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The creative 'slum'

Art has often been associated with wealth and luxury, but also with expressions of creativity and the potential of the imagination. In this post, [John Clammer](#) reflects on the resourcefulness and creative expressions found in poor, informal communities all over the world, and how art in its many forms is related to manifestations of social development.

Informal communities – whether known as favelas, slums, or by some other designation – have in many people’s minds changed their social status as it has become recognised that they are not only sites of problems (crime, poverty and the usual suspects), but also sites of enormous creative energy. This creativity takes many forms – innovative micro-economies often sharing many of the characteristics of what is coming to be called “solidarity economy”, amazing ability to recycle just about everything, innovative forms of house construction and design, cooperative child minding practices, and art. The latter might seem surprising since it is something that we often associate with surplus energy, and even with luxury, elements that tend to be in short supply in slum communities.

Certainly there have been external interventions to bring art to the slums

discussed in the post on this very site on October 22 ([Favela Painting](#)), but relatively little attention has been paid to art emerging directly from favelas or their equivalents in other countries. This seemed to be an important gap, as the Favela Painting Project itself demonstrated that beautifying the local environment and making it more visually interesting does contribute to a higher sense of belonging, identity and self-esteem

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amongst the inhabitants, factors which, as with urban gardening projects in 'rough' neighbourhoods in North American cities, have been associated with lower crime, less gang activity and the cultivation of new and positive leisure pursuits amongst both teenagers and older people.



Image credit: Philip Bouchard (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Not that I especially needed convincing as my own fieldwork in Indonesia and India had already shown me that art was alive and well in such seemingly unpromising circumstances. In those contexts in informal local communities art took many forms including textile arts (weaving, sewing and embroidery), wood carving, metal work,

pottery, painting of pictures for devotional use in temples and shrines as well as for decorative use, the highly creative use of waste materials such as newsprint, which could be re-cycled into papier-mâché plaques and free-standing sculptures, innovative architecture, gardening and the modernisation of traditional art forms such as the decoration with complex geometric patterns of the external walls of houses. These do not include other forms of artistic practice still in vogue, including story-telling illustrated with long scrolls on which the characters of the story in question are depicted, puppetry, the shadow-play characteristic of Javanese and Balinese performative cultures, and of course the various forms of performance itself, including dance and dance-dramas, local theatre, mime, music and chanting.

An entire economy in other words existed based on artistic production, and often with an interesting social base: the local well-digger in one south Indian community being also an accomplished actor in the annual cycle of religious trance performances, as was a warder in the local jail, and both were of low caste, a status out of which they were elevated into virtually semi-divine status during their performances (or "possessions" as they preferred to describe them), it being believed that a highly

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accomplished actor is in some sense inhabited by the god that he is enacting.

There is also a gendered aspect to these forms of artistic production – in many cases in both Indonesia and India, textile art and often pottery were female preserves, conferring on women both status and a means of economic independence. In the south Indian town of Tirupati, known as a major pilgrimage site to its large (and male Brahmin controlled) temple, there are communities of female artists engaged in a distinctive form of textile art – paintings (and often Sanskrit inscriptions) painted on cloth with the whole production process from the grinding and preparation of the pigments through design, outlining and colouring-in, being organised on a women-only communal basis.



Image credit: [Anuradha Sengupta \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

Art, both as an activity which contributes to economic wellbeing, and as an aspect of actual daily life and local concern in “developing” societies has not received as much attention as it should. My project in a **recent book** was to attempt to rectify this by showing how art production contributes significantly to poverty alleviation, gender empowerment, a sense of identity and accomplishment in its practitioners, to the creation of the good-life, and to very practical concerns of elegant design necessarily using re-cycled and local materials, cultural notions of appropriateness and climate and just sheer creativity.

These are certainly not just theoretical or academic anthropological questions: studies of post-tsunami reconstruction in Sri Lanka and Aceh in Indonesia, post-earthquake redesign of informal communities in India, Pakistan and Haiti, and post-flooding reconstruction in New Orleans have demonstrated in significant role of what in the Indian context have been called “citizen architects” can play. This approach dovetails with the findings of the anthropologist [Kate Crehan in her study of “community art” in the UK](#), where such artistic projects contributed significantly to the social harmony of poor and ethnically divided inner-city housing projects and gave them and their inhabitants a new sense of identity.

About the Author

[John Clammer](#) is Visiting Professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Sustainability, United Nations University, Tokyo. He has taught or researched at a number of universities in the UK, South Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, Germany, Australia, Fiji, Argentina and India and the main thrust of his current work is at the intersection of culture and development. His recent writings on this theme and on the question of art in particular can be found in *Culture, Development and Social Theory: Towards an Integrated Social Development, Vision and Society: Towards a Sociology and Anthropology from Art* and the just published *Art, Culture and International Development: Humanizing Social Transformation*.

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