

# #OCCUPYPABAHAY AND THE POLITICS OF PLACELESSNESS: DISPATCHES FROM MANILA, PHILIPPINES

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General assembly of Kadamay Bulacan, and fourth-month celebration of #OccupyPabahay. / Photo by Kadamay Bulacan (2018), with thanks to Michael Beltran.

The past year has seen the emergence of homelessness and housing justice issues in popular discourse in the Philippines, particularly in Manila and its peri-urban fringe. Kadamay (*Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap*), a militant urban poor group, has played the pivotal role in bringing this conversation to the forefront with the #OccupyPabahay (#OccupyHousing) direct actions, which commenced on March 8, 2017 in Pandi Bulacan, a suburb north of Metro Manila. Thousands of urban poor families facing eviction and homelessness barricaded the entrance of seven off-city public housing projects and occupied some 5,000 idle and substandard housing units meant for state security forces and 'danger zone' evictees. This shock — though not wholly unprecedented considering the long decades of extreme discontent — surfaced the deplorable state of social housing for both government employees and informal settler relocatees, and likewise revealed the crisis of homelessness and the poverty of urban justice in the Philippines.

Until these occupations, housing justice has received scant attention in the media and the general public. It is only now that it is being talked about, albeit in grossly unsympathetic and hostile terms. #OccupyPabahay incurred the rancor not only of displaced beneficiaries of relocation housing, who are evicted

informal settlers themselves, but also of the relatively well-off working and middle classes as well as the elite. In thinking about the severe backlash it generated, it is useful to understand that the occupation occurred in a country with a 5.6 million housing backlog, where shelter needs are outsourced to the private sector and where social housing stock is nonexistent beyond informal settler relocation and government employee housing. Despite originating from decades of institutional neglect, these events likewise did not escape the wrath of state officials, notably President Rodrigo Duterte who pejoratively referred to the takeover as "anarchy" and promised to inflict violence against participants in future actions. As the occupation spread to neighboring state housing projects, the widespread condemnation of both the act and its agents revitalized the stigma of the urban poor's moral depravation and unbelonging, and reinvigorated views of the urban underclass as the uncouth, the migrant, and the rural other who is outside and out of place.

While narratives of banishment against the urban underclass are certainly not peculiar to Manila, they are remarkable in this instance because their exclusionary politics surfaced an unbelonging that does not only erode the urban poor's right to the city but also undermines their fundamental right to housing.

This is neither simply a question of the legality of the occupation nor a concern about the resulting displacement of intended beneficiaries, but rather a resentful conflation of rights with "deservingness," and a revanchist notion of urban citizenship. Here, the right to shelter — particularly the right to social housing — is cast as foremost, if not exclusively, the right of "legitimate" citizens. The "squatter," a pejorative Filipinos use to express contempt and indicate undesirability, is denied this right not so much by revoking it but rather by disqualifying them in the first instance — by arguing that they do not possess such right, to begin with. Kadamay's critics in both the state and the public demolish their right to shelter and assail the morality of their claims by invoking the fulfillment of certain obligations (most prominently, the payment of taxes) and foregrounding the contributions of formal, taxable labor as barometers of citizenship, and thereafter framing such exclusionary notions of citizenship as a measure of deservingness: "Who are they to deserve social housing when legitimate and productive citizens themselves are not entitled to the same? Why should the 'theft' of homes merit the awarding of homes?"

Arguments against a just and urgent response to the crisis of homelessness and empty homes have rescaled slum unbelonging in terms of a placelessness that further displaces the urban poor. Indictments against the occupation reinforce what we already know: that the poor do not belong in the city where land is scarce for social housing but immediately available and quite abundant for private developments. But perhaps more important, these judgments also tell us that when the disgruntled among them flock to the peri-urban fringe, where the state has built entire villages with slum-like conditions to segregate the "necessary" casualties of Manila's world-class dreams and disaster resilience schemes, they find that they, too, do not belong there. They do not belong anywhere.

This placelessness has less to do with "the take" than the belief, clarified in discourses of and responses to #OccupyPabahay, that the urban poor are being denied the fundamental right to housing — or the right to any space for that matter. In depriving them of all kinds of spaces and places (of slums and shanties, or of dignified homes and idle housing), and in blocking all manner of insurgent practices that stake a claim to a space and a place (i.e., encroachment and occupation), their antagonists forbid their existence. They erase them even from the margins, and so dispossess them of life. Nowhere has this discourse been more pronounced in the fraught decades-long history of urbanizing and cleaning up Manila. This banishment is its culmination, as it no longer suffices for the poor to be swept and set aside: the rejection of their right to shelter is in fact a clamor for their disappearance.

There are other aspects to this hostility against the occupation. The leftist roots of Kadamay and the public disdain for militant activism likewise constitute this enmity.

But even if it were led by a non-leftist group, the revanchism that undergirds the brutal responses to the occupation still would have surfaced. The contempt for the urban poor, accompanied by the stigma of squatters as simultaneously the site and the source of urban violence coalesce with the accumulated sense of working- and middle-class disenfranchisement, rooted in the state's historical neglect of the provision of housing, among other dignities of life. Further, this loathing also draws upon inherited antagonisms against the urban underclass — against the squatter who had long been cast as a nuisance to the urbanization of Metro Manila and its surrounding cities.

The backlash against #OccupyPabahay signifies an important rupture in Philippine urban and housing politics. Notably, it reorients understandings of the city and its problems in terms of dispossession and banishment — phenomena which, despite being deeply embedded in processes of urban development and problems of mobility, are conspicuously absent in journalism, punditry, public scholarship, and conversations about Manila. The immense publicity the occupation generated presents a counterpoint to the stories in the metro sections of major Philippine broadsheets, where writing the city has long been confined to traffic, mobility, and crime — and in the last two years, to the spate of killings under Duterte's murderous anti-drug campaign. Notwithstanding the importance of these beats, particularly the moral urgency of the latter, the vital stories of building, reconfiguring, and transforming Manila have long been absent. They are found instead in the property sections, where the life of our city is filed under real estate and property development, which is reported like advertisements and chronicled as successes.

In important ways, this banality does offer insights into the state of housing not only in Manila but in the Philippines in general. Housing is thriving as investment. It is abundant as elite and middle-class residence, but deeply unaffordable to the working class, and virtually absent for the homeless and the urban poor. But of course, this sort of reportage and the accompanying shallow journalistic engagements with urban transformations substantially miss the point. #OccupyPabahay surfaces the invisibility of the casualties of urban development, raising questions and igniting debates about housing beyond its allies. This is not to say that the media has substantially or substantively engaged the story behind the struggle; however, the reactions that emerge from the coverage help push the agenda of social housing as urban justice further into the center, alongside the argument of housing inequality as urban inequality.

A year and a half into the occupation, the fate of the homeless remains just as precarious: not only have housing units not been awarded, but eviction orders have also been served. Though intended recipients of occupied housing projects for state security forces were enjoined by the President to give up their units in exchange for more dignified ones, it is uncertain whether and when these empty, unfinished, and substandard homes will be formally transferred to their occupants. Until then, the new residents of these ghost towns and suburban slums will have to guard their homes, defend their barricades, and, as they have always done, bring life to spaces where there was none.