

Book Review

– *Urban dwellings, Haitian citizenships: Housing, memory and daily life in Haiti*, by Vicent Joos, Rutgers University Press, 2022

Urban Dwellings, Haitian Citizenships is a critical ethnographic account of the planning disaster that struck Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. It offers compelling new insights into the complex dynamics that underpin the failures of the international post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation of Port-au-Prince. It illuminates the myriad of ways in which reconstruction policies and projects have exacerbated inequalities and social fragmentation in the country. Transcending both sensationalist views and dichotomous descriptions of post-disaster landscapes, the book displays the extremely intertwined connections of urban and rural lifeworld in Haiti: from exclusionary processes of urbanization and industrialization that cause massive destruction of productive rural landscapes to the gradual consolidation and absorption of peasantry lifestyles and practices into the urban fabrics of Port-au-Prince. Richly narrated ethnographies accompanied by well-documented urban projects convey Joos' principal argument: that culturally anchored practices related to reciprocal networks, income-generation (ti *komés*), social organization, and vernacular dwelling typologies (structures that withstood the earthquake on most occasions), are socially, economically and ecologically sustainable forms of urbanism that may offer viable alternatives to conventional post-disaster rehabilitation trajectories and internationally sponsored urban planning that turn a blind eye to 'what already is'.

The book consists of six main chapters that take the reader on a journey across multiple post-disaster landscapes in the country. These show the larger interconnections of people and places in Haiti, highlighting various scales to which citizenships relate, from global developmental policy and processes of dispossession to inhabitation and people's everyday practices. The first chapter sets out a historical narrative of the industrial outpost of Caracol. Astoundingly, this place – located along the Northern coastline comprising Haiti's most fertile, productive and sacred soils – was demarcated as a free-trade zone in the post-earthquake reconstruction plan. Large-scale textile factories producing for United States' fast fashion industries envisioned to boost the Haitian local economy and generate revenue for reconstruction, yet destroyed peasantry ways of

life of the place and made Haitian increasingly dependent on global food markets, destabilizing already vulnerable populations nation-wide. The narrative of Caracol provides us with two key lessons. Firstly, the foundations of Haiti's 'natural disaster' are historically conditioned and started way before the earthquake struck the country on the afternoon of January 12, 2010. Political violence and development-induced displacements have terrorized Caracol's residents ever since colonial times – from exploitative gold mining practices in the area under Spanish and later French rule, to the monopolization of rubber and sisal plantations by the US military, to the most recent post-disaster reconstruction ventures. Secondly, Haiti 'slow-onset disasters' – fuelled by international developmental pro-business politics – similarly kept reproducing inequalities in the years following the 2010 earthquake.

Chapter 2 focuses on the state-led peripheral housing program of Village Lumane Casimir, connected to the construction of an industrial complex - which to this day is still inexistent. International developmental visions that forge the creation of free trade zones impose behavioural restrictions, normative dwelling typologies and neocolonial forms of labour on populations whose customs and beliefs are rooted in the soils, trees and spirits of the territory, impeding families to generating a household income through *ti komés*. Village Lumane Casimir provides yet another example of the disastrous consequences on the livelihoods of earthquake victims who moved into the housing complex deprived of basic infrastructure after the quake but already started abandoning their properties.

Contrasting these exclusionary industrialized landscapes, in the succeeding chapters, Joos further develops the idea of citizenship as a lived experience intrinsically linked to people's living places, life trajectories and everyday practices, now venturing into the urban territory of Port-au-Prince. A comparison of the popular neighbourhoods of Martissant and Bolosse is set out in chapter three, including one of the few examples — although limited in scale – of a successful negotiation between the Haitian state, local NGOs and residents for environmental rehabilitation. Likewise, the chapter clearly shows (although not explicitly articulated by the author) how legal citizenship (that in downtown Port-au-Prince largely consists of informal rental and right-to-use arrangements based on kin relations and social bonds with former employers) does remain an important component since the lack of it similarly results in contestation over infrastructural issues and basic service provision.

Chapters four, five and six focus on Haitian vernacular dwelling typologies subject to constant user-initiated transformations and their absorption into the urban fabric and the daily lives of urban citizens. Until the late 1990s, Haiti made a legal distinction between urban and rural citizens (*moun adeyo*, literally meaning outsider). In this section of the book, Joos provides compelling examples that expose how through vernacular architectures, and the practices that people develop around the dwellings, such dualities and contested categorizations are rewritten by Port-au-Prince's citizens who develop adaptive strategies extremely intertwined with both their rural and urban life trajectories. The chapter similarly

displays the resilience of this social agency: physical environments may be bulldozed, while social networks prove more difficult to erase.

Given the urgent need for a place-based perspective on citizenship beyond abstract notions of legal frameworks, the book should be praised as a valuable contribution. The study results from intensive field research and close relationships that the author built and maintained with Haitian families and institutions over multiple years. Joos, a trained urban anthropologist, convincingly develops a novel social-spatial approach focusing on people's interactions with buildings, infrastructures and urban projects, examining the extent to which architectural forms allow people to proactively construct a sense of belonging to a place. In this view, urban space is an 'active agent' and not a mere background on which everyday life and social practices unfold, since – as Joos argues – 'urban space itself intervenes directly in peoples lives' (Joos, 2022: 15). That makes this contribution faithful to the multidimensionality of the issue and quite unique in its field, where urban space itself is often still marginalized in the debate. The monograph dives deep into the history and meaning of belonging, critically reflecting on what it entails to belong to places that historically have been ruptured by political violence, economic instability, disaster and (re)development forcing people to displace and abandon their dwellings and livelihoods often more than once in their lifetimes.

It remains to be seen whether and how *compagnonnage* and systems of living together 'away from the state', which are limited in tackling higher-level demands, could prevent Haitian urban dwellers from being trapped in a vulnerable position that currently excludes them from fully enjoying basic urban services and infrastructures. Though the author acknowledges the potential role local governments and local NGOs could play (see chapter 3), little is said about possible measures these institutions could take to consolidate culturally anchored dwelling and place-making practices, provide urban services despite ambiguities in the titling of dwellings, and prevent the displacement of the population. Despite that, the book offers rich theoretical insights into the multi-dimensional issues of housing and citizenship. It will be of most use to those addressing housing and urban development issues in the fields of urban history, urban anthropology, geography and urban planning and design. Hopefully, it will deter decision-makers and international organizations from inducing displacements through global developmental policies and turn their eyes to the resourcefulness of culturally anchored practices in Haiti, and elsewhere.

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