

Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World, by Robert Neuwirth



Review by: Philip Sansone

This is the book that helped many, including Whole Earth Catalog founder Stewart Brand, understand how valuable urbanization is for the poor and in turn the environment. Shadow Cities shows that the squatter slums are often not stagnate horrible places, but rather dynamic environments where the poor are changing their lives and creating wealth. Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto pointed out many years ago that urban settings provide the poor with access to better food and nutrition, education, health services and education, all of which add not only to the quality of their lives, but also serves to prolong their lives while giving their children a fighting chance to really escape poverty.

The small subsistence farms that I call "poverty factories" only offer mentally diminished malnourished children who are often bred for their "free" labor on the farms and as a sort of social security for the parents; environmental degradation, as the poor are some of the worst stewards of the environment; and a shorter life of hard labor in the fields. Neuwirth points out that in the Shadow Cities life again has a chance to be something other than awful.

Population growth needs to be curtailed and, in fact, the growth is declining as the world's poor accumulate wealth. The population is expected to peak around 10 billion before it starts to come back down. Urbanization will help stem population growth, while concentrating environmental impact and subsequent management and providing a far better environment to raise children than in the rural countryside. The arguments are complex, so I suggest reading the book to fully understand this process. Brand estimates that by the turn of century humans will be almost totally urbanized and only utilizing about 3% of the land. The vast unpopulated areas will be, essentially, one huge natural wilderness.