistance to global capitalism, it is, in fact, out of an *attentiveness* to their multiple motivations, experiences and aspirations that a different way of understanding what it is possible still to do in cities emerges. These patterns of squatting in both the North and South not only reflect the contingencies of precarious life in an unstable urban world but also offer ‘practices of sociability and world-building that move beyond conventional formulations or bracketings of the “political”’ (see Vasudevan, 2011a: 285). It is, in other words, a recognition of what it means to *inhabit* precarity that drives the ‘often complex forms of deliberation, calculation and engagement through which residents try to do more than simply register the factualness of a bare existence’ (Simone, 2010: 333). And it is in this context that we might begin to speak tentatively of a global geography of squatting and the different shared and competing ways of

imagining an alternative urbanism. To do so should not be seen as an attempt to use metropolitan High Theory in order to develop a conceptual grid to colonize the political actions of city dwellers elsewhere in the world (Gregory, forthcoming). Nor should it be seen as an attempt to romanticize the ‘material constraints facing the urban poor and the resources they use to address those constraints’ (Varley, 2013: 16). Rather, it points to an enduring need for new geographies of urban theory and practice that seek to learn from the specific settlements, struggles and histories that have come to shape a whole swath of life in the Global South (Roy, 2011: 231; Pithouse, 2006).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I examine the uneven materialities of urban squatting in order to identify and develop a set of analytical frames that help us to imagine and inhabit the possibilities of conceiving, researching and writing a global geography of squatting. The paper is, in this way, of a piece with a growing body of scholarship that seeks to recognize the cardinal significance of the city to contemporary geographical thinking and practice (Amin, 2013; McFarlane, 2011b; Pieterse, 2008; Roy, 2011). If the sheer startling immensity of capitalist urbanization has prompted some to speak of an age of ‘planetary urbanization’ (Merrifield, 2013; Brenner and Schmid, 2011), it has also precipitated a heightened sensitivity to those elements of city life that cannot be simply captured or adequately expressed by the traditional categories of modern social science. What Simone describes as ‘cityness’ – i.e. the city’s capacities continuously to reshape the ways in which people, places, materials and ideas come together – is, in fact, critical to *how* we might come to know the city differently (see Simone, 2010; see also McFarlane, 2011b). Squatting, as this paper has shown, operates at the meeting point between these two overlapping narratives. On

the one hand, it speaks to the unjust structures of dispossession, exclusion and violence that define and shape the experiences of many of the world's urban dwellers. On the other hand, it also points to the possibilities – complex, make-shift and experimental – for extending, improving and sustaining life in settings of pervasive marginality.

In sketching the contours of a global geography of squatting, it is not my intention to develop a theory of adaptation, negotiation and resistance that is all-encompassing. Whether it is Berlin or Mumbai, for most squatters the struggle begins, as Pithouse (2006) has suggested, with *this* land, this eviction, this neighbourhood, this developer, this idea, these needs. While my own work is located in the Global North, my main aim here has been to spy connectivities across multiple sites and thereby to link a practical concern for the everyday struggles of squatters with a modest set of theoretical propositions that seek to open up a problem space for rethinking what it means to 'see like a city' (Amin, 2013). What I have described as a 'modest theory' of 'urban combats' demands, it seems to me, a greater commitment to thinking about different contingent histories of precarious city life and *how* they might be shared across the North/South divide. It also depends on an optic that zooms in on the spatial practices of squatters, the different resources and materials they use, and the ideas, knowledges and spaces they create. In this way, this paper responds to McFarlane's recent appeal to a 'different theorization and lexicon of urbanism that seeks not to displace existing urban theory, but to *add to it*' (2011b: 184; emphasis added). At stake here is both an abiding concern with the urbanization of capital as a materialization of displacement and dispossession and a critical attunement to 'the new itineraries of research and analysis' that have emerged out of cities of the Global South (Roy, 2011: 231). While Simone has argued that we need to 'stretch the imagination and push the

ways in which connections between cities across Asia and Africa could be envisioned' (2010: 267), this paper seeks to *extend* these connections in order to rethink the relations between cities in the Global North and South. How might we, in other words, develop a dialogue that brings together different perspectives on squatting that abandons Euro-American dominance in favour of new connections and understandings? And, in order to do so, how might we best re-orient our theorizing in order to accommodate the ambiguity and provisionality of squatting?

These are questions that have come increasingly to occupy the work of academics and activists in the Global North as they seek out and foster new collaborations with groups such as Abahlali baseMjondolo (the South African shack dwellers' movement) and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (the MST or landless workers' movement from Brazil). The recent visit of Raquel Rolnik, the Brazilian academic and UN special rapporteur on housing, to the United Kingdom and her critique of the country's housing policy further highlights the emergence of new global faultlines and trajectories that speak to an ever-expanding geography of precariousness in urban life (Gentleman, 2013). It is with this context in mind that this paper identifies three implications for how we might attend to the actual circumstances and thinking of squatters in a range of different settings. These are:

1. A recognition of the importance of the *informal* register as both the grounded terrain of a subaltern urbanism and the heuristic through which such an urbanism is understood and policed. This paper thus seeks to locate squatting within a set of debates about the nature of urban informality that recognizes the various forms of informal life in our cities. At the same time, it also operates as a heuristic device that helps to uncover 'the ever-shifting urban relationship

between the legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorised and unauthorised' (Roy, 2011: 233; see also Varley, 2013).

2. A committed empirical approach that places particular emphasis on the dense matrix of *makeshift* practices that are central to how squatted spaces and communities are pieced together. To speak of a makeshift urbanism is therefore to acknowledge the constantly changing role of materials and resources in the making of such spaces. It is also to shift attention to aspects of urban life that serve as a platform for rethinking how we, as geographers, understand the city as a site of endurance and social transformation.
3. A critical understanding of how global trends toward the deepening of impoverishment and *precarity* are urbanized. The paper argues that a certain responsiveness to precarity plays a central role in the different tactics used by squatters as they seek to reclaim and build a sustained social world. At stake here is an urban analytics that opens up new ideas about 'what cities are and can still be' (Simone, 2010: 16).

Taken as a whole, the paper thus offers a different reading of squatting and urban marginality than the one set out by Davis (2006). While Davis characterizes the lives of the majority of the world's squatters and slum dwellers as ones of interminable exploitation and violence, it is also possible to detect, even in the most precarious of urban settings, ways of thinking about and living urban life that have the potential to reanimate the city as a key site of geographical inquiry. On the surface, these are practices often shaped by immediate questions of survival and necessity and where the forms of violent dispossession and the precarity that they seek to resist are too much to bear. At the same time, they are

also able to reveal the conditions – the counter-archive of practices, sentiments, tactics and stories – that point to an alternative urbanism. And it is these living geographies that ultimately hold the promise for the development of a different, better city.

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