

Book Review: Planet of Slums by Mike Davis

## The dirty secret of gentrification

*Reviewed by Hans Frei*

More than one billion people – that are just one third of the urban population worldwide – are dreaming of the huts of Chatal Hüyük, one of the first known urban settlements on earth, writes Mike Davis in his new book *Planet of Slums* (London: verso, 2006, p.19). The achievements of 9000 years urban history haven't brought them anything. They live in slums, which Davis describes according to the rather cautious definition of the UN Human Settlement Programme as “overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure.” (p.25) His report is a dizzying addition of examples of slums which he deals with in terms of bigness, growth, types and specific ecologies (unnatural hazards, encroachments, evictions, waste and mortality).

Architecture in classical sense is the issue of chapter 5 entitled “Haussmann in the Tropes” (pp.95-120). Improvements of slums and “urban beautification programmes” promise economic growth, better supplies and more social justice for the poor. But what they are offered in the end are new heaps of waste at the edges of new luxurious resorts. Davis lists only a few of the most famous slum evictions and arrives nevertheless at a number of 4 million evictees. This dirty history of architecture has yet to be written. It could very well turn out that many of the architectural beautifications belong also to a list of crimes against humanity.

The population of the slums grows by 20 million people per year. If this development continues we will soon have no more cities but only slums with some resorts for the privileged. Davis worries that urban poverty could turn out to be a catastrophe similar in scale to global warming – it might even be borne out of the very same causes.

One shouldn't interpret Davis' “urbanisme noir” as an unchangeable destiny. It is based on facts which are not the least constructed with the help of the auto poetic imaginary power of architects. The question, posed by *Planet of Slums* is whether architecture is essentially powerless in the face of urban poverty or if it is presently headed in the wrong direction to address it.

