Mad Cartographers

The Case for Putting Squatter Communities on the Map

By Robert Neuwirth

You go to the police station at four in the afternoon to declare that you exist….
You stand still in a street that devours you, just as you in turn devour your rage and defeat.
What is homeland? To hold onto your memory—that is homeland.

—Mahmoud Darwish, *Journal of an Ordinary Grief*

February 23, 2013, early morning: with no warning, armed state government officials descend on Badia East, a centrally located shack neighborhood in Lagos, Nigeria, and smash rickety houses and businesses to the ground.

In the days that follow, the Lagos state commissioner for housing is adamant that the eviction and demolition were a public service. "It's a regeneration of a slum," the honorable Adedeji Olatubosun Jeje told the *New York Times*. "We gave enough notification. The government intends to develop 1,008 housing units. What we removed was just shanties. Nobody was even living in those shanties. Maybe we had a couple of squatters living there."

The residents told a different story: people were sleeping when the bulldozers descended. Later, they discovered that the government had, in fact, informed the *baale* (the area's traditional ruler), a man they seldom communicate with and who lives far across town in a different neighborhood. What's more, they noted, they had been uprooted once before, in 1977, when the federal government built the nearby national theater and relocated families living on that site to Badia, which was under federal jurisdiction because a railroad line ran through the area.

▷ Badia East shantytown after demolition, Lagos, Feb. 28, 2013. *Samuel James*

The way the residents understood it, this transfer gave their new community implied federal recognition; the state could not simply come in and destroy



their homes and livelihoods. "We were moved to this place by the federal government," said Biola Ogunyemi, a local activist whose home escaped demolition—for now—as we walked through the wreckage of Badia. "Now they want to evict us again, without coming here to discuss with us. Lagos State has stolen our rights away from us." A white pickup full of gun-toting state government forces cruised by as we spoke. The residents, who had done nothing to resist the storm troopers, grew quiet and waited for the commandos to depart. Our conversation picked back up as the truck pulled away, and one resident whispered the obvious: the sole purpose of the armed drive-by was intimidation.

As many as nine thousand people were pushed out of Badia East that morning, the Social and Economic Rights Action Center, a local non-governmental organization, has reported. Days after the eviction, a hardy few were scavenging scrap from the demolition site, seeking boards they could use to rebuild and rubber or metal they could resell. Months later, scores of families were still living nearby on makeshift platforms they had erected above a swamp or encamped on the open dirt with no shelter at all.

Perhaps the residents assumed that their thirty-plus years of occupancy gave them some sort of possession right. Perhaps they believed that the federal government would not betray them by allowing them to be pushed out a second time. Perhaps they simply couldn't comprehend that their less-than-modest community could be of interest to anyone else. But they didn't reckon with the new mega city plan championed by Lagos State Governor Babatunde Fashola, whose policies are altering the city in staggering style.

Fashola believes that shantytowns and street markets are a visual and moral blight, and his administration has been avidly getting rid of them. Badia, a sea of shacks in a bustling neighborhood not far from the port, is in the crosshairs because of its location. It sits in the shadow of a busy elevated highway interchange and directly across the street from the 7-Up bottling plant in adjacent Ijora. Under Fashola's plan, Ijora will become the temporary terminus of one of the new light rail lines under construction in the city. All rail passengers coming from the east, along the Badagry express road and the major interchange called Mile 2, and heading to Lagos Island, Victoria Island or Lekki—the most popular areas of the city for big businesses—will have to disembark in Ijora. Badia, neglected for years, is suddenly desirable turf.

A Tattered Atlas

Now imagine a different scenario. Suppose, starting back in 1977, that the people of Badia, shocked by their forced relocation from the national theater site, had created a map of their new community as they developed it and determined to chronicle all the

changes they experienced as the neighborhood moved forward. After three decades of ceaseless editing, this always-up-to-date map would be incredibly fragile—frayed from countless erasures and pencil marks and innumerable times being folded and unfolded and folded again. Despite its tenuous condition, this tattered atlas of the community would be invaluable.

It would document the neighborhood's history: the structures, stores, pathways, alleys, houses, ditches, pilings; the local landmarks and how they changed over time; the names of the traditional healers and juju men and women's circles and self-created community institutions; the locations of latrines and garbage heaps and self-built wooden bridges that snake across the mud flats, offering a sketch of the privately owned but communal infrastructure that has made life better in the community. And it is crucial that this document be ink-on-paper. Yes, there are currently a number of worthy digital projects, like Map Kibera, an online effort to chart the contours of Nairobi's largest shantytown. And yes, digital maps don't degrade. But they also don't have the same local reach—because most people in Badia and Kibera and other shantytowns and street markets don't have personal computers, smartphones or broadband connections stable enough to access and continually update an online map.

Suppose that, long before the state swooped in to raze their homes, the people of Badia had presented annual copies of this living map to the local and national governments, to the United Nations, to the World Bank (which has given the state government $85 million for drainage projects, including one in Badia East). Suppose they had given a copy to the *baale*, to the local politicians and all the political parties. Suppose they filed copies with the local land records office and with the court and gotten copies to all the newspapers in town. Suppose they had, in short, used the map as a tool to declare, "We exist—and we don't have to go to the police station to declare it. We matter. We are important." Would the government have found it quite so easy to evict them then?

Every squatter neighborhood needs to be its own troubadour, every street market its own cartographer, every informal community its own town crier. In this way, each can demonstrate its history, importance and value. Think of how powerful Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi, whose tragic self-immolation ignited the Arab Spring, might have felt if he had been on a city map—literally, his location, products, accomplishments and value recorded on paper and filed with the government. He might not have felt the need to set himself ablaze in front of a government office to declare his existence. He might have found another route, in concert with his fellow vendors, to make his frustrations known.

This, of course, represents a seismic shift in strategy for squatters and street merchants. In the early days of their encroachments, squatters and street hawkers hid from the authorities, figuring that flying under the radar was their best guarantee of survival. If

they successfully avoided detection, they felt, they could achieve a level of freedom and stability. But as cities pursue growth at all costs, spending wildly to attract international sporting events, or trying to build themselves up as business and tourist destinations by copying the planning techniques of the West, there is no longer any hiding.

Under his mega city plan, Governor Fashola wants to recast the massive Nigerian commercial metropolis to be more like Dubai. In pursuit of this goal, Fashola has criminalized street vending, sent squads of paramilitary police to smash down massive street markets, outlawed most *okada*, or motorcycle taxis (there were perhaps one million motorcycle taxis operating in Lagos and banning them trashed an industry that, in a very conservative estimate, generated a turnover in the neighborhood of $500 million a year—money that mostly circulated locally), and turned loose the bulldozers on shack communities. Even gigantic markets like Oshodi—which for decades sprawled over a highway interchange and became so massive that it was like an immovable chaotic commercial cosmos that took over buildings, sidewalks, streets, a train line, and even the highways—are at risk. Indeed, Fashola's vengeful quasi-police force, the squadron called Kick Against Indiscipline, made quick work of Oshodi, destroying most of it in 2009, meeting almost no resistance.

In this kind of environment, spontaneous neighborhoods and markets can no longer imagine that they exist in a vacuum. Rather, they must declare their presence and take charge of their interaction with government and the rest of the city.

To Possess a Roof

Around the world, cities are drawing up master plans with little public input and then using those plans as policy weapons of mass destruction, rushing to demolish impoverished communities and destroy vital informal markets in the name of progress and civic betterment. The estimated 900 million squatters who live in self-built communities are generally not part of these plans. Nor are the majority of working people (1.8 billion people, 60 percent of the workers of the world) who labor off the books, in the informal markets or on the streets or who get paid with cash under the table.

Mumbai officials have pointed to Shanghai as their development model and have periodically razed shantytowns and pushed hawkers off the streets. São Paulo and Kigali have claimed Singapore as a model for development—and São Paulo recently pushed out the street merchants on Rua 25 de Marco—where trade was so brisk that, if it were a single corporation, its annual turnover would make it one of the five largest Brazilian-owned firms in the country. Rio de Janeiro has demolished favelas and street markets as it spruces up in anticipation of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games.

What these cities forget is that they have their own culture and development patterns. They don't have to turn themselves into somewhere else. It hardly seems an

accident that Dubai, Shanghai and Singapore, these purported models of urban excellence, are authoritarian cities where big government and big businesses run the streets. There is little citizen empowerment in these municipalities. Rather, they are notable for central control of development decisions, for devoting development efforts to attracting tourists rather than making life better for residents, and for enforcing strict laws regarding personal conduct.

What would happen if every one of the informal outposts and enterprises in these cities made their own equivalent of a map? If the vendors in São Paulo's massive street markets had mapped their stalls and the global journeys merchants took to get their products and the distance their customers traveled to get to the market? If the *okada* drivers, rather than folding up shop and selling their bikes, had mapped all the trips that they made in every neighborhood of the city for a month, thus showing that they were a necessary and well-accepted provider of public transport? If all street hawkers recorded their itinerant journeys, showing where the best spots were to sell and how many miles they walked every day? If the metal scavengers and plastic recyclers mapped their routes and where they found the most valuable material? If the garbage dump scavengers mapped where the trucks came from at what times of day? If the communities threatened with demolition drew themselves into existence?

Every second, the urban population of the world edges upward by two people. That tiny increment, compounded over minutes, hours and days, makes an avalanche: cities around the globe are growing by 60 million people a year. Almost all of these new urban residents will be in the cities of the developing world. They will be the root of urban population growth and at least 50 percent of global economic growth. Simply put, there's no government, no global or local non-governmental organization, no private developer, who can build enough housing for these new urban residents at a price they can afford.

The novelist Patrick Chamoiseau said it best: "To be is first and foremost to possess a roof." For the 60 million new urban arrivals to exist—for them to be full-fledged individuals, workers, citizens, to raise families, to participate in social and civic life—they must have a roof, and to do this they must build for themselves, even if that means constructing their homes illegally. The world's squatter communities are neighborhoods of strivers. Squatter communities may not yet have water, electricity, sanitation or sewers, but they have something else: incredible individual and collective energy and spirit. Despite the obvious degraded conditions, the residents live with great gusto. They buy food and household items and, when they can (more often than you might expect, actually), they party. Indeed, it's fair to say that every one of the world's shantytowns, no matter how small, has at least one grocery store, one restaurant and one bar.

The Umbrella Market

Major makers of consumer goods and beverages have recognized just how big the shantytown market can be. From laundry detergent and toothpaste to beer and soda, major multinationals have made it their business to get their products into the stalls, stores, saloons and salons of these self-made communities. Selling to firms in the shantytowns is no different than selling to any other businesses—though perhaps involves more cash-in-hand transactions than credit cards.

It's the same with street markets. Major firms know that selling on the street represents a powerful tool. Procter & Gamble, a multi-billion dollar consumer goods company, has recognized that its continued global growth requires getting its products into street stalls and shantytown stores in the developing world—and it has adjusted its policies to include them. "No matter the legislation or fiscal structure of the country," Paul Fox, P&G's chief PR man, told me, "we want to make sure these stores are financially viable." All told, these small but high frequency shops account for 20 percent of P&G's business—making them the company's largest, most important, and fastest growing market segment.

The mobile phone providers of Africa are one of the enduring examples of creative use of a street sales force. The press has been full of stories of the emergence of the mobile phone economy—a continent with just 16.5 million mobile subscribers in 2000 saw mobile accounts rocket to 650 million by 2011. This makes Africa a bigger mobile market than either the United States or the European Union—with very little analysis of why this leapfrog technology has grown so quickly.

What accounts for the success? Two things stand out: street selling and piracy.

Mobile phone providers in Africa were willing to tap into a ready-made, unlicensed sales force of street vendors. In much of the developing world, phones are pay-as-you-go—meaning that you have to buy airtime credit to make calls. Since most mobile phone providers on the continent don't sell many phones or monthly contracts, those minutes are the key to their corporate profits. They sell the airtime through unlicensed sidewalk merchants and street hawkers. This roving sales force is so big and so profitable that the mobile phone companies consider it a legitimate distribution channel. They call it the umbrella market, in honor of the umbrellas that these roadside vendors use to shade themselves from the sun and rain.

Here's how the system works: the mobile providers produce recharge cards. They sell them in bulk to distributors, who in turn sell to sub-distributors who sell to the roadside vendors. If the vendors buy in bulk, they can get a discount, and that discount is the source of their profit. "We don't have a direct relationship with the gentleman or lady on the street," said Akinwale Goodluck, who at the time we spoke was general manager for regulatory issues for the South Africa-based mobile

provider MTN, which has a 40 percent lock on the Nigerian market. Nonetheless, he told me, most mobile providers in Africa earn the bulk of their cash by selling recharge cards, and roadside sales account for the bulk of profit. "The umbrella market is a very, very important market now," he said. "No serious operator can afford to ignore the umbrella people."

The existence of the umbrella market ensures that people don't have to go out of their way to buy airtime. There's always someone selling recharge cards—whether on the corner, on the sidewalk or threading their way through traffic—and it's this presence that has helped make mobile service convenient and popular. In this way, street hawkers function as a social good, and a key driver of profits for major corporations.

Pirates, too, had a hand in the spread of phones. Take Kenya. When I was first there a decade ago, the mobile phone revolution had not reached the masses. Entrepreneurs, businesspeople and politicians all had mobile phones. So did the creative class. But I was hanging out in Kibera, the largest mud hut neighborhood in the Kenyan capital, and few of the folks I knew there had mobiles. Fast-forward ten years and the situation is totally different. There are now 30 million mobile phones spread among 24 million Kenyans over the age of fifteen—an effective penetration rate of 125 percent. Most of my friends in Kibera now have mobiles. Even scavengers at Dandora, the city's noxious garbage dump, have them.

What explains the ubiquity? Pirate manufacturers, most of them from China, drove the cost of a handset down. A decade back, a mobile phone was a luxury item out of the reach of the poor. Knockoffs, when they arrived, cut the price, and the sudden arrival of cheap phones helped mobile usage explode. In this way, piracy served the public good (and, not coincidentally, the corporate good). When I was in Guangzhou, China, I met dozens of merchants seeking to get their hands on pirated phones. They didn't call them pirated or counterfeited or even fakes. To these entrepreneurs, the pirated phones were, in the words of Chief Arthur Okafor, who had a small (if you can call $40,000 in pirate purchases per trip to Guangzhou small) but highly profitable business smuggling pirated Nokias into Nigeria, "real copies."

Indeed, Nokia, the largest-selling phone brand in Africa (the Finnish firm, whose mobile business was recently bought by Microsoft, still boasts around a 60 percent market share on the continent), has recognized that the way to win the African market is to outmaneuver the pirates. In March 2013, when I was last in Nigeria, I discovered that a new Nokia handset cost just $19. That's less than half what I paid five years ago. When a phone is that cheap, there's almost no reason for it to be pirated. Nokia has even learned a trick or two from the pirates. For instance, around 2009, some savvy pirate operators started producing phones that could handle two SIM cards simultaneously—two lines that you could switch between as if you were using call waiting.

Now Nokia offers its own dual SIM phone for just $29. In effect, Nokia has copied the pirates. And the firm is continuing to ensure that prices will remain low as it rolls out smartphones for the African market. For example, the company recently released what you might call a semi-smartphone that retails for less than $100. With a hyper-long battery life—advertised as seventeen hours of talk time and forty-eight days of standby—the phone seems specially designed for the shantytowns and street markets of the world, areas that have limited access to electricity.

With the price of name-brand handsets falling, Kenya was able to take the controversial step of canceling service on pirated phones. Overnight on October 1, 2012, the Kenya Communications Commission deprived 1.9 million people of the use of their mobile phones. But the move went off without much protest because customers could now find legal replacements at an affordable price.

From Slum Dwellers to Policy Makers

Squatter communities and street markets need to publicize these positive facts. Mapping is only one idea. There are other possibilities. A street market could form a claims club, a kind of cooperative neighborhood registry in which each vendor would record where he did business and what kind of business he did; in this way establishing a non-binding, unofficial claim to his kiosk or place in the market. Claims clubs like these were common in the United States a century and a half ago, as homesteaders and squatters who led the western migration across the continent (and in the process boosted the country's economy) looked for a way to stake their tenuous claim to the land where they had settled. A community could conduct a census, simply documenting how many people lived there. A market could start a newspaper or initiate a cooperative improvement association, taking tentative steps toward public betterment by, perhaps, paving a road or installing a few battery-powered streetlights.

Of course, simply making a map, establishing a local claims registry, convening a mini planning tribunal, or opening a local media outlet are not sufficient for people to gain a right to the city. These do-it-yourself strategies are simply a start. They're no replacement for direct action. Squatters and street vendors will have to go public. They will have to show that, if government wants to push them out, they will not go gentle into the night. They will have to engage in a campaign to take control of their futures. This may take the form of organizing a large public pressure group to push for proper policy changes. It could also involve joining the system and even entering the political arena and running candidates for office. And, in a move that would be truly transformative and dynamic, squatters and street vendors could establish new civic ventures based on a three-way partnership between residents, vendors and their customers. These could offer strong, parallel, cooperative systems of governance that

would ensure that squatter communities and street markets could never be considered unstable or dangerous or undemocratic or socially destructive.

On the other side, governments need to understand that development is not purely technocratic and that planning rules cannot be inflexible. Rather, politicians and policy makers have to learn to listen to the residents of the discredited neighborhoods called slums and the vast numbers who are derided as criminals because they do business on the street. They are the key component in any true form of urban development. With their own effort and ingenuity, these long-neglected citizens have started on the road toward equitable urban growth. They have created their neighborhoods and businesses out of nothing. They have democratized the spread of technology. They have built sustainable incomes and are increasingly creating steady jobs. We need to turn development upside down and give it back to the people who are creating the new urban world.

Until the damned maps burn
Until the mad cartographer
Falls to the ground and possesses
The sweet thick earth from which he has been hiding.

—Jack Spicer, *Psychoanalysis: An Elegy*