"Unbuilding"—the Remedy for Modern "Slum Problems"

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Abstract: Slums, a distinct social and architectural spatialization, as constantly perceived as squalid, overcrowded regions inhabited by residents widely suffering from economic deprivation, reflect beyond the assumed simple reason of indigence, acting instead as an intricate end-product generated by intertwining societal issues. By proposing the questions of "how do unbuilt (invisible) barriers between climate injustice, race, and social hierarchy inform both the formation and unbuilding of slums?" and "what are the characteristics of slums that determine the regional differences and similarities between slum types?", the paper intends to discuss through the extracted values of the slum presences to foster a direct relation to the city growth. Examining the sophisticated slum dilemma with the method of "unbuilding," the method implies that a genuine scrutinization of the initial causes will be required to discern the phenomenon comprehensively. By cataloging the existing slum into four distinctive categories utilizing the axial determinants of "hope," "despair," "escalator," and "non-escalator," the paper proposed peculiar solutions for the slum formations in Guayaquil, Boston, Chicago, and New Orlean, under the operation of "unbuilding." Thus, throughout the contention over the so-called "Slum Problem" and the pursuit of remedies, the paper purported an elevated understanding of society's natural selection process, racial segregation, and climate injustice that have previously informed the social discordance.

Keywords: Slum; Slum Formation; To unbuild; Racial Segregation; Climate Injustice

1. Introduction

The definition of a "slum" has been a contested issue in scholarship and journalistic writing. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary associates it with the visualization of a densely populated urban area marked especially by poverty. The UN [United Nations] offers a more expansive understanding of this social phenomenon and defines a slum as "a group of individuals living under the same roof who lack one or more of the following: durable housing that protects against extreme climate conditions, easy access to safe and affordable water, access to adequate sanitation, and security of tenure that prevents forced eviction." Yet, slums still persist even in most of the developed countries, disregarding the societal prosperity and high level of developments. Indicated by Kellie Rankey [1], the essay "Solution for Slum Improvement through Local Empowerment" also proposes the notion of a modern "slum problem" that, albeit under most societies' relentless effort of eradication via the means of "slum clearance and demolition, slum resettlement, and slum redevelopment", they failed to discover the apt means for the mitigation between the slum ecology and the rest of the society. If each of the aforementioned methods lacks a certain degree of consideration and quality to closely examine slums, and are predestined to an inherent potential failure: slum clearance exhibits limited reflection on slum formations but only intends complete removal; slum resettlement overlooks the causes of displacement and fails to accommodate the resettled population with necessary resources or transportation; slum redevelopment, while frequently metamorphoses the previous inadequate habitats into modern lands of lucrative infrastructure, only exemplifies another tool that capitalism utilizes to exaggerate the social gaps. Therefore, a new approach is needed that is different from the former efforts, in order to restore the local ecology.

To unbuild, notwithstanding its similarity with the concept *"to demolish"*, implies a constant attempt to resolve the slum issues and illustrates a genuine rumination of the phenomenon through the scrutinization of the initial causes. Varying from methods of *"resettlement"* and *"redevelopment"*, the action of **unbuilding** could not be implemented prior to understanding how the artifice was originally constructed. Thus, **to unbuild the slums** is by no means the mere deconstruction nor the total abandonment of such urban episodes' physical presences; instead, the process reflects on the logic of impoverishment that has taken place at first, acquiring further knowledge of confounding factors related

to racism, regionalism, and societal wealth gaps. Owing to such pre-established foundations the concept **"to unbuild"** brings about, the result aims to propose the proper social remedies for different scenarios based on the rigorous understanding of the slum formations. Thus, by proposing the questions such as "how do unbuilt (invisible) barriers between climate injustice, race, and social hierarchy inform both the formation and unbuilding of slums?" and "what are the characteristics of slums that determine the regional differences and similarities between slum types?" This paper intends to discuss slums' direct relation to the city growth.

2. Analysis of slum problems and remedial measures

2.1. Types of Slums

Hope/Despair - Escalator/Non-Escalator

Concerning its impact on a myriad of societal issues, "the slum" shall be interpreted here both as a spatial complex engaging vital city land use and an ideological construct. Due to the same reason, none of the slum types could be concluded from any single proposed. Charles J. Stokes [2], in his publication of *"A Theory of Slums,"* initiates a fresh model to differentiate slums with four categories. Slums shall be classified with two major measurements: *One of these falls to be the slum dwellers' psychological attitude toward the potential of advancing up the social ladder through assimilation or acculturation to full involv*ement in the community they have been previously excluded from, both economically and socially; the other is the society's reactive impediments to such mobility. Thus, the two approaches could be distinguished as "hope" and "despair," as "escalator" and "non-escalator". "Hope" of the slum quality manifests the physiological response of the dwellers' intentions of entering the rest of the society, "despair" denotes the opposite intention, illustrating a pessimistic perception of such effort along with the probable outcomes. The "escalator" and "non-escalator" sentiment, neglecting the residents' frames of mind, discerns the slummers' ability to be absorbed into the society: the "escalator" welcomes the slum population via a foreseeable ascending channel in the society; and "unescalated" society precludes the possibility of such rise, limiting the population into the trapped dilemma. Thus, it remains pivotal to examine each type of slum by scrutinizing the original cause and its unique characteristics.

2.2. Case analysis and remedial measures of slum types

Type A:

Guayaquil: the provisional settlements

Because of the lack of sanitizing infrastructures, educational institutions, and public provision areas, the district identifies inadequate social facilities and health networks to fulfill the needs of the underprivileged people of the region [3]. Despite the city's relentless attempts to "clean out" the area, the poor occupied principal streets while the region expanded speedily. The border of the slum region was pushed further and further daily. DeWight R. Middleton [4], in the article *Neighborhood and City in Coastal Ecuador,* summarizes the expansion of the city since the 20th century as the "redistribution of the population of Ecuador from the highlands to the coast, a process which saw the coast gain 7% over the highlands from 1950 to 1962," as a result of the "overcrowding and diminishing productivity in the high and increased opportunity on the coast".

However, obtaining both qualities of "hope" and "escalator", Guayaquil, as a type A slum, requires far less attention in terms of "unbuilding" such social constructs [5]. Appearing to acquire the most evanescent essence out of the four analogs, the type A slums, despite their varying lengths of existence times, exhibits a tendency to eliminate the presence of themselves without any deliberate treatments and concerns. Backtracking the historical context and societal status quo, Guayaquil does not isolate the slum residents in the impoverished area in any aspect: with a constant aspiration to be assimilated into the city, the dwellers found it undemanding to do so once they obtain the necessary social and economic resources, in many instances merely stable occupations in the import or outport industries. Under this agenda, although the slums subsequently remain for a more extended time period than its residents' vicissitudes, the slum foresees the old "generation's" leave, and new arrivals immediately replace the former with fresh "hope". In other words, if the city's growth occurs to be rapid enough, the city expansion will conceivably absorb the slum regions as an integral part of the city.

Type B:

Boston North End: the forgotten cast-offs

The North End provided the European generations, majorly the Italians, with a livable habitat for decades, which witnessed the population rise to 44,000 by the year 1930. Yet, the peak of the region did not persist: the elevated crime rates and the infamous reputation generated negative public stereotypization about the neighborhood [6]. During the same time period, due to the gradual population loss resulting from either the shut-down or the relocation of the waterfront industries, local commercials, public institutions, and even St. Mary's Catholic Church that used to be the focal point of the city, the prosperity of the region eventually yielded to its finale. With the identical sight of various Italian restaurants, pastry shops, and coffee shops, the second expression of the current site, however, falls into a relatively long-lasting sense of decay. Although the region still includes a considerable percentage of the Italian populace along with racial minorities, the essential residents of the region are considered as the social residues: the prostitutes, the "citizen at the margin of social respectability;" the elders, the ones with limited capacity to accommodate for the rapid society alterations; and the impoverished, who failed to seek job opportunities in the city and had to reside in the low-cost housings of the area [7]. The old, the poor, and the abandoned Bostonians cast the "Despair" color of the region: "Like the South End, they are often genteel in background but are the present home of the cast-off plus those who have been unable to complete the process of acculturation,", even though the barriers determining the possibility of the resident's ability to move upward and outward remains as subjective.

Compared to type A, type B slums, although occasionally providing better living conditions than those of type A, illustrate a process of dwellers' gradual moving in but rare moving out. As it is believed to be psychologically "less productive" without an apparent form of the typical slum, the type B slum un-builds itself as the natural perish of the city remnants. With an uncertain time span, the process might take years for its last forgotten dweller to be cast off. Thus, equivalent to the once prominent National Theater, the Revere House hotel, or Old West Church around the district, though some are still standing nowadays, the neighborhood persuades its residents, and further propagates the notion to the rest of the city, into believing that they eventually constitute parts of Boston's forgotten memories.

Type C:

Chicago: the divided city

Bronzeville has been historically associated with the term "ghetto", as David Meyer explains in the article *Blacks in Slum Housing* [8]: *A Distorted Theme*, "any perusal of literature will reveal that the term "ghetto" often symbolizes social decay, crime, slums, and poverty." Sharing similarities with the Boston South End, Chicago's south side Bronzeville presents a pre-constructed [9], privileged class's perception of social morality and superiority. However, contrary to Boston's socially "obliterated" population, Chicago's Bronzevillians, the residents that used to be bounded by Roosevelt Boulevard and Wentworth Avenue, were stereotyped as the "colored community who inhabited the ghetto" that ought to remain in the region due to the former action of redlining and lingered racial bias. As usually represented as an informed slum, Bronzeville, with its black housing that was previously redlined by governmental denial for a loan or other service for its prepossession of potential financial risks, has constantly been carelessly associated with the term "slum," which only reinforces the stereotype that Black housing falls to be the slum lodging. Thus, as the marginalized population of the societies, in the case of the previously segregated races defined by "Redlining Zones," the Black population of Chicago [10] (typically recognized as the slum dwellers) suffered from inequality of access forwarded by the "colonial power" of "racial assumptions," which inevitably led to their becoming of the "colonized" cheap resources that fed the accumulation of societal wealth and deprivation that systematically destabilized the current social structure and reinforced the "invisible boundaries".

The book *A Global History* explains the situation with a positive perspective: "it has a lot to do with timing. The city's population exploded in a still-developing city as the flourishing of racial and eugenic 'science' overlapped into the nascent fields of sociology and real-estate economics" (Stavrianos, 1988). However, being characterized as the "non-escalated" type, Bronzeville dwellers confront an apparent societal obstacle informed by such ingrained racial division. As Irmgard Emmelhainz [11], in the article *Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action*, indicated, *"the vasic rhetoric of market democracy conceals vast inequalities of access"*, the formation of contemporary colonial models manifested the "sacrificed zones" (the ideological slums) that marginalized populations reside. Therefore, the Black Slum Dwellers were suffering from inequality of access to goods [12], infrastructure, borders, and institutions of help beyond the apparent reach of any national democracy, whereas such inherent injustice is normalized in the systematic programming of the city that formed, again, the "invisible and invincible boundaries". In *A Framework for Creating Positive Change: Solutions for Slum Improvement Through*

Local Empowerment, the article seconds the city rejection by proposing the general argument that "the Negro's economic and social limitations have brought peculiarities of living conditions in the colored sections of the city which are the concern of the white sections as well as of the colored" . Type C slum, under such conditions, appears to be an ideological construct that supports the emerging racial system: the privileged, frequently the white community, utilize the method of slumming as the assertion of their whiteness.

Burnham's Plan of Chicago proposed another plausible means to unbuild the type C slum and rearrange the social fragmentations. Mainly rooted in the egalitarianism theories, the Plan of Chicago foresees a reparation of the segregation between social classes and races by encouraging "the population of the city transformed into productive [13], enterprising, and prosperous citizenry, fully incorporated into the political and cultural life of the nation." Nevertheless, as the Plan oriented most of its effort in rediscussing the relations between communal spaces and the rest of the city, including railways, transportation roads, and civil circulations, the Plan has been criticized as being "sterile" that it lacks consideration for the actual citizens and human activities in the city. Anthony Sutcliffe points to the neglect of housing and serious pro-proposals for land use controls, arguing, "Burnham's work has to be understood as an advertisement for city planning rather than a blueprint." Thus, unbuilding the type C scenario requires a close examination of civic identity rather than the simple approach of material concerns. Only with the awareness and acknowledgment of the prior segregations and social tensions will the society be competent to formulate a reparative and genuine absorption of its citizens across all races.

Type D:

New Orleans: the Floating Population

The salient transformation of the neighborhood's environmental condition also reshaped the racial and class components of the Lower Ninth Ward. "From 1940 to 1970, the nonwhite population of the area rose from 31 percent to 73 percent, and by 1970, 28 percent of Lower Ninth Ward families lived below the poverty line. By 2000, approximately 90 percent of the Lower Ninth Ward was African American, and 33 percent lived in poverty."

The type D slum, of which the vagabond populace of New Orleans elicits the example, presents the inability for an "escalation" to a greater extent than the type C slum. Residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, not only reside around the flood-prone precincts of the cities for their poverty, but, as Ashley Dawson explains in the *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change* by the social hierarchy theory [14], the "terrain that has not been developed because of the natural period - from landslides to floods- that make it unsuitable for elite habitation." Mike Davis refers to the phenomenon as the slum ecologies [15]: "the forms of inequality that push urban squatter communities to live in the most marginal and often dangerous portions of the city." As type D slum stereotypes its populace as the non-escalated class, the cruel social calculus drove them into the city peripheries. The dwellers had no choice amidst the toxic landfills, chaotic electricity lines, and flood-prone dangers but to formulate their own isolated community to sustain their lives. Although the elites from the city's heart usually assume more responsibilities for energy consumption and decision-making, such climatic injustice, oriented potentially by social disparities, brings about more significant harm to the slum dwellers. Therefore, while the housing markets feasibly seemed to provide equal "choices", the hypocritical "choices" became a form of subterfuge that thrusts urban squatter communities to live in the most marginal and often dangerous portions of the city, proposed by Bruce Hull, as the regions that "potentially or recently hostile or dangerous areas or times, including those in post-disaster situations caused by natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes", through the segregation promoted by climatic related injustice [16-17].

Furthermore, simply residing in the slum area, the residents generate "excremental surplus", proposed by Davis, which illustrates that the lack of infrastructure explicitly leads to an extended spread of illness related to waste disposal and water contamination. Paralleled with the ideology, Irmgard Emmelhainz pointed out that "amid economic instability, the tanks of redundant, excluded populations continue to swell, global warming [and other forms of natural disasters] intensify a new form of slavery."

Despite the ideology of a "mass removals as an environmental improvement strategy" to unbuild type D slums requires both the realization of the need for social elites to subsidize the disenfranchised population and a broader understanding of the environmental impact globally [18]. On the local scale, notwithstanding slum dwellers' limited impact on the environment through their relatively "informal settlements", they frequently become the victims of environmental changes and natural disasters. Thus, as restoration might not be the only solution after the destroying events, the privileged are expected to

provide genuine considerations for the marginal social population, offering them fresh prospects generated by such natural disparities [19]. On a larger scale, as Dawson concludes, "how to mobilize through the tools of grassroots environmentalism so that the regulation does not only make the lives of the slum dwellers better but also save the entire environment, considering the climate lenses." After all, the overlooked discussion of who retains nature and how could naturely be turned into tangible capitals of alienation in the first place needs to be well-addressed for the potential remedy.

3. Conclusion

Despite the public's continual effort to associate them with superficial housing issues, slums mirror a society's pre-established issues. Slums gradually became the product of social discordance, involving an understanding of society's natural selection process, racial segregation, and climate injustice. At the time of scrutinizing the slums, it remains detrimental to make the oversimplified assumption that the penurious population is "incapable" or that a straightforward action of complete removal would soothe the situation. As slums range from being the index of the city growth to the modern translation of a historical dilemma, one would understand the issue truly and, thereupon, resolve it through the constant investigation of the primary reasons and logic of slum formation. Thus, it is not without the undertaking of unbuilding that modernity could seek an effectual remedy for lingering social issues and arrive at a final solution.

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