

From the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, to Mumbai's chawls, to the garbage slum of Manila's Smoky Mountain and across to the slums of Los Angeles, Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums* is a whirlwind tour of the unseen Third World. As is the case with most people after such a continent-hopping trip, one is left overstimulated, weary, and reeling from what one has seen. Davis' latest book is an intriguing albeit relentless look at the global phenomenon of slums, the history of its creation and subsequent perpetuation, as well as the people who have grappled with the politics of slum life for generations. Flying in the face of Western visions of an urban future wrought of steel and glass, Davis makes it undeniably clear that, "[i]nstead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world sits in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay." (Davis 2006). The ominous title sets the tone for this book, and Davis manages to illuminate the shadowy political and social processes that shape slum life without losing readers in angry diatribes, over-specialized analysis or the activation of guilt, tactics that have come to be characteristics of the genre.

It is right in the midst of the unattractive, harsh, and complex environment of a slum that Davis brings the reader, and wasting no time on formalities, gets into the thick of statistics and facts. Starting with a historical survey of key events that instigated rural-urban migration in various parts of Asia and South America, Davis underscores that "'overurbanization' ... is driven by the reproduction of poverty, not by the supply of jobs. This is one of the unexpected tracks down which a neoliberal world order is shunting the future." (Davis 16). The separation of industrialization and urbanization does not stem the constant flow of migrants, despite fewer jobs and plummeting wages. Sidewalks, self-built shanties, and pirate subdivisions constitute an illegal and informal land market, and thus the diffuse urbanism of the slum becomes the only way for the poor and marginalized to claim their piece of something they were told was worth having.

*Planet of Slums* implicates the IMF and the World Bank, in addition to the corrupt governments of most Third World countries, for the acceptance of slums as a valid form of housing and criminalizing of its inhabitants. Issues of urban citizenship, economic and political exclusionary practices and the lingering effects of colonialism all come into play. Repeatedly, Davis provides examples of the lip service paid to the poor by their own governments and the disastrous attempts at mass public housing developments. Most haunting are his descriptions of the sanitary conditions of slums, the poisonous and volatile natural environments in which the urban poor are forced to live, and the vicious cruelty with which officials erase these 'blights' on the 'city beautiful'.

With such a heavy and loaded subject, this book could easily have become a longer version of a Worldvision or Unicef campaign, painting the Third World as a victimized and passive Other, in need of all sorts of intervention from North America. To Davis' credit, what really grounds *Planet of Slums* and steers it clear of that route, is that it shows that the Western world is not immune to the consequences of chronic urban poverty. Slum prevalence is not unique to the Third World; as

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the population of cities everywhere grow at their current exponential rates, the difference between the upper and lower classes will continue to widen and brings with it its own social problems. Affordable housing, for example, will always be a contentious subject in world cities. A walk through downtown Toronto makes explicit the push for not only the densification of the core, but also the attraction of a certain demographic of inhabitants. Torontonians who cannot afford the thousands of luxury condominiums and townhouses cropping up like mushrooms all over the city have to move further away from the centre, and seek lower rents in the periphery. Still, options are limited, as the quantity and quality of these units are far fewer than the number of people who need it. It is an interesting, admittedly less extreme, parallel to Cairo, the majority of whose apartments lie vacant while their owners work in the Gulf (Davis 86).

Davis also provides a fascinating glimpse into what is happening on the other side of town. Those with means cannot seem to wait to move away from the affront of poverty and shanties to gated communities on the periphery. Often named and designed to replicate an actual place in the West, these "off-worlds", to use Davis' term, include "Orange County" in Beijing, "Palm Springs" in Hong Kong, Palo Alto and Sunnyvale lifestyles in Bangalore and "Dreamland" in Cairo. This bizarre desire for life in a completely fabricated environment, secluded and insulated from the realities of the region and country brings a new and sinister dimension to the urban experience. Quoting colleague Jeremy Seabrook, Davis writes, "... the Third World urban bourgeoisie 'cease to be citizens of their own country and become nomads belonging to, and owing allegiance to, a superterrestrial topography of money; they become patriots of wealth, nationalists of an exclusive and golden nowhere.'" (Davis 120) Following the dangerous 'out of sight, out of mind' logic, this multidimensional separation of realities reinforce policies that benefit the upper class, while leaving scores of people unrepresented, unaccounted for, and ultimately a distant nuisance to be eliminated.

So much information is packed in *Planet of Slums* that one gets the impression that Davis could have gone on much longer. Thankfully, he packs quite a punch in less than 300 pages, and keeps a steady momentum throughout the book. The many tables, charts and statistics that are generously sprinkled throughout may be seen as too much, an overload of tidbits, but they do highlight the urgency of the content. It feels like one has returned from a vacation gone wrong - the sights seen and culture absorbed were not of conventional landmarks and monuments travel bureaus might promote, but of the hidden, denied and yet just as astonishing world of slums.