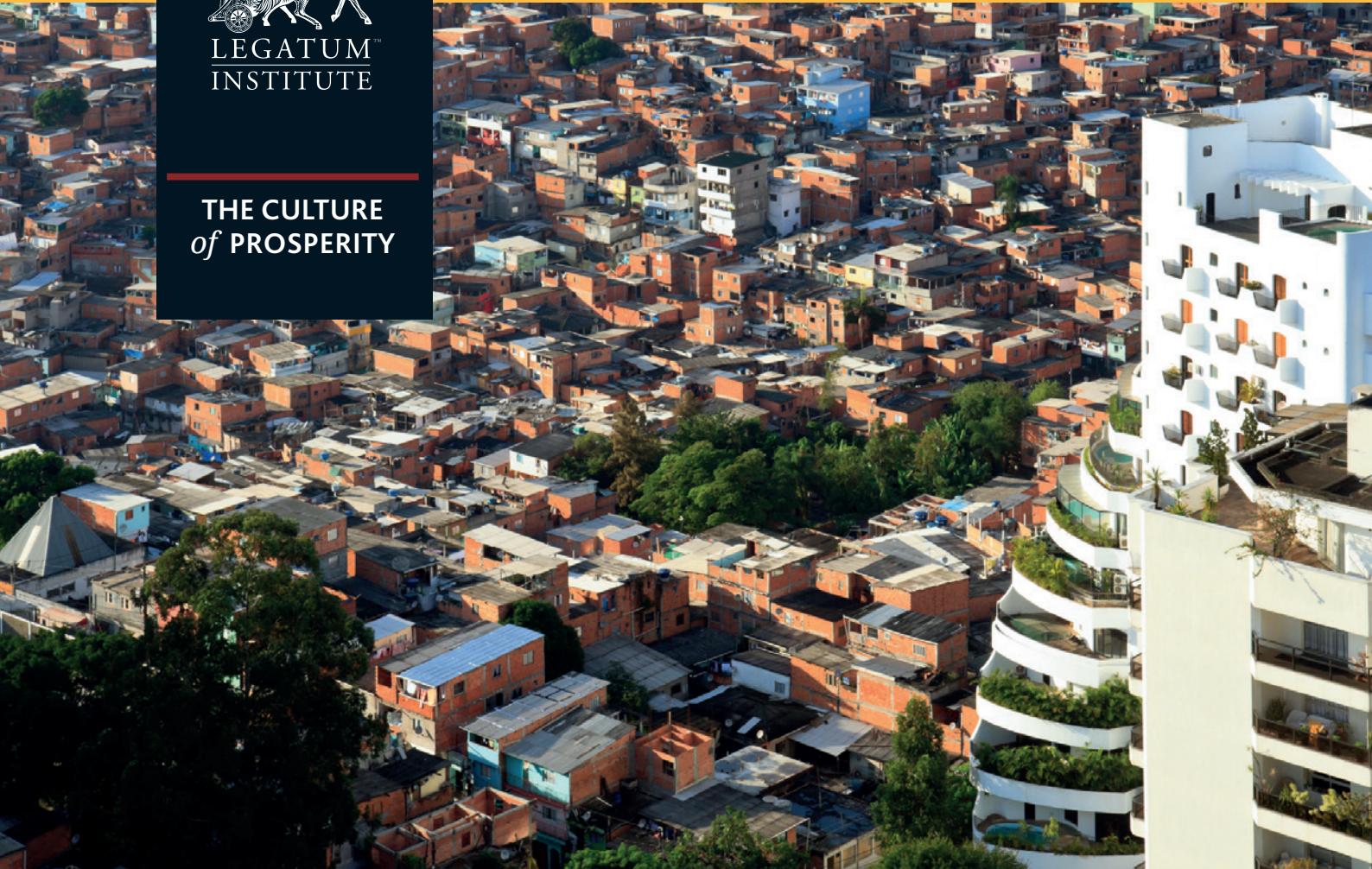


THE CULTURE
of PROSPERITY



ARCHITECTURE OF PROSPERITY | SEPTEMBER 2015

The Urban Escalator

by James Fischelis

with an introduction by Hywel Williams and Alanna Putze
and a response by Harry Mount

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Front cover shows:

Paraisópolis favela adjacent to a luxury apartment complex. São Paulo, Brazil.



The Legatum Institute would like to thank the Legatum Foundation for their sponsorship and for making the report possible.

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INTRODUCTION

by Hywel Williams

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Urban expansion and industrialisation have dominated the western world's social and economic history for some two and a half centuries. The millions of agricultural workers who moved from the country to the city did so in the hope of securing an escape from the privations that typify a rural, subsistence economy: disease, famine and joblessness. From the mid-twentieth century onwards similar journeys—and a consequently enormous population shift—have been witnessed in societies where industrialisation is a more recent phenomenon. Today more than half of the world's population live in cities and 'the slum', in its many forms, is home to nearly 900 million people. Social restlessness and economic ambition will swell these numbers in future years. Agricultural labourers in 'developing' societies are packing their bags and leaving the land. Natural disasters too have the capacity to drive many away from the countryside and into the town whose settled habitat offers the promise of greater security and shelter.

This transformation of living conditions and architectural context—visible for example in India's '100 smart cities' project, London's Crossrail and São Paulo's favela redevelopment—illustrates a great diversity of scene. But there is a common theme and architectural need. How can we secure an urban development which respects the local scene and is responsive to particular, individual needs? The history of architecture, like that of civic development more generally, reveals no shortage of grand plans. Sometimes the grandeur has tipped over into a grandiosity which brooks no contradiction. Values and ideas are as central to architecture as they are to human development more generally. Sometimes their influence in determining the shape of our homes and public buildings is so profound that it goes unnoticed. Public debate carries with it the promise of exposing such ideas to scrutiny.

Our contemporary phase of urbanisation may well provide us with a turning point in the history of architecture, planning and development. We now have an opportunity to jettison ideas that have become harmful to prosperity. The challenge of designing buildings that are both useful and beautiful is surely too important a task to be left to architects or planners alone and our solutions must therefore be rooted in interdisciplinary skills.

Obtuse regulations and bureaucratic corruption as well as our own prejudices often stand in the way of greater prosperity for slum and city residents alike. In *The Urban Escalator*, James Fischelis examines why some cities have met the urban influx with great success, whereas others continue on a downward spiral. Slums should, he argues, be neither shunned nor demolished, and market-led solutions can promote the integration of the urban sprawl into the wider, civic life.



Harry Mount's thoughtful critique places the fallacy of architectural utopianism in a wider cultural context. Can communities in fact be 'created'? Are they not better understood as the product of unconscious, unplanned development? Absence of a grand and centralising plan may in fact be proof of a discriminating intelligence—one which respects the vagaries of human experience in all its variety.

In 2016 the Legatum Institute's Architecture of Prosperity programme will investigate the idea of community and its consequences on a global scale. James Fischelis's paper sets the stage for a series of publications that show the links between architecture, human freedom, and individual creativity.

Dhaka, Bangladesh

1. THE GREAT MIGRATION

Tucked away in a corner of the great estate at Versailles is a beautiful pastiche of a rural French village. Known as Le Hameau de la Reine (The Queen's Hamlet), it includes a dovecote, a dairy, a barn and a water mill, alongside farm buildings and thatched cottages. It was built in 1783 by Marie Antoinette's favourite architect as a plaything for the queen and her court. There, Marie Antoinette and her coterie would play at being peasants, milking the freshly scrubbed cows.

LE HAMEAU DE LA REINE

But, outside the walls of Versailles, rural life for most French people was a filthy, famished, oppressive business. Peasants were flooding into the cities in search of a better life. Once there, they found it almost impossible to get work or feed their families. Their discontent fuelled popular support for the French Revolution¹ in Paris—and, ultimately, resulted in the decapitation of Marie Antoinette.

How different history might have been if instead of pretending to be farmers and milkmaids the French courtiers had played shopkeepers and artisans, and had even an inkling of the real economic challenges of urban life, rather than creating their own fiction of a rural idyll.

Throughout history, people have increasingly been making the journey from the country to the village and then the city, fleeing poverty. But at the end of the eighteenth century more people poured into more cities than ever before. It's no accident that it was just a few years later, in 1812, that the word 'slum' was first used to describe a back-room or street of poor people.² Since then, slums have expanded and grown, often forming mini-cities in their own right. They can be found in both developing and developed countries—from the rooftop shacks on the top of Hong Kong's apartment blocks to the refugee camps of migrant communities at Calais, from the mega-slums of Lagos to the foreign builders and cleaners living six-to-a-room in London.

This paper aims to reclaim the pejorative word 'slum'. Instead of regarding a slum as an entirely undesirable mass dwelling, it suggests that it is an embryonic proto-city that forms an essential part of its population's journey to urban affluence. For the purposes of this paper, a slum is defined as an area of human habitation with many of the following features:

- » It contains self-built housing which is easy to access and is either cheap or free, as opposed to public housing funded by government)
- » It sits outside the formal economy
- » It lacks formal infrastructure such as clean water, power etc.
- » It is often lawless and blighted by poverty
- » It is dense, un-zoned and intimate, fostering a sense of community
- » It is located close to the economic centre of the city



We can see from this list why slums are not an attractive proposition for those who can afford to live away from them. But their self-organising, coherent communities are full of enterprise, initiative and energy. This paper argues that society must encourage these qualities to flourish, tackling the negative aspects of slums as their inhabitants move towards prosperity.

Slum dwellers recognise that the city provides opportunities for affluence, for developing ideas, creating flourishing businesses and a life free from social oppression. The city is not just a physical space defined by its parks, towers, streets, houses and shops. It is fundamentally a series of networks, both social and economic, through which people exchange goods and ideas: an intricate web of relationships and transactions. The café where friends meet is also a business, which depends not only on its customers but also on wholesalers, utility providers, decorators, till technicians and so on. Each of those connections ties a business into the city. It is the desire to join this network that keeps our cities, and their slums, growing.

Le Hameau de La Reine

2. THE URBAN ESCALATOR

By 2050, two thirds of the world's population will be living in cities,³ trying to escape rural poverty and make the most of their future. Moizuddin Miah,⁴ for instance, is a rickshaw driver in Dhaka with four children, who came to the city to earn money to pay for his daughter's dowry. For him, Dhaka is a place of opportunity where he can earn five times as much per day as he would in the Bangladeshi countryside. He sends as much of his earnings as possible back home and lives in a room scarcely bigger than the size of his bed. His journey is not unique—it has been made countless times before and millions more are still to make it. His first step on the ladder is Sabujbagh, one of Dhaka's many slums. This is where so many other urban journeys begin; the place which Moizuddin hopes will be his first step on to the urban escalator of prosperity.

Five thousand miles away, in London's East End, is the Brick Lane Mosque, serving the spiritual needs of the local community—something this building has been doing for the past 250 years. Its remarkable history illustrates how some slums have become successful first steps on the ladder to prosperity. Before this building was a mosque, it housed the Great Synagogue of Brick Lane when the East End was home to a vibrant Jewish community. Though only small reminders remain of this once vibrant ethnic enclave, the Jews did not disappear from London. Their slum provided a gateway to the prosperous suburbs of Hendon, Golders Green and Ilford. It is here that the former slum-dwellers and their descendants now live.

But the synagogue on Brick Lane was not built for the Jewish community. Its origins lie with an even earlier group of migrants: the Protestant French Huguenots who, like many before and after them, fled persecution and came to the city in search of a better life. Their presence is still felt in street names such as Fleur De Lis, which today houses curry shops and Bangladeshi stores.

The East End of London perhaps best illustrates how some slums have successfully become gateways to a better life. Many of the buildings have remained dilapidated and the communities who live there are still poor, but this cheap, accessible housing has provided a foothold for each new wave of immigrants.

A rather different transformation has happened in Istanbul.⁵ The word *gecekondu* refers to an Istanbul slum, and it means 'landed at night'. From the 1950s, rural settlers would occupy vacant urban land on the periphery of the city at night, rapidly setting up slums under the cover of darkness. What is remarkable about these slums is how, within the space of a single generation, the residents have not moved on to better places, but have fought instead for the establishment of land rights via strong community leadership, changing their slums into smart new middle class neighbourhoods where residents are sometimes freehold landlords of modern rented-out apartments. They have, in effect, built their own urban escalator.

But perhaps the most remarkable transformation from slum colony to modern metropolis is Hong Kong. The then Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, described it in 1841 as "a barren rock with nay a house upon it. It will never be a mart for trade". Today Hong Kong is one of the most prosperous places on the planet with an average annual GDP per person of \$56,000⁶ (seventh in the world) and the world's highest life expectancy.⁷ It is also home to the world's fourth busiest cargo port⁸ and eleventh busiest passenger airport.⁹

The emergence of this micro-economic powerhouse was in no way guaranteed. In 1945 its population was around half a million and in the aftermath of the Second World War migrants flooded into the territory seeking refuge from communist rule in China, increasing the population to nearly six million by the early 1990s. During that period, the number of refugees reaching Hong Kong was on occasion in excess of 100,000 in a single month, and as with any new arrivals in cities, slums were their first stopping point. This unpromising spit of land, without a periphery or natural resources, is now a global centre of trade, built on regulation and the endeavour of its people.

In 1953 Hong Kong was forced to address the issue of informal development when a fire ripped through the slum of Shek Kip Mei,¹⁰ destroying over 50,000 homes. This led to the Hong Kong Public Housing project and today over two million of the territory's residents live in public housing. Single rooms housing entire families have evolved into air-conditioned modern apartments. This metamorphosis from shanty-town to modern city could only have been achieved in tandem with the rapid economic growth of the city. This is the 'slum to city' process at its most rapid.

What London, Istanbul and Hong Kong share is that their slums have been the gateway through which rural people moved on their journey to affluence, education and personal success. In all three cases, slum-dwellers have participated directly in their own economic transformation, benefitting from the jobs, income and government spending which cities provide. It is this crucial economic development, the ability of the citizen to join the capitalist ecology, which has underpinned some of the biggest and most rapid moves from poverty to prosperity in history. This paper contends that if our slums, and indeed our cities, are to thrive in the future, then we must underpin their development with a capitalist system that supports and encourages business and entrepreneurship, and provides the citizen with clear rights to his or her own land.

3. THE BROKEN ESCALATOR—AND HOW TO FIX IT

And yet, if there exists a simple solution, why are there slums, which remain stuck in a primitive condition? Dharavi, Mumbai's most famous slum, was established in 1882, just 40 years after Hong Kong was founded, but it remains a byword for filthy, overcrowded urban poverty. The same is true of Todo in the Philippines, described as long ago as 1890 by the wife of the American commissioner as "the dirtiest and most crowded part of Manila".

So why is it that some slums deliver a route to prosperity for their inhabitants, while others languish in squalor and misery? One reason is that the transition from rural to urban life is complex—more than just a move away from fields and agriculture to apartments and offices. From the generalised rural business of farming, trade and casual labour, urban migrants have to become specialised workers: rickshaw drivers, cleaners, technicians, shop workers, bus drivers and so on. The city demands jobs that do not exist in the countryside.

This transformation from rural generalist to urban specialist can only happen via one of the key components of city life—regulation of commerce. In the countryside, bonds of trust are built up in small villages, through family and friendship over generations. The urban economy could not be more different. Reliance on strangers and the lack of a tribal or family network means that oversight of commerce is vital. While today's mega-slums might offer rural migrants the first step on the ladder to prosperity, without the legal means to formalise economic activity the slums themselves are locked out of the modern highly regulated city.

And even when residents are given nominal land rights, there remain crucial stumbling blocks. In Phnom Penh,¹¹ a land-titling project has been under way for many years to give certain residents formal rights to their property, but the project has been beset by delays and failures by civil servants to abide by the rules. The project was initially supported by the World Bank, but it eventually cut off lending to the Cambodian government in frustration at its behaviour. The dispute has centred on a particular development of prime real estate in central Phnom Penh, inhabited by poorer citizens trying to establish their place in the formal economy. Boeung Kak, a lake in the north of the capital, has traditionally been a hotspot for visiting tourists keen to sink a beer with a view of the water at sunset. But today the lake has been pumped full of sand, readying it for development into luxury flats. The project is now on hold as local residents try to gain compensation and establish title to their land. Some may have paperwork giving them official recognition of their property rights, but this has been ignored or rejected by government. The story has all the hallmarks of urban corruption: the property company is owned by a senator with links to overseas investors, and local officials refuse to acknowledge reasonable land claims. A once-successful tourist area of the city has now sunk into decline and the local urban economy is in tatters.

This combination of corruption, greed and vested interests fails to recognise the contribution that the residents of poor areas of the city can, and should, make to the wider economy. Without land titles that are respected by bureaucrats, these citizens are reluctant to build and invest in their property, nor can they use their ownership as collateral. Land taxes cannot be collected, preventing the city from forming a symbiotic relationship with its poorer citizens.



People in slums *do* have money to spend on services. There are electric hook-ups, mobile phones, diesel generators and satellite TVs in many of the world's poorest slums. But too often these services come at a price: in Lebanon, for example, the generator businesses lobby against better electricity supplies,¹² protecting their monopoly. In several countries these so-called businesses are often closely connected to or run by the very government that is supposed to be on the same side as the citizen.

These complex problems are made clearer in The World Bank's *Doing Business 2014* report, which provides insights into how complex regulation can stifle a city's growth. The rankings are based upon criteria such as the time and cost involved in:

- » Registering a property
- » Getting connected to the electricity grid
- » Constructing a warehouse
- » Registering a business

According to the report, Singapore ranks as the sixth easiest place in the world to

Dharavi, Mumbai

start a business, requiring three stages of administration, 2.5 days and 0.5% of average GDP per head. Contrast this with India, where 13 different administrative stages take over 30 days and the equivalent of 127% of GDP per head in administration and initial capitalisation costs. This also assumes that the admin processes themselves are working. In the Legatum Institute's report *India's Tarnished Economic Miracle*,¹³ Shikha Dalmia writes that "official corruption is the bane of Indian Society" and explains that 'babus' (local bureaucrats) have enormous power to interpret regulation and shake down businesses. In some parts of the country it can take 400 days to register a property (well beyond the 47 days officially recognised in the World Bank report). In Manila, an electricity connection might only take four days to establish, but it will cost 90% of GDP per head, compared to the United States at 14% of GDP per head.

It is no wonder, then, that the poorest inhabitants of the developing world face the toughest challenges when trying to make their way up the urban escalator. The difficulty of doing business in the poorest parts of the world, along with the corruption and lack of property and business rights which characterise the worst problems of the slum, make it near-impossible to move towards affluence. The slum, with its dirty streets and ramshackle housing, is a symbol of people's inability to join a vibrant economy.

This paper recommends that, in order to break this deadlock, governments should:

- » Maintain cheap or free self-build housing that is immediately available for new urban arrivals
- » Nurture strong community leadership and participation, as part of a wider sense of citizenship
- » Regulate property rights so that land owners become part of the formal economy
- » Create infrastructure for clean water, sewage and electricity run by community leaders, with local government that is truly representative of its constituency
- » Create a localised taxation system that is seen by residents to be reinvested in the slum
- » Provide parks or other green spaces for recreation alongside the slum (but not within it)

If the mega-cities of the developing world are to become an escape route out of poverty, as they have been in the developed world, then governments must allow people to join the urban capitalist ecology. Too often, the walls of the slum are not the railway tracks or congested highways: they are the regulations that divide the world into the formal and informal economy. These badly enforced, or unequally applied, regulations are often the biggest barrier to progress.

But the criteria listed above are not limited in their application merely to the developing world. Hernando de Soto, in his book *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fail Everywhere Else* (2003), argues that America's expansion and economic success was built on the regulation of property rights from the earliest days of its European settlers. This attitude—of welcoming and including new citizens as soon as they arrive—has been essential to the growth of the US as a global powerhouse, and is applicable to other developed nations. London's blossoming economy is a magnet for countless transnational migrants, but they often end up housed in 'hidden slums', with many sharing a single room in converted garages, flea-ridden hostels and ill-equipped, dingy flats.

How, then, to house the mass of disparate migrants who populate first-world cities such as New York or London when these places do not have official slums to offer them? According to the criteria above, it is essential to locate slums within easy access of the economic centre of the city. In cities without mass transit, slums such as Dharavi in Mumbai or the Central Slum in Cairo are situated close to the centre.

But in the cities of the developed world, where good public transport is available, new migrants can be welcomed to places outside the existing city. This report suggests self-build new towns as the answer to migrant population housing. These towns would bring together disparate migrants into a community, with regulation and taxation. They would have access to the formal economy through property rights and housing would be immediately available to new arrivals. Politicians can decide where to site these new towns. Some will argue that the greenbelt is a waste of space, an area of high-intensity arable land that is positioned so close to the boundaries of major cities that it chokes their growth. Others will contend that new towns will destroy a vital 'green lung' and that the greenbelt is essential for the health of the city. Regardless, the problem of physically housing, organising and maximising the potential of migrants must be addressed and new towns are the best means of achieving this.

It is important to reiterate that the word 'slum' must be reclaimed as an essential and positive component of any successful city, whether in the developed or developing world. The new towns proposed here are not government-led public housing projects, which—despite good intentions—have created some of the worst human habitations on the planet. Red Road in Glasgow or Pruitt-Igoe in St Louis, Missouri, are classic examples of well-meaning public housing which have destroyed communities, making it impossible for people to commute to the economic centre and instead making them reliant on the state for housing rather than taking ownership of their own property. In contrast, successful slums encourage self-reliance, strong communities, entrepreneurship and—because of their access to the city centre—a powerful group of hard-working citizens.

In essence, then, this report proposes a 'starter pack' for the city, where slums are the first officially recognised step on the ladder to joining the urban elite; a series of self-build towns that harness the energy of their new arrivals while bringing them into the formal economy.

4. A NEW MINDSET

There is a widely circulated photograph of the juxtaposition between a slum in São Paulo and a luxury development on its doorstep called Paradise City. At first glance, the contrast between the obvious wealth of the condos on the right with the chaos of the slum on the left leads us to think of a world of 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

But for those readers who remain unconvinced of the merits of high-density, high-intimacy living, take a closer look: the slum is a hive of activity, while the condominiums on the right are empty and their glittering swimming pools sit unused. What we observe is not just a clear difference in wealth and status, but a distinct choice between two very different ways of living in, and engaging with, the city.

What might happen if we chose to compare the slum of São Paulo not with its condo neighbour but instead with a historic byword for urban success—Renaissance Florence? Immediately, the positive qualities of our slum become more apparent: it is a place of commerce, where dense streets provide the framework for the exchange of good and ideas. There is no zoning of business and residential districts. Urban life, work, home and business exist in harmony. In many ways, this seemingly impoverished district of São Paulo is much like Florence in its heyday: a seething mass of people and ideas.

The luxury flats on the right of the photo above are dormitories for the super-rich; their lives are zoned into business parks for work, condos for living and sleeping, with the weekend reserved for a trip in the air-conditioned 4x4 to the mall for retail therapy.



Paraisópolis favela and
Paradise City, São Paulo, Brazil



São Paulo today (*background*) vs
Renaissance Florence (*foreground*)

There is little dispute that we are becoming more and more urban, but cities and governments have a choice in how that urbanisation will take place and what it will ultimately look like. This report argues that, if the choice is represented by the first photograph above, then the image on the left is very much the answer. Cities cannot successfully be hived off into zones. Jane Jacobs's description of the 'Ballet of Hudson Street' in her seminal book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* pushes against this idea of utopian separation of city functions, championing instead the chaos of the urban form that ties people into the city. It is the slum street with its cobblers, food sellers, market stalls, children playing games, homes and businesses that epitomises the density and chaotic excitement of city living at its best.

5. HOW (NOT) TO FIX A SLUM

The rural idyll that Marie Antoinette once played in is an idea that has had a strong hold over the Western imagination for many centuries, and has continued to inform social thinking and urban development right up to our own age. The nineteenth century guru of town planning Ebenezer Howard, in his thesis on the Garden City, railed against the modern industrial city as a place beset by pollution and oppression in comparison with the pure, bucolic joy of the countryside. Howard's solution was to fill Britain's new cities with so much green space that it destroyed their sense of urban community and entrepreneurship through separation of people from their neighbours and the zoning of businesses and homes. Thus was lost the great ballet of urban life: those interactions and deals that make great cities tick. The great twentieth century modernist architect Le Corbusier bemoaned the lack of trees in industrial cities and wanted to give each resident space, light and air to mimic the good effects of the countryside. His developments resulted in high-rise towers set often in parks, which isolated their inhabitants from the city. They lacked meeting spaces and opportunities for businesses to thrive because they left their inhabitants isolated from one another. In trying to bring the countryside to the city, both Howard and Le Corbusier fundamentally misunderstood what it is that makes cities thrive: their density, community and the resulting transference of human energy. Perhaps only Karl Marx truly understood the condition of countryside living, describing the 'isolation of rural life' in his *Communist Manifesto*.

In the BBC documentary series *The Secret History of Our Streets*,¹⁴ one of the most dismal episodes focused on the local council's well-meaning attempt to improve Deptford High Street. This involved compulsory purchase orders and relocation of friends, families and communities to a series of new towns outside London, ripping apart the bonds and cross-generational relationships that once characterised the area. The new accommodation on the outskirts of the city, full of the green spaces so beloved of Ebenezer Howard and the legions of politicians who have followed him, could not facilitate the formation of new social bonds or the economic activity that made people love Deptford and its high street.

The reality of the city is that it is an economic engine whose prosperity is powered by its people. Slums are an integral part of that, forming the first step on an urban escalator that offers its people the riches of the city while, in turn, enriching the city itself.

Slums are still too often unsanitary, dangerous, disempowering places. But now surely is the time to dispel our horror of them, to stop ignoring dispossessed migrants and to make it possible for slums to fulfil their role as an essential part of the city. These hotbeds of community and commerce are the entry point for many millions of the world's migrant workers to personal success. If any single example of an existing slum stands out as the most effective way to encourage good urban development, it is the *gecekondu* of Istanbul. Thanks to the government's embrace of the community and its leaders while also delivering property rights, its citizens have been empowered to develop their own neighbourhoods and have benefitted from the economic dividends. In turn, Istanbul has reaped the rewards of a community that is politically and economically engaged with the city. Though haphazard and retrospective, the gift of land rights to slum dwellers in Istanbul should form a blueprint for slum improvement. These ideas are also supported by Hernando De Soto in his book *The Other Path*, in which he focuses on his efforts to bring people into the formal economy, with great success.

In order for the world's slums to work well they must maintain the cheap or free self-build housing that they currently enjoy. They must nurture strong community leadership and participation, as part of their residents' path to a wider sense of citizenship. Their property rights must be regulated and adhered to by government. Residents must have access to clean water, sewage and electricity and support an effective taxation system that can be seen to improve living conditions in the slum. And residents need access to parks and green spaces alongside the slum, which provide space for reflection and relaxation without dissipating the intensity and energy of the slum itself.

When new arrivals reach a city, they should find a welcome in the slum, with its collection of small, individual plots available to buy, with cheap loans secured on the plot. These would be flexible spaces, available for use as homes, businesses, or both. This minimally designed area would include spaces for schools, churches and medical centres, but in essence it would trust the slum to work its own self-organising magic, through the power of community action and elected representation.

In the past, too often rulers and politicians have failed to understand what it is that make cities work and citizens thrive. Had the earliest slums of Europe been organised along the principles outlined in this report, perhaps today the French dauphin would be happily playing in the gardens of Versailles—while in Paris and countless other cities the dwellers of the slum go about the business of making their city great and themselves truly prosperous.

WHYUTOPIAS GO WRONG—A RESPONSE

by Harry Mount

Thomas More invented the word 'utopia' from the Greek 'ou'—'not'—and 'topos'—'place'; i.e. Utopia was by its nature not a real place.

Architectural utopias can be lovely places to live. But they have never worked as panaceas for social problems. I ultimately agree with James Fischelis's argument: slums are ideal points to propel the rural working classes into middle-class prosperity. High-minded visionaries have tried, for centuries, to pull off the same alchemy through dazzling utopias; they have never worked.

That's partly because they cost too much to build; partly because they were built on too small a scale, considering the massive growth in urban populations from the eighteenth century until today.

But the main reason is that utopias are necessarily planned before the event. A visionary—and they are often gifted visionaries—comes up with a precise architectural and social format, and then expects mankind to fit into it.

Well, mankind doesn't work like that. Man on his own is a messy, unpredictable creature. Men and women in vast crowds move in an even messier, more unpredictable way. They can't be catered for by the cool calculations of a single mind, however sophisticated that mind might be.

The slum's messy lack of order is an echo of mankind's chaos. It expands and shrinks—usually expands—to meet the demands of shifting populations. It responds quickly, if not very prettily, to the demands of a newly arrived population.

Just look at the shanty town that has sprung up in Calais in recent years to cater to the thousands of migrants longing to get across the Channel to Britain. It certainly isn't pretty but it was, almost instantly, equipped with makeshift shops, houses and a church in response to the basic needs of body and soul.

If more migrants come—as they surely will—the shanty town will grow. If, by some miracle, the international migration problem is solved, it will shrink or disappear. Just like those makeshift buildings, the structure of the slum is flimsy, but the slum's response to migrants' needs is much more flexible and immediate than any historical utopia's response.

The first kind of utopia was the factory town. The original was Cromford, Derbyshire, where Richard Arkwright erected the world's first water-powered cotton mill in 1771 and created the first purpose-built industrial village around it.

Cromford worked well, based as it was around a hard-headed, profitably run industry. Where planned settlements didn't work so well is when their developers try to force a social programme on their inhabitants.

Soon afterwards, in New Lanark, Scotland, Robert Owen, a mill manager, had high-minded intentions: he controlled prices in the shops and founded schools. He also limited how much the workers could drink.

Owen was also a communist, in his dream that all workers should share labour, machinery and wages equally, and live in the same big house.



Like so many communist dreams, it fell apart; and fell apart on a grand scale in his new town in America—Harmony, Indiana. Hucksters, proto-hippies and radicals battled with each other for four years about how to run the place before it collapsed.

More recently, utopias have failed because they are just too nice. Designed as working-class settlements, they're so well designed that they're soon colonised by the middle classes.

Garden cities—dreamt up by the social reformer Ebenezer Howard—were intended as suburban, mid-sized towns, surrounded by a permanent belt of agricultural land.

Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City were built, in 1903 and 1920 respectively, as towns where the working classes would live and work, with factories and offices threaded in between the residential developments.

The dream has failed. They've become the ideal middle-class commuter towns within easy reach of London.

Much the same happened with the garden suburb, as invented by Dame Henrietta Barnett in Hampstead Garden Suburb in 1906.

Letchworth Garden City, c.1905
Image credit: Garden City Collection

It was, and is, a wonderful thing. The building density was low—eight houses or fewer per acre. Every house had a private garden and there were no walls, only hedges—a popular idea in American gated communities from the early twentieth century onwards.

Dame Henrietta picked leading architects to produce wildly differing looks: tile-hanging, half-timbering and low eaves were combined with casement windows.

Neo-Georgian mansions proliferated, too, and Sir Edwin Lutyens produced his own Romantic-Byzantine-cum-Nedi style (his nickname was Nedi) for St Jude's, the suburb's Gothic church.

These detailed, varied developments, though, were too lovely and, in time, too expensive. Envisaged as working-class housing, they are now the preserve of not just the middle classes, but the millionaire classes.

The same goes for Bedford Park, begun in West London in 1875. What was planned as a varied, delightful suburb has become an integral part of spreading, multimillionaire metropolis.

There's nothing wrong in these places; quite the contrary. But they haven't fulfilled their original purpose as progressive homes for the aspiring poor.

The essential quality of houses for the urban poor is that they should be dirt cheap. The actual houses themselves—what they look like, what they're made out of, where they are—are essentially immaterial.

In the last 70 years, areas of London that were once slums—Notting Hill, Islington and Shoreditch among them—have become multi-million pound enclaves, restricted to the very rich.

The rich may have done those houses up, put in more bathrooms and dug down into the ground to make more space. But the houses, largely Georgian and Victorian, were just as handsome in the 1950s as they now are; and they are necessarily in the same place.

Those same houses were originally built for an urban, lower-middle class epitomised by Mr Pooter in the 1892 classic, *The Diary of a Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith. Mr Pooter is far from being a gazillionaire: he is a clerk in the City, much mocked for his pretensions for a smarter life. Still, today,

his large house in Holloway, North London, would be worth going on for £2 million.

The newly arrived poor did live in Holloway in the postwar years—but none of those poor souls fighting to get across the Channel today could now hope to live in Mr Pooter's house in a million years.

And so they must flock to those new areas that have become the cheapest part of town—on the far fringes of the city. They will certainly not flock to that part of town designed by a well-meaning utopian, whose houses tend to soar in value almost at the moment they're finished.

As well as cheapness, new arrivals almost invariably seek an urban life. They could, if they wanted, find equally cheap housing in remote, rural parts of the country.

But that isn't where the work is—nor is it where, on the whole, humans want to go. As Boris Johnson put it last year, people move to cities for vital biological reasons.

London, the mayor said, is “producing more babies than at any time since England won the World Cup in 1966. A city is a huge centrifuge, it spins people round at much greater velocity than anywhere else. People meet each other, they have more sexual intercourse, as Michael Gove is continually pointing out. One of the reasons cities are so successful is that they provide a huge assortment of potential mates—in business and pleasure.”

Those desires—for pleasure, for access to fellow humans and affordable housing—are overpowering; natural, even. They cannot be contained by the cool, precise thoughts of a well-meaning soul designing arts and crafts housing in his own ivory tower.

Horrible as the word, slum, might be—and lovelier as the word ‘utopia’ definitely is—slums do the job much better.

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Makati financial district in the background with the slums of Pasay City, foreground. Manila, Philippines.



978-1-907409-91-2

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SEPTEMBER 2015