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# Editorial

By Josephine Berry Slater

As I write this I am sitting in my ex-local authority flat, looking out over the new vertical growth of London's pounding financial heart. My flat is in a highrise too, a block built in the late '60s at the peak of the social housing boom of the welfare state. No matter how its construction displaced and arguably helped destroy the community it apparently served, this style of development nonetheless aimed at providing London's working class with (relatively) spacious, light, central and well serviced homes. Now highrises are strictly for business – office blocks or yuppie apartments. I've watched several blowdowns in my neighbourhood in the past few years, as tower blocks take the blame for the 'dangerous' and 'alienated' existence of the urban poor. Meanwhile, out of my window, corporate highrises are slung up apace. Obviously there is nothing innately wrong with them – so long as they are pulsing with cash and city workers. Or, as in my case, sold off to private leaseholders.

The increasing gulf between these vertiginous bastions of capital and, when they are built at all, the low-rise dingy barracks of affordable housing, dramatises the general state of the world's divided cities. The poor, though required to build and service the swelling megalopolises, are apparently not welcome here. Mike Davis, whose book *Planet of Slums* has largely provoked this issue of *Mute*, cites figures which unquestionably prove the mass influx of humanity from the countryside into urban slums. However, these slums are themselves under threat. Largely the product of neoliberal economics – its sell-off of public assets, spiralling living costs and structural adjustment programmes which render traditional modes of rural subsistence untenable, etc. – slums, as with the UK's social housing under Thatcher, are now public enemy number one. They often occupy centrally located zones which, once considered unsavoury because too industrial, are now highly desirable and hence valuable. While plans to build thousands of new homes in the Thames Gateway may well end up creating a sink of poor quality housing for London's low-paid service workers, the centres of cities are becoming off limits to anyone but the middle class and business.

This is nothing short of a new enclosure – real estate is bearing the brunt of a general economic crisis in which credit fuelled consumption masks an underlying lack of productivity and economic expansion. Inflation and expropriation go hand in hand. Squatters are thrown off the land without, in many cases, any viable rehousing plans, just as the poor are shunted from welfare to workfare, without any real prospect of employment. Another mode of expropriation is also occurring at a cultural level – the spectre of what at *Mute* we've been calling the 'shanty chic' aesthetic. As the bubble of convenience culture and technologised hyper-mediation numbs the cultural class, a vicarious worship of all things bricolaged, improvised and threadbare – read pauperised – has taken hold. The acid bath of poverty is the urbane consumer's psychic chemical peel of choice. This admiration has strayed from the art world into the culture industry in general – a new chain of restaurants in Paris and London shamelessly, almost unconsciously, named *Favela Chic* now serves up top-dollar cuisine at soup-kitchen style collective tables, overlooked by an artlessly bricolaged DJ booth. Meanwhile the spectacle of the South's slum dwellers is served up to the cinema goers of the North, mixing equal measures of desperation and glamorous dreams of life beyond the law.

In this issue we have tried to explore both the production and abduction of a 'surplus humanity' adrift in the world's cities. While cautious of the tendency to lapse into a Rem Koolhaas style celebration of the improvisatory ingenuity of the precarious class, to Learn from Lagos as it were, this issue nevertheless attempts to reveal a 'politics of the poor', which meshes together dissent in the slums of Port au Prince, Delhi, Durban and São Paulo with the pen pricks of poets and the living words of dead rappers.