

Informal Urbanism and the Taste for Slums

KIM DOVEY & ROSS KING

Department of Architecture, Building & Planning, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia

ABSTRACT *This paper explores the aesthetics and politics of slum tourism – what are the attractions and what are the dangers of aestheticizing poverty? We first present eleven images of slums and informal urbanism in south and Southeast Asia and suggest a complex mix of attractions for Western tourists. On the one hand informal urbanism can be picturesque with elements of nostalgia and a quest for authenticity; on the other is the shock of the real, the spectacle of intensive labyrinthine urbanity and an uneasy voyeurism. We suggest the attraction is more the anxious and awe-filled pleasure of the sublime than any formal beauty. The paper then changes scale to connect such imagery to the political economy and geography of the city where the visibility of slums and urban informality is linked to state and market ideologies. Informal settlements generally have negative symbolic and political capital; the developing state paradoxically needs tourists yet seeks to control the urban image for purposes of branding and to signify law and order. The slum is often hidden from the public gaze in a manner that is complicit with the reproduction of poverty. While the voyeuristic gaze of the Western tourist produces an aestheticization of poverty this does not depoliticize so much as it opens up new connections and potential transformations.*

KEY WORDS: Informal, slum, aesthetic, sublime, capital, urban, Southeast Asia, tourism, South Asia

Introduction

When Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacin toured the slums of Naples in 1924 and wrote their famous essay, they portrayed the slum as a place of great ambiguity – a place of shock where ‘the travelling citizen . . . loses his nerve’ (Benjamin & Lacin 1978: 164); at once the dystopia of poverty yet teeming with intensity, vitality and ambiguous attraction. The theatre critic and the director described the scene in terms of a theatre where backstage and frontstage interpenetrate:

. . . the house is far less the refuge into which people retreat than the inexhaustible reservoir from which they flood out. Life bursts not only from doors,

Correspondence Address: Kim Dovey, Department of Architecture, Building & Planning, University of Melbourne, Parkville 3010, Australia. Fax: (+ 61 3) 83447779; Tel.: (+ 61 3) 83445532; Email: dovey@unimelb.edu.au

ISSN 1461-6688 Print/1470-1340 Online /12/02/00275–19 © 2012 Taylor & Francis
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2011.613944>

not only into front yards . . . From the balconies, housekeeping utensils hang like potted plants . . . Just as the living room appears on the street, with chairs, hearth and altar, so – only much more loudly – the street migrates into the living room . . . Poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought. There is no hour, often no place, for sleeping and eating . . . How could anyone sleep in such rooms? To be sure there are beds – as many as the room will hold. But even if there are six or seven, there are often more than twice as many occupants . . . (Benjamin & Lacia 1978: 171–2).

The tenements of Naples and elsewhere have long been supplemented in the collective imagination by the proliferation of squatter and informal settlements of developing cities. The terms ‘slum’, ‘squatter’ and ‘informal’ are not synonymous, of course – in general terms a slum is defined in terms of poor sanitation and shelter; squatting in terms of legality of tenure; and informality in terms of practices that fall outside state control (Roy & Alsayyad 2004; UN-Habitat 2006). These are contested terms that identify stereotypes and mask more ambiguous realities. Informality emerged initially from critiques of the informal economy and now applies also to people (floating populations) and places (informal settlements). Informality is a framework for understanding the encroachment of informal activities and settlements within formally planned cities (Roy & Alsayyad 2004). There are, however, many kinds of informal settlement (Dovey & King 2011) and many degrees and kinds of formality within them (Freire-Medieros 2009). While informality becomes identified with its settled outcomes it is fundamentally a process rather than a form; there can be no easy division between the formal and informal city. There can be high levels of morphological informality without slums; the medieval remnants of many European cities (now global tourist sites) are amongst the oldest of informal settlements.

The slippage between our uses of the terms ‘informal’ and ‘slum’ reflects the ambiguities as we shy away from ‘slum’ and ‘squatter’ as terms of denigration towards ‘informal’ with its respect for the complexity, ingenuity and creativity of everyday adaptations. While there is no such thing as a pure slum, the rhizomic incremental housing of informal settlements often comes to signify slum conditions and the informality is part of the attraction of slum tourism. The more recent revival in the use of the term ‘slum’ in turn reflects an imperative to not shy away from poverty, indeed to look harder at urban informality and the representations of ‘slums’, even their attractions.

In ‘Slumming it’, the 2010 British television documentary, some aspects of this ambiguity find a popular audience. In an echo of the British tradition of the Grand Tour, Kevin McCloud (host of the popular TV series ‘Grand Designs’) is to spend two weeks living in Dharavi, Mumbai, and he has a particular set of questions before he goes:

Dharavi looks like a hellhole, disease is rife, water's contaminated and sanitation is rudimentary. But it's also claimed that this slum has got a strong sense of community, high employment and little crime. Architects, planners and even Prince Charles are convinced that Dharavi has got what we lack . . . When I think about a slum what I think about is misery in a way yet these people are saying they're not miserable, they're intensely happy. I don't buy that; I'm going to see for myself if this place can in any way be the answer to anyone's problems (Channel 4, 2010).

Before he enters Dharavi the audience are shown dwellings on a rubbish heap, children defecating on the pavement, mountains of rubbish and putrid drains with 'toxic sludge'. He enters the dense labyrinth with a guide and the initial shock is soon mixed with a sense of amazement at the sheer density of it all and the severe disorientation – he would have no idea how to get out of this 'mind boggling maze of lanes' without a guide. The narrative begins as largely negative – in a fire they would be trapped, the food is prepared on the floor, twenty people live in one tiny house where he cannot sleep for the rats. Over time more positive responses begin: there is a safe, welcoming and all-embracing sociality; the women are beautifully dressed in colourful saris; the children go to school; everyone seems productive and happy. The excitement on McCloud's face is evident: 'if there is one word for all this it is "intensity"'. As he explores the settlement he finds aspects that are purely horrifying (the working conditions), yet also places where he suggests they place heritage controls. There is a sense of this being a hidden world that looks negative from the outside and turns out both worse and better than it appears. Towards the end of the documentary a small group of young Westerners files past the camera and into Dharavi with a comment from McCloud 'there goes a tour'. This documentary will inevitably promote further tourism in Dharavi and it raises issues about the aesthetic attraction of the slum, the public visibility of slums and questions of political and economic context to which we will return.

Images of Informality

We begin this paper with a series of speculative accounts of how and why such dystopic places become attractive, with examples drawn from our encounters in Southeast and South Asia. In doing this it may prove useful to extend our necks a little while acknowledging that this encounter always says more about the tourist or the researcher than the slum. The following images have been selected because we regard them in some way as compelling and because we either know or sense that they attract tourists to take photographs. Our goal in what follows is to read our own unease in confronting and photographing these places as much as to describe the content and interpret the attraction.

The Chao Phraya river in Bangkok is a major public transport route and its public boats are popular with tourists photographing the public monuments of palace, temples and forts (Figure 1 (upper)). Yet their cameras also seek out the passing panorama of riverside communities with informal housing offering fleeting glimpses of exotic lives. The informal housing is framed by a screen of flags and images proclaiming nation, king and religion (King 2011).



Figure 1. Bangkok (photos: upper by Ross King; lower by Kim Dovey).

Visitors to Thailand are also likely to join the tourist boats that trawl the smaller *khlongs* (canals) lined with informal housing extending over the water with a visible social life on the water's edge (Figure 1 (lower)). Such waterfront communities are seen as remnants of a traditional Thai authenticity that is no longer found in the streets; one can hear the tourist's say: 'this is the real Bangkok'. The 'authentic' Thai lifestyle is consumed from the safe distance of the boat as locals bathe and hang out in the traditional open pavilions (*sala*) over the water and floating shops ply their trade. While dilapidation is often evident and even severe, the crowding and the real slum remains hidden.

Until the 1980s Gondolyu was a very makeshift settlement clinging to a steep riverbank in Yogyakarta where it was highly visible to passing traffic and threatened with demolition due, in large part, to this visibility. It has since been upgraded in a manner that deploys traditional Javanese roof types and wall paintings in a dense but informal manner reminiscent of a traditional village (Khudori 1987). The new buildings and wall paintings were, in part, a show of community identity and pride that has led to a much higher level of tenure security. The visibility of the riverbank also means that the image of the settlement is juxtaposed with advertising signs that cut across any fantasy of authenticity and construct an incongruity of rival yet mutually dependent economies (Figure 2 (upper)).



Figure 2. Left: Yogyakarta (photo by Wiryono Raharjo). Right: Manila (photo by Kim Dovey).

From the rooftops of a sea of slums in Manila rises a single-room tower three storeys taller than the surroundings, all on one footprint and clad in scavenged corrugated iron sheets (Figure 2 (lower)). The rooms have been built in stages with differently coloured cladding – surrounded by a landscape littered with rocks, plastic, boards and domestic items. The tower has an aesthetic quality linked to collage or bricolage; to the consistency of corrugated iron; to the typology of single-room extrusions; and to the sense of order that is introduced in contrast to the surrounding chaos. The visibility is produced by a relatively new pedestrian walkway connecting two railway stations – looking down and across the slums becomes a substitute for negotiating the city at street level.

In East Bandra, Mumbai, is another view produced by the desire to lift the middle classes off the street (Figure 3 (upper)). This conglomeration of houses up to five storeys high is constructed mostly of plywood sheets, interspersed with tarpaulin and steel sheeting. None of the floors or walls appear to line up, there are no signs of internal circulation and it is often impossible to tell where one room or house begins. From a small window a young boy looks out and above him a large television aerial extends from the roof. This image raises some problematic questions – why was it taken, how was it cropped and what are the political implications of such an aestheticization of poverty?

On a canal in Manila is a three-storey assemblage, most of it in some state of collapse. The supporting poles rise from a soup of garbage; looming above is the empty frame for a billboard suggesting failure at both ends of the economy (Figure 3 (centre)). This is a shocking scene that evokes horror and pity but also a certain awe at the necessity for life under such conditions. In these encounters one hesitates to go any further as if on the edge of an abyss – to enter is to lose the distance necessary for photography.

The most visible of such settlements line the railways of Mumbai with more than a million passing commuters every day (Figure 3 (lower)). These are fleeting glimpses of everyday lives, children playing, a sequence of apparent communities. Yet these real lives and real people are gone in an instant unless the camera snaps an image we can reflect on. Façades are strung with washing and lined with potted plants; the windows are small and shuttered. One of the buildings is a shop with signs and a phone booth outside. If it were not for the railway within two metres of the front doors this could be a village. These momentary flashes of other lives can be mere spectacle or profoundly disturbing; as can the act of photographing and publishing such an image. To what degree is this an exercise in self-gratification, the self-indulgence of living our own lives vicariously through others? Are the residents of this settlement better off if we avert the camera and the gaze? What are the politics of turning away?

Along the river in Surabaya, Indonesia, a string of row houses are propped above the water, clad in rusted corrugated iron sheets with few windows or balconies and no access to the water (Figure 4 (upper)). At the end of the row some of the houses are slowly collapsing. Behind this row of rust and dereliction is a brightly



Figure 3. Upper and lower: Mumbai; centre: Manila (photos by Kim Dovey).



Figure 4. Upper: Surabaya; lower: Bangkok (photos by Ross King).

coloured commercial complex with a large billboard demonstrating how it will soon be extended. This is the elite model of a water-front city which the waterfront communities have resisted (Dovey 2010). The juxtaposition between formal and informal in this image reflects a real politics of resistance and part of this resistance involves a determination to exclude the tourist. Yet this is an ambivalent position: residents might seek exposure for a specific political purpose, yet pride coupled with resentment will cut in and privacy will be insisted upon.

In Bangkok an informal settlement lines the edge of a canal that has also been used for an elevated freeway (Figure 4 (lower)). The uppermost house with open verandah and gabled roof could present an almost bucolic image if it were not for the fact that it is located immediately on top of a number of other houses (some in advanced states of collapse) and immediately beneath the freeway. Here the juxtaposition of fundamentally different urban processes, forms and lifestyles becomes part of the attraction.

Kampung Bahru in Kuala Lumpur is scarcely an attraction in itself, yet tourists will visit for the Sunday Market. They may then find it a good location from which to photograph the Petronas Towers – emblematic of the city and the nation – juxtaposed against the informality (Figure 5 (upper)). A similarly juxtaposed image appeared in the 1998 movie ‘Entrapment’, but Kampung Bahru was considered insufficiently sordid and an image from a more archetypical slum was spliced in (Bunnell 2004). The scene caused political outrage; not only was it inauthentic and violated the preferred national image, but it also opened some sensitive political issues since Kampung Bahru is regarded as a hotbed of Islamic and political radicalism (King 2008).

Pavement squatters in Mumbai live in a two-storey row backed against the blank wall of an industrial building (Figure 5 (lower)). The makeshift buildings are covered on the street facades by domestic paraphernalia, the entire pavement is consumed by domestic space and all pedestrian traffic is forced into the street. This is a voyeuristic photograph that raises questions about the ethics of slum tourism and photography under conditions where the public gaze necessarily and constantly penetrates deeply into domestic space. But again where is the morality in aversion?

Aesthetics of Informality

We will now explore some of the issues identified above through a series of more general themes. We begin from the view that the tourist encounter with poverty and urban informality is at once a moral, aesthetic and epistemological encounter – these three realms of critique that Kant would keep separate are here inextricably intertwined. While we intend to focus on the aesthetic, this is not to presume any priority so much as to explore this dimension and its connections. In the eighteenth century Burke (1958) drew a sharp distinction between the beautiful and the sublime: the beautiful brings us delight and submits to our gaze while the sublime is a pleasure

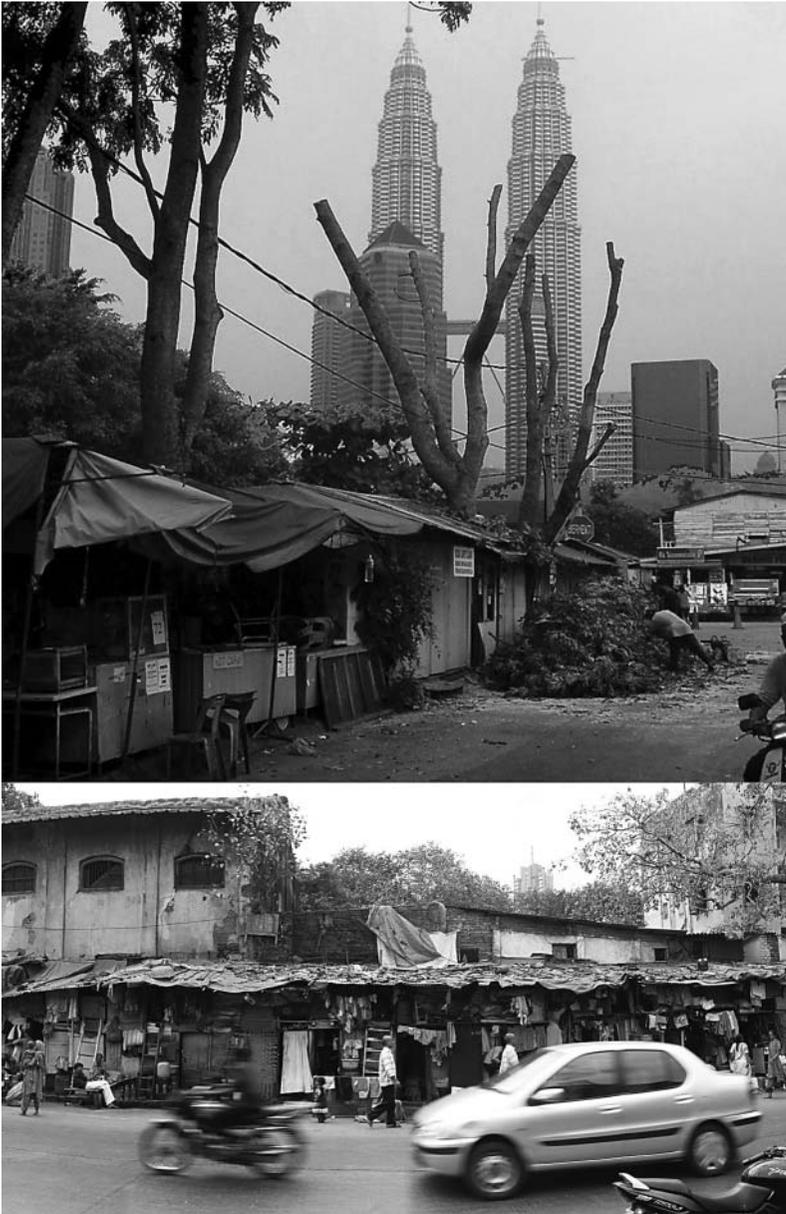


Figure 5. Upper: Kuala Lumpur (photo by Ross King); lower: Mumbai (photo by Kim Dovey).

born of fear in the face of the unknown and the overwhelming. While we want to identify the pleasures of slum tourism primarily with the sublime, it is clear that there are also elements of delight. We begin with the experience of nostalgia, the quest for authenticity and the pleasures of the exotic and picturesque; moving towards the shock of the real, the potency of dialectic juxtapositions and the lure of labyrinthine intensity.

Beauty

Nostalgia is the sentimental affection for a real or imagined past; it can be evoked when the informal settlement becomes reminiscent of a traditional village through its vernacular architecture, spatial structure or social life (Figures 2 (upper) and 3 (lower)). Such sentiment can be linked to a quest for authenticity (Conran 2007). For MacCannell (1989: 41) this quest is based in a perceived lack in modern life where the city has become contrived spectacle: 'Modern man has been condemned to look elsewhere, everywhere, for his authenticity, to see if he can catch a glimpse of it reflected in the simplicity, poverty, chastity or purity of others'. Slums can also embody the attractions of the exotic – not so much other times as other lives, beliefs and customs. The exotic is a spectacle to be photographed while maintaining a distance (Figure 1), an identity we borrow to augment the one we retain. Informal urbanism is often picturesque – what is seen can be reduced to a picture. The aesthetic idea of the picturesque was, from its eighteenth century beginnings, linked to the practice of tourism and the Grand Tour (Gilpin 1782). While Burke had tried to draw a mutually exclusive line between the beautiful and the sublime, here was a movement to render the sublime beautiful, to reduce it to a picture (Figures 2, 3 (upper) & 5 (upper)). From its beginnings, the picturesque also incorporated elements of poverty, including imagery of worker-hovels (MacArthur 2007).

The aesthetic delights and pleasures of informal settlements have often been noticed by those who study them. Peattie (1992) suggests that such a discourse is inherently political and draws attention to the way Perlman (1976) used the dramatic imagery of *favelas* to promote a positive image of stigmatized communities in her seminal book *The Myth of Marginality*. Such positive interest in the aesthetic of urban informality is not easily reduced to sentimental nostalgia; the *favelas* have been the subject of aesthetic interest since the early twentieth century (Freire-Madieros 2009). There is also a broader interest in the aesthetics of vernacular architecture that burgeoned in the wake of Rudofsky's (1964) highly influential book *Architecture Without Architects*. This was a photographic essay in traditional vernacular architecture – exotic, picturesque and highly potent images with poverty erased. Some of the attractions of more recent informal settlements can be seen to have a similar source in the ways an informal urban morphology is produced through a repetition of simple building types and materials yet where every house and lane is different. The informal process

produces a certain order of repetition but variegated by an incremental adaptive process (Figures 2, 3). While this is a social process, it produces a variegated landscape that can be seen at a distance as ‘organic’ in the sense of parts fitting together into a whole – an urban morphology produced by informal adaptations within an ecology of scarcity. As Perlman (2010: xviii) puts it:

From the beginning, I found the *favelas* visually more interesting and humanly more welcoming than the upper-middle-class neighbourhoods . . . with their high-density low-rise architecture, featuring facades variously angled to catch a breeze or a view, and shade trees and shutters to keep them cool . . . they followed the organic curves of the hillsides rather than a rigid grid pattern.

The typology of single-room increments sets up a rhythm, both vertically and horizontally. The adaptive process often produces an inventive architecture of one-off solutions. Where informal settlements cling to steep escarpments they often produce a spectacular urban profile that follows the topographic contours – a landscape thickly coated with houses with both a consistency and a myriad of variations in form and materials. The materiality of informal urbanism (steel, plastic, concrete) is largely modern rather than traditional and the typology of single-room accretions is global rather than local even while the emergent visual effects differ markedly with topography and climate. What renders such an urban landscape picturesque is visibility at a distance – it relies on a particular conjunction of topology and morphology.

The Sublime

All of the themes discussed thus far – the experience of nostalgia, the quest for authenticity, the idea of the exotic, the picturesque and vernacular – can be loosely seen within the framework of an aesthetic of beauty. Yet, while slums have their delights, this is never pure delight but often mixed with horror – here we turn to an understanding of the sublime. The aesthetic of the sublime, as originally conceived by Burke in 1757, involves the encounter with overwhelming scale or force, particularly related to overwhelming forces of nature (Burke 1958). The aesthetic passion stems from fear, horror or terror that becomes an awe-filled pleasure as we realize our own safety from it. While beauty involves the love of what submits to us, the sublime involves submission to a larger force that threatens to overwhelm us (Eagleton 1990). The sublime is the combination of anxiety and pleasure we experience when we encounter a potentially overwhelming threat under conditions of safety. For Kant (1974), our inability to understand and to grasp the enormity of the sublime involves a loss of the sense of the rational moral self. Yet the key to the pleasure is that the danger is not real – the pleasure depends on being safe in this encounter with the overwhelming. Such pleasure, for Kant, comes from a reassertion of a transcendent moral and rational order – we surrender to the thrill of danger in the knowledge that we are safe and can rise above it. More recently Lyotard (1994) suggests that the

power of the sublime is to expose the limits of human reason and the conceits of the enlightenment project with its master narratives of truth, progress, justice and development. He identifies the sublime with the foundational move of avant-garde modern art. The avant-garde offered the shock of such realization in the safety of the gallery. Within this framework of the sublime we suggest that a key attraction of slum tourism is that it offers safe passage through a potentially overwhelming poverty (Figures 2 (lower), 3).

Any quest for the 'real' or 'authentic' city in the slums soon yields to the 'shock of the real' – the terrible realization of the world as given, against Utopian dreams of what should be. Photographs or television reports on slums might lead to reactions of outrage, philanthropy or activism, but an actual visit can evoke a further set of reactions: not only fear but shame, guilt, pity and embarrassment at the thought of intrusion. Any aesthetic response is always already entangled with a failure of reason and moral outrage. There is an inevitable tension between our own moral discomfort and a real concern for the state of humanity (Figures 3, 5 (lower)). The tourist's horror in confronting the slum and its denizens is always tinged by the dread of a loss of morality and a loss of self – the preservation of the moral subject is at stake. Turning away (with or without the photograph) is one response to this dilemma; commitment to action is another.

The informal settlement is often labyrinthine in that it is visually and functionally impenetrable; its spatial structure is informal, its laneways narrow and irregular. Whatever one sees from the formal public space is but an entrance that suggests the first of many layers that disappear into the depths (Figures 2, 3). The labyrinth offers the mix of dread/pleasure suggested by the sublime. The threat here is largely epistemological, a threat to the rational subject – the terror of the unknown. The labyrinth is unreadable and infinitely disorientating. The maze of lanes and openings threatens, should we enter, a loss of the knowing subject, of who we are and where we are. For Deleuze (1993: 3–6) the labyrinth is a multiplicity of slippages or 'folds' where one place or identity folds into another with every turn – a place of 'becoming' (Dovey 2010). The labyrinth threatens a loss of orientation, an unravelling of self-identity; but it also promises new understanding. A 'maze' implies spatial complexity – it is a puzzle and a challenge to reason. To become 'amazed' is a term that suggests awakening or understanding as one becomes lost in another world. The labyrinth is at once threatening yet enticing.

Benjamin saw modern society of mass culture as a dream world – at once a kind of false consciousness but also a form of collective imagination with potential for collective awakening, for seeing the dream as a dream (Buck-Morss 1989: 261–3). Part of the potency of the image of the slum is that of a dystopic counter image that cuts through the dream of modernity. For Benjamin the city generally produces deceptive visions of our history and future where the seemingly permanent is really transient (Gilloch 1996). In the encounter with slums the supposedly transient appears as permanent – an awakening from the dream of a modern world of enlightenment

and abundance. Slums can be seen as an insurgent urbanism where the shock of the real cuts through ideology.

While informal settlements may become a spectacle in themselves, their spatial position as urban interstices means they are often juxtaposed with counter images to form a dialectic image where it is the incongruity of the image that carries the effect – one element of an image deconstructs another and both are called into question. Dialectical images compel discourse. Benjamin was interested in the ways the juxtapositions of difference in urban life could reveal something of a larger truth – spatial logic could reveal what a linear logic could not through a ‘dialectic of awakening’ (Buck-Morss 1989: 262). The MacDonaldis sign, the Petronas Towers and the freeway (Figures 2 (upper), 4 (lower), 5 (upper)) each counters any fantasy of the authentic traditional village, *khlong* or *kampung*, as it hits the observer with the obscenity of inequality. Such images of traditional/modern, local/global, informal/formal, poor/rich, village/nation open a space for re-thinking such relations and mythologies. Advertising images may be juxtaposed in a manner where Utopian wish images contrast with a dystopic landscape – billboards become windows on to a world of plenty that is the diametric opposite of poverty. At a smaller scale and close-up, the dialectic image may be created by the way images of beauty can cut through the dereliction, poverty and chaos with small-scale practices of pride – tiny gardens, flowers, shrines, birds, artworks. The dialectic image may reveal social differences where formal and informal morphologies, rich and poor, are co-located. One finds the infrastructure of the formal city (pedestrian overpasses, elevated expressways, residential and commercial towers, shopping malls) in a cheek-by-jowl juxtaposition with urban slums (Figure 4 (upper)). At times the landscape exposes the sharp geographical divisions between rich and poor, and there are locations where the picturesque beauty of the informal city from a distance can make the formal look dull by contrast.

The shock value of the slum is linked to the density and intensity of both built form and urban life – densities that are often more than 100 times that of the suburban homes of the tourists. This shock can be linked to what Deleuze (originally Spinoza) calls ‘affect’ – not a feeling or emotion but a pre-conscious bodily response to intensity; not what an image or event *means* but what it *does* (Deleuze & Guattari 1994; Colebrook 2002: xix–xx). While this response may or may not be positive, it has an aesthetic dimension of a similar kind to our bodily response to intense music. Intensity has to do with excess. Here scale is important, where a little bit of dilapidation looks tawdry, an overwhelming disorder becomes interesting. Detached buildings in disrepair do not have the same impact as a four-storey assemblage of contiguous dwellings in the same condition (Figure 3 (upper)). A few power cables strung along a street can interfere with the urban spectacle, yet when they approach saturation of the spatial field they become the spectacle. Intensity is linked to multi-functionality and multiple use of space; informal settlements fill interstices with an intensive aesthetic of efficiency – every scrap of sunlight is used for drying clothes

or food; every scrap of material finds a use; every scrap of space is used for many things (Figure 5 (lower)).

The intensity of the informal settlement is linked to the quality that Benjamin & Laci (1978) identified as 'porosity' – the degree to which the spatial and social segmentarity of the city dissolves under conditions of high density and poverty. In particular there is a dissolution of boundaries between private and public as domestic life spills into public space and the public gaze penetrates into the private realm:

Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its 'thus and not otherwise'. This is how architecture, the most binding part of the communal rhythm, comes into being here ... One can scarcely discern where building is still in progress and where dilapidation has already set in. For nothing is concluded. Porosity results ... above all from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be preserved at any price. Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable simultaneously animated theatres. Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes (Benjamin & Laci 1978: 166–8).

One can read in this passage nearly all of the attractions we have introduced above, the experience of nostalgia, the picturesque and labyrinthine intensity. The slum is seen as an unfinished constellation of people and buildings in a dynamic state of both creativity and dilapidation. The attraction in part is that 'nothing is concluded' in this everyday festival, this theatre of the unforeseen. While the informal settlements of the developing world are not the slums of early twentieth-century Naples, there are significant parallels in this exposure of domesticity that makes the private public. There is also an element of making the public private – informal settlements often protect their privacy to some degree by remaining hidden to the gaze from the formal city. While there may be little privacy within such settlements, many are invisible and largely impenetrable from the formal public spaces of the city. Even when visible from a distance informal settlements are often enclaves, as impenetrable to outsiders from a different social class as gated communities – they may, indeed, be informally gated and guarded; their streets and lanes do not appear on street maps. Here we return to the quest for authenticity – slum tourism as the only way to see the 'back-stage' (MacCannell 1989).

The issue of visibility and, therefore, the prospect of slum tourism, is strongly mediated by both topography of the landscape and the morphology of urban development. We have argued elsewhere that the morphology of informal settlements can be viewed as a loose constellation of types: escarpments, waterfronts, districts, easements and pavements (Dovey & King 2011). The visibility and imagery of informal

settlements plays an important role in the politics of eviction and displacement as well as the quest for tenure security.

Political Economy of the Sublime

We conclude this paper by opening up some questions about the politics and ethics of slum tourism. These are not easy questions and we can take no more than a few short steps here. If we are vaguely correct in identifying some of the aesthetic attractions of the slum, then one of the dangers is that we engage in an aestheticization of poverty, producing a depoliticized image that becomes attractive for capitalist exploitation. As Roy (2004: 302) puts it: ‘... the aestheticization of poverty is the establishment of an aesthetic and aestheticized (rather than political) relationship between viewer and viewed, between professional and city, between First and Third Worlds. It is an ideology of space’.

For Roy (2004: 298–303), the aesthetic gaze largely reduces the slum to a kind of ‘primitive organicism’ – aesthetic discourse directs attention and resources to design outcomes and away from the deeper political issues of global poverty. While we acknowledge that such can well be the case, how separate are the aesthetic and the political?

Perhaps the most potent critique of the relationship of politics to aesthetics comes from the work of Bourdieu (1984), for whom judgements that appear to draw aesthetic distinctions between things also work to draw social distinctions between people. He makes the observation that to take and frame a photograph of rubbish as a work of art is to distinguish a particular social class – working classes do not photograph rubbish (or slums?). For Bourdieu, aesthetic judgements operate within a field of power wherein what is at stake is ‘symbolic capital’: one of a range of forms of capital – symbolic, social, cultural, economic, political – that circulate through fields of power and are convertible to each other in different ways. One way of understanding the informal settlement within the urban field of the developing city is as a place with negative symbolic capital. For local middle classes these are places to avoid or to avert one’s eyes; the informal city becomes the ‘other’ of the formal city and hence essential to its identity. This helps to explain why informality continues to signify the ‘slum’ even after slum conditions and tenure are upgraded:

Perhaps the single persistent distinction between *favelas* and the rest of the city is the deeply rooted stigma that adheres to them and to those who reside in them ... Even after the extensive ... upgrading programs ... there is little doubt as to where the *asfalto* (pavement) ends ... The visual markers of each are unmistakable, whether viewed from above or on street level (Perlman 2010: 30).

Informal settlements largely occupy the interstices of cities that compete in the larger field of the global market wherein place marketing or urban branding are

seen as crucial for attracting investment (Kearns & Philo 1993; Klingman 2007). In this larger field the image of urban informality cuts across the brand image. Furthermore, images of slums embody negative political capital since governments are embarrassed by signification of failure and a lack of law and order. In response to both negative symbolic and political capital, informal settlements are sometimes upgraded or demolished because they are visible. Slum tourism provides an interesting twist in that in some cities it turns the slum into part of the brand – the image of Rio incorporates the *favelas*. The place branding schemes of many developing cities – importing Western models of waterfront development and dressing up local places according to global formulae – can ironically render them placeless from a global viewpoint. In this context the slum adds value as an authentic urbanism cutting through the spectacle of globalization, modernity and placelessness, an insurgent urbanism that resists global capitalism and authoritarian politics. If the slum adds tourist value then the paradox is that the developing state needs the flows of tourists yet seeks to control the urban image for purposes of branding and to signify law and order. While this could ultimately be seen as some kind of protection against demolition it will not necessarily encourage upgrading – self-help and sanitation programmes are not particularly photogenic.

Bourdieu has little place in his scheme for the sublime, but Lyotard's (1994) identification of the sublime with the shock of the avant-garde in modern art provides a connection. For Bourdieu the avant-garde works through an overturning of codes; to see a blank canvas or an off-the-shelf urinal as fine art is to overturn the dominant code of aesthetic taste. While this overturning appears to be revolutionary, the autonomy granted to the avant-garde is conditional on the reinvigoration and, therefore, the reproduction of the field. For Bourdieu, the primary role of the avant-garde is to inject the field with new strains of symbolic capital, to reinvigorate the art market with novel forms of expression (Bourdieu 1984: 254). What appears to be an autonomous aesthetic field is integrated with cycles of symbolic capital. While Bourdieu's insights are crucial they can be seen as overly reductionist; there is a chorus of social theory (Foucault on Delacroix, Deleuze on Bacon, Lyotard on Duchamp) that suggests in different ways that avant-garde art is fundamentally political in that it can open doors into new ways of seeing and thinking. So what has all this to do with slum tourism? We suggest that slum tourism can be construed as a parallel to the idea of the avant-garde: explorations of an urban frontier that feed a market for the new and different. It gains potency from the shock; it relies on a certain safety and distance for contemplation; it is inducted from its inception into tourist markets and capital flows and it may be complicit with forms of social reproduction. It can also open windows on to new ways of seeing and thinking.

While the consumption of slums may be critiqued in aesthetic terms, such practices are thoroughly implicated in epistemological and ethical issues. Slums offer a challenge to our sense of reason and morality as well as our sense of beauty or place – the separation of these three zones of critique (as in the Kantian philosophical paradigm)

cannot be sustained. It follows that to exclude aesthetic critique on the basis that it becomes complicit with an aestheticization of poverty is no way to address the issue. The invisibility of slums is part of a closed cycle of socio-economic reproduction; the voyeuristic gaze of the tourist opens this up to potential transformation. There is no simple answer to the question of whether photographing slums is legitimate; in our case we leave the reader to decide. Yet, to avert our gaze from the image in favour of politics or social practice is to ignore the political and social potency of the image. Whether it produces shock, horror, delight or political activism, slum tourism is unlikely to abate and seems destined to open these settlements to Western eyes. The question of how much it may open Western eyes (and pockets) to the enduring problems of poverty is more complex, but the prospect is enticing.

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Notes on Contributors

Kim Dovey is Professor of Architecture and Urban Design in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, the University of Melbourne, Australia.

Ross King is Professorial Fellow in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, the University of Melbourne, Australia.