

**Review / Reseña**

Gyger, Helen. *Improvised Cities: Architecture, Urbanization, and Innovation in Peru*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. 456 pp.

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Helen Gyger's *Improvised Cities: Architecture, Urbanization, and Innovation in Peru* is a comprehensive study of affordable housing construction in the mid-twentieth century. Tracing historical shifts in theories and practices related to architecture, design, and urban planning along with detailed analyses of community formation and public housing projects, the author describes how Peruvian governments encouraged and supported residents to build inexpensive and hygienic houses and settlements. The book also offers a model of how to study housing programs from an interdisciplinary perspective. Many of the authorities and experts mentioned by Gyger used aided self-help housing not only to respond to the urban crisis but also to transform poor residents into modern citizens.

The book includes an introduction and eight chapters organized chronologically from 1954 until 1986. Overall, they demonstrate that no matter the political spectrum defended by the authority in power, housing was always a key element in their agendas—making Peru a fertile soil for innovation in cheap housing. In the introduction, the author discusses the meanings and history of informal settlements and the connections between this type of urbanization and the elites' views of modernization and industrialization. Citing scholars such as the urban planner Francis Violich, the anthropologist James Holston, the sociologist Harley Browning, and the Peruvian anthropologist José Matos Mar, Gyger debates urban

citizenship and the different expressions used for informal settlements according to political ideologies. Discussing anthropological studies about slums, favelas, and *barriadas*, the author delves into the historical persistence of the discourse of marginality to interpret not only groups of people but also geographical places.

In the first chapter, Gyger draws the big picture of the emergence of public housing projects in the 1940s and 1950s while discussing the three main Peruvian politicians responsible for different interpretations of informal settlements and affordable housing: Fernando Belaúnde, Pedro Beltrán, and Adolfo Córdova. In chapter two, she examines one of the most significant cases of *barriadas*, Ciudad de Dios—a land occupation established in 1954 in which the Peruvian government decided to allow the occupiers to live and build their homes there. According to Gyger, Ciudad de Dios represented a turning point in the conflicting relationship between authorities and *barriadas* residents (or *pobladores*). Authorities never enforced any of the promised eviction threats. Instead, municipal agents closed a symbolic sale of the plot to the *pobladores* and agreed to build affordable and hygienic housing with access to electricity, water, and sewage. As a result, architects started considering self-help housing one of the main modes of mass construction in Peru.

In the third chapter, Gyger goes back to the emergence of urban planning as a profession and the creation of specialized state agencies specifically focused on improving *barriadas* with innovative architectural knowledge based on John F. C. Turner's ideas of fostering self-organized groups of builders. The late 1950s and early 1960s were also marked by the growing influence in Latin America of international and transnational networks of urban experts, such as the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) and the Inter-American Housing and Planning Center (CINVA, which was supported by the Alliance for Progress and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)). At the same time, urbanists and housing experts started to participate in the Peruvian government through the creation of agencies such as the Comisión para la Reforma Agraria y la Vivienda (CRAV), Instituto de la Vivienda (INVI, 1961), Junta Nacional de Vivienda (JNV, 1963), and the Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda (PREVI, 1966). These agencies offered *barriadas*' residents technical assistance and promoted aided self-help housing communities. However, technical assistance offices could not control the rise of insurgent settlements, and political authorities proposed unprecedented new legislation to incorporate *barriadas* designs and legalize existing squatter settlements.

In the 1960s, national efforts to regulate informal *barriadas* coincided with international development agencies' support for self-help housing. Chapter 5 dissects the national environment in which transnational and international endeavors embedded these projects in their larger goals. Many of these cooperation endeavors also had their roots in the transnational housing center of CINVA, funded by the USAID and the Alliance for Progress. Founded in 1951 in Bogotá, Colombia, CINVA influenced housing programs throughout Latin American cities in places such as Rio de Janeiro, Natal, and Recife in Brazil; Santiago, Chile; San Juan, Costa Rica; and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Alliance for Progress initially fostered cooperation programs in Peru offering technical expertise and funded aided self-help housing projects. Despite political, social, and economic challenges, according to the author, the Alliance for Progress in Peru “c[ould] claim some success in contributing to the construction of a total of 4,106 housing units in nine projects located in seven cities across Peru” (237). The Alliance experiment served to highlight a couple of conclusions: housing experts such as John F. C. Turner and members of *Junta Nacional de Vivienda* reassessed the value of technical assistance for self-help housing, and self-builders were already quite skeptical of aided self-help housing benefits.

Throughout the book, Gyger portrays the complicated scenario of the affordable housing construction industry. The history of public housing is not linear, but rather marked by times of acceleration and stoppages. The literature demonstrates that when it comes to describing and discussing the construction process of planned communities, the writer cannot help but often inform the reader that “it is not clear what happened to the houses afterward”—as the author concludes when examining the construction of semi-detached houses by Peru's president and architect Fernando Belaúnde (41). In the last three chapters, the author demonstrates how in the 1970s the USAID abandoned its support for the aided self-help approach, and Peru turned towards new projects adopting exclusively top-to-bottom construction lines—a similar story to the one reproduced all over Latin America, but which was particularly intense in Peru. It is a story that portrays an economic shift from establishing public policies focused on national development to a long process of neoliberal privatizations that represented the impoverishment and deindustrialization of Latin America.

Beyond portraying the intellectual discussions of the period about urban matters as public housing, *barriadas*, and planning, *Improvised Cities* is a book that uses different writing styles to tell a history of the built environment and show how the

Peruvian housing experience fostered by authorities and experts transcended the national context. In this context, it is important to note that Gyger does not address the voices of *barriada* residents and participants in self-help housing programs, but she describes, analyzes, contextualizes, and questions the ideas and practices of those in power—successfully demonstrating that with or without social movements protesting and demanding, authorities and experts desired to provide affordable housing for their own specific purposes.

In sum, *Improvised Cities* illustrates Peru's housing history with gorgeous photographs, maps, and blueprints of several different neighborhoods, with most of the primary sources coming directly from John F. C. Turner's personal archive. She helps the reader understand the changing meanings of urban citizenship, the discourse of marginality, and informal settlements, as well as the history of architecture, urban planning, public policies, and rural and urban migrations in Peru. In doing so, Helen Gyger provides us with an extensive analytical work that tells the history of modern Peru through housing provision and the interactions between global and national urban practices and ideas. The book, then, is a fantastic addition to a fascinating line of urban studies on public housing in Latin America, such as Edward Murphy's *For a Proper Home: Housing Rights in the Margins of Urban Chile* (U of Pittsburgh P, 2015); Alejandro Velasco's *Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (UC Press, 2015); Leandro Benmergui's research on transnational housing programs in Argentina and Brazil; and Mark Healey's work on the Inter-American Housing and Planning Center (CINVA).