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# 'When the house burns down': displacement, precariousness and inhabitation

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**ABSTRACT**

Displacement and precarity are two conditions that define our broken world. Acknowledging that any rhetoric of fixity, sustainability, and progress is insufficient and that the only choice is to learn to live with the fragments, the paper reflects on displacement beyond its common form of non-livability and the absence of a future. Offering some diffractions across the spatial narratives of three different territories where we worked – Iquitos in Peru, Bar Elias-Tell Serhoun in Lebanon, and Hlaingtharyar in Yangon – and mobilising the critical work of Berlant, Tsing and Agamben, this paper reframes displacement as the unfinished possibility of inhabiting, a tenacious struggle to resist the violent subtraction of future, space and possibilities, therefore contributing to the wider reflection on the challenge of inhabiting the uninhabitable urban conditions of the present.

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## Introduction

"There is no sense in anything I do if the house burns down. And yet it is exactly while the house is burning that one must carry on as always, must do everything with care and precision, perhaps even more diligently-even if no one notices" (Agamben 2022, 1) Giorgio Agamben recently wrote in a short pamphlet titled *When the House Burns Down* (Agamben 2022). As an image, certainly not solely metaphorical, it is a reminder of global structural violence, mass drownings, dispossessions, ecological erasure, and carceral abandonments that signify our present time. We know that environmental, social, economic, and health crises are not exceptions, stumbling blocks, or simply historical events, but a "defuturing machine" – with Tony Fry (2020) words – that de-forms environmental-climatic, geo- and bio-political, economic and technological conditions.

"Which house is burning?" Agamben continues, "is it the country where you live, or Europe, or the whole world? Perhaps houses and cities have already burned down – who knows how long ago? – in a single immense blaze that we pretended not to see. (. . .). And

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yet we cover them so carefully with white plaster and false words for them to seem intact. We live in houses, in cities burned to the ground (. . .) people pretend to live there and go out into the streets masked amid the ruins as if these were the familiar neighbourhoods of times past" (Agamben 2022, 3). Keeping the metaphor of the burning house, a little later in the text Agamben suggests that "if it is only in the house in flames that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible, then you can now see the stakes of the story of the West" (Agamben 2022:6). Agamben's incipit is not a simple metaphor to make easily visible the planetary conditions of the ecological collapse such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, extractions, and depletions of territories. Rather, for us, it serves as temporal and thematic crossroads, a vector that evokes a central element around which such reality can be understood. The burning house appears as an opportunity, not only a revelation of a dramatic moment, but a way to access the heart of its problematic nature: inhabiting the world, and the very possibility of "governing bare life is the madness of our time" (Agamben 2022:6). Engaging with earlier work on the notion of inhabitation (Boano and Astolfo 2020; Boano and Bianchetti 2022), and specifically housing and displacement (Astolfo 2021; Astolfo and Boano 2020; Desmaison 2019; Desmaison, Boano, and Espinoza 2021), this article reflects on displacement as a process, a condition, and a spatial practice framing it as an unfinished possibility of inhabiting in conditions of temporal and spatial precariousness, which is inextricably intertwined with death, extinction, and the protection of life.

What does it happen when the house is at constant threat or, in the worst case, lost? Does displacement represent the opposite of survival and signify the impossibility of sustaining a life? Embracing precariousness as a conceptual register and seeing home as a condition of life, the paper suggests defining displacement beyond of the conventional idea of non-livability and the absence of a future.

Mobilising the critical work of Berlant, Tsing and Agamben, the paper reframes displacement as the unfinished possibility of inhabiting, a tenacious struggle to resist the violent subtraction of future, space, and possibilities, contributing to the reflection and the challenge of inhabiting the uninhabitable urban conditions of the present.

It does so by discussing spatial narratives of three different and distant places where authors have either physically or intellectually intersected several times. In Iquitos, Peru, we engage with how people live with extractive logics that produce ruined landscapes and degradation (Desmaison 2019). Our reflections are grounded in nearly a decade of engaged and situated research, action planning and participatory design conducted in the Peruvian Amazon as a part of doctoral and funded research, with indigenous communities and scholars. In Bar Elias-Tell Serhoun, Lebanon, we explore those gestures that enable survival as withdrawal from death (Boano 2021b), getting inspired by and expanding on long term conversations with Palestinian displaced groups, around themes of exception, protection of life and resistance (Dabaj, Boano, Abdallah, 2022). In Yangon, Myanmar, we get closer to the housing struggles of women collectives amidst endurance and exhaustion (Astolfo 2023; Astolfo and Boano 2020) drawing thoughts from several years of research-based teaching and knowledge co-production with dwellers groups, activists, scholars, higher education institutes, and international housing networks.

Altogether, Iquitos, Bar Elias-Tell Serhoun and Yangon point at how inhabiting the uninhabitable is possible, making displacement to co-exist side by side with shared precariousness. For us, they are not case studies. They are not examined in depth, nor

written in a complete and exhaustive form. Rather, they are fragments of research – funded, teaching based, or emerging from long lasting partnerships – that either because of their singularity, or because of the special relation we have with them, continue to teach us something, and we constantly go back to them as sites of learning. Methodologically, we have chosen to revisit research material collected before the pandemic through informal conversations, mobile ethnographies and observations.

Even if fragmented and partial, we have chosen to narrate these spatial narratives to foreground conditions and practices where makeshift forms of life and creative infrastructures confront the cumulative dynamics of exclusion, displacement, and deep inequality as irreducible elements of all three sites. We are well aware of the impossibility to shed light to the complexity of each of them in the short space of an article. However, what we aim to disclose is that Iquitos, Bar Elias-Tell Serhoun and Yangon are places where displacement is not an exception, but it is constitutive of their development and inseparable from resource extraction, conflict, and settler dispossession. Yet, in all these territories, some precarious "lifelines" (Boano and Bianchetti 2022) can still get imagined, arranged, and organised.

When the COVID-19 outbreak hit, each author was engaged in their own research. Suddenly, places and communities, partners, and colleagues, became inaccessible, and practice engagement and physical encounters were made overly complicated. Employing Thieme's (2021) approach to using "field sketches and story fragments" (p.1092) to get closer to the field in the impossibility of being physically there, we reinterpreted Iquitos, Bar Elias and Yangon as "livable collaborations" in displacement, through and from three neighbourhoods located in different and distant geographies. Through Zoom calls and email exchanges, we shared archives, discussed overlaps and discovered precariousness as a central register from which a separate "vignette" (Thieme 2021) emerged, that weaves together displacement, un-homing and coloniality. The purpose of the authors was to depict the creative, un-resting and fragile processes through which individuals and communities are able to inhabit, stay and live (Thieme 2021) in an uninhabitable place, and how different spatial practices are mobilised to make these spaces more liveable, if at all.

Across these three territories, we discovered that the everyday un-heroic spatial practices put forward by their inhabitants gesture a form of critical presence, which is restorative in nature (Millington 2019). Starting from Jackson's "broken world thinking" (Jackson 2014, 221), that takes decay in lieu of growth as a departing point to recognise the fragility of environments (Jackson 2014, 221) and framing such spaces through Simone's lens of "arrangements" and "surrounds" (Simone 2022, 2023), we argue that these practices have the potential to preserve value and life in contexts of displacement, loss and trauma. Iquitos, Bar Elias, and Yangon disclose displacement as a form of inhabitation and therefore of city making where spaces, homes and life are "makeshift" (Jordan and Minca 2023; Simone 2019), "transitional" (Bakonyi and Chonka 2023), and in a state of permanent temporariness (Hilal and Petti 2019) combining "a plethora of registers, apertures, potentialities and an ontology of indeterminacy, that things only exist provisionally, and at the expense of elision, subjugation, and omission . . . .a locus of continuous rebellion" (Simone 2023, 2–3).Rather than following the structure of an academic essay, this paper briefly introduces the notion of precarity as it emerges from key literature, and lets the three vignettes take the central stage presenting the different makeshift assemblages of social, spatial and material practices within the precariousness

of displacements. Then, it offers some comparative reflections around the different spatial practices as witnessed in each territory, accounting for the materiality and politics of displacement as inhabitation assembling a variety of stories, "putting things together" (Simone 2023, 4) rather than by rehearsing a totalizing, definitive argument.

## Precariousness: inhabiting the uninhabitable

It is clear by now that we live with a threat of impending collapse – whether climatic, ecological, social, or cultural – and maybe stating it might seem almost tautological. As many have argued, at the core of such ruination lies global displacement (Carstens and Bozalek 2021), a phenomenon deeply entangled with capitalism, colonialism, extraction, racialization, and financialisation. According to the UN Refugee Agency, by 2050 an estimated 250 million people worldwide will be displaced because of climate change alone (Gaynor 2020), let aside those displaced because of conflict, famine, and disasters. Amidst this, human – and animal lives – are constantly made surplus to capital (Cooper 2008). The necrotic machine of climate extractive capitalism produces racialised, displaceable and disposable bodies (Bauman 2004; Mbembe 2003; Shaw and Waterstone 2021). The resulting bioavailability triggers a self-destruction process, whereas human beings are a threat to life, a threat to themselves (McBrien 2016; Moore 2015) and to all other beings.

Perhaps, Agamben's metaphor of the burning house is a story of perpetual planetary conflict, akin to the narrative that Guinard, Latour and Lin used in the title the 2020 Taipei Biennial: "You and I don't live on the same planet." The planetarium that the curators invented includes several other planets, such as "planet globalization," which is constructed around the promise of modernity and unlimited growth, and the resulting violence and inequality; "planet security," where people who were betrayed by the myth and the violence of globalization, ask for a piece of land – a fenced or a bordered haven to live in, protected from others; and "planet escape" where a limited number of privileged people invest in hyper-techno fix security solutions or leave the earth. For all those who are excluded from these three planets, the only option is to live what the curators call the "terrestrial planet." This parallels Simone's (2016) concept of the "uninhabitable," not because its conditions are limited for residents to find shelter and refuge but, rather, because habitation is not only probable or possible but is just a matter of life. A life that by nature is on the verge of dissipation.

More than ever, "not only the finitude of a life (that death is certain) but also its precariousness" (Butler 2015) is central. As other authors have noted, especially examining the urban margins (Lancione 2016), the concept of precarity has gained significant attention as it represents the inherent vulnerability and insecurity experienced and lived by individuals and communities. Following Rachael Squire's (2023) suggestion to look for a "geography that is more attentive to the complexities of making sense of place in extreme and troubling times" (p. 1) and expanding the affective dimensions of precarity, we think it is important to touch upon – even if very briefly – the work of Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, and Anna Tsing who have provided us valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of precarity we found in our research territories.

Judith Butler offers a distinct understanding of precarity. In a blog concerned with *Precariousness and Grievability* she argues that precariousness is a universalising condition that implies "the fact that one's life is in the hands of the other (. . .) a dependence on

people we know, or barely know, or know not at all" (Butler 2015). Elsewhere, she states that precarity "exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency" (Butler 2012, 148). For Butler precariousness can be understood as a condition characterised by uncertainty and insecurity, amongst a backdrop of "injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2004: II). Butler's work emphasises that precariousness is not solely an economic phenomenon but extends to the very fabric of social and political life. She posits that precarity is produced by normative structures that regulate and govern our lives, perpetuating inequality and rendering individuals susceptible to violence and social instability. Because we are vulnerable, we are in need of others, of collective care and, therefore, vulnerability is also presented as a condition to endure life, a way of survival.

Just as Butler's notion of precarity extends beyond the material dimensions of precariousness and delves into the inherent instability of social relations and identities, the same holds true for Laurent Berlant who sees precarity as an affective dimension, a "condition of being and belonging" (Berlant 2011, 194). Berlant argues that precarity is not solely a condition, but an embodied experience which is "structural in many senses" and that "permeates the affective environment too" (p.192). Precarity, for Berlant, is characterised by a constant state of uncertainty and anxiety making "certain situations exemplary laboratories for sensing contemporary life in new idioms of affective realism" (p.54). What interests us is the nature of spaces and forms of life that emerge from assembling different practices, institutions and actors in marginal territories.

Another significant concept in Berlant's body of work, that complements the concept of precarity and helps to understand the uninhabitable, is that of "crisis ordinariness." For Berlant, crisis is not "exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (p.10). She argues that there is no need for heroic actions, refusal or extraordinary gestures, rather to live within "the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the 'technologies of patience' that enable . . . to suspend questions about the cruelty of the now" (p.28). Berlant's concept is important as she points towards an experience that is "simultaneously at an extreme and in a zone of ordinariness, where life building and the 'attrition of human life' are indistinguishable, and where it is hard to distinguish modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation from deliberate and deliberative activity, as they are all involved in the reproduction of predictable life" (p.96).

These concepts also recall Anna Tsing's perspective on precarity. Tsing says precisely that precariousness is a life without the promise of stability (Tsing 2015, 24). To inhabit, for her, is not about "having, disposing, infrastructuring, organising," rather it is a way of being in the world that "consists in weaving relationships, incorporations, knotting, taking distance" (Tsing 2015, 24). One inhabits a continuous "ruin of plans, of ideologies, of possibilities, in a perpetual dysfunctionality" (Tsing 2015, 24). A living and a life therefore not qualified by norms and conventions, but delineated by forces of friction that she calls "livable collaborations."

Understanding precarity enables us to critically engage with social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. By acknowledging the pervasive reality of precarity, we can foster empathy and solidarity, advocating for social justice and transformative change. Living in the burning house, in the burning world and in the impossibility of breathing and redemption, implies not only analysing displacement

as a process of subtraction, oppression, and extraction of life, but also and simultaneously making visible practices of inhabiting that are always inextricably intertwined with the promise of death, destruction, disappearance and displacement. This is the continuous creative process through which inhabitants struggle to resist the violent subtractions of future, space and possibilities, through creating Tsing's "livable collaborations." Not "bare lives" in the words of Agamben, but lives without categories – of species, of citizenship, of nations – just inhabiting lives, because being in the world builds the world.

Iquitos, Bar Elias, and Yangon lie within Latour's terrestrial planet and Simone's uninhabitable territories – realms where inhabitation is not a matter of possibility, but a spontaneous occurrence. Here, relations are imbued in precarity as a matter of survival and more than survival. In all these territories, reflecting on local spatial practices and embodied experiences, we have found Butler's ambivalence of precarity, as a marker of inequality and solidarity, and as a presupposition of the social. All these territories also resonates with Berlant's attrition of human life, where people, communities and bodies are somehow "stuck" in "the incoherence [of] a present scarred by precarity and caught in intractable impasses," where crisis is normalised, and people are simultaneously aware and exhausted (Agamben 2022, 6). In all these territories, we have found Tsing's livable collaborations too, not as a romantic tool to retrieve the alleged integrity and wholeness of the past, but as an element to embrace the ruinous, broken present as the only possibility to imagine forms of inhabitation.

## The displacement of amphibian settlements in the Peruvian Amazon: Belén in Iquitos, Peru

Belén is a flooding prone settlement situated along the shores of the Itaya river in Iquitos, the largest city in the Peruvian Amazon. Amphibious settlements are located on flooding areas of rivers and lakes, with wooden houses that either float or are built on stilts. While not unique to Amazonian cities, these settlements also appear on leftover spaces or areas deemed unstable in Recife, Bangkok, Lagos, and other cities in the tropical belt. Amphibious settlements are, to an extent, the epitome of uninhabitability. They are constantly rendered invisible, deprived of legitimacy, and stigmatised. They are evicted, relocated, burned, or labelled as high-risk areas. A risk to whom? To the residents that rebuild and repair their houses or to governments unable to provide basic services and infrastructures in flooding areas?

Cities like Iquitos, Manaus, and Belem appeared at the turn of the 20th century as port-cities to transport rubber extracted from the rainforest through the Amazon River and across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe and North America. The centre of Iquitos is characterised by buildings that emulate Portuguese and European cities. Its wealth came from the exploitation of indigenous communities that were torn apart and relocated to *reducciones* – camps where they were forced to meet quotas in the extraction of rubber. Those that escaped settled on the shores of the Itaya river and near the city to gain access to services. They built their dwellings with local materials – wood and palm trees – and inhabited the river as a means of transport and as a mode of living. Iquitos, and other Amazonian cities, emerged as dual settlements in which an elite depended upon the exploitation of the forest and its people (Varón and Maza 2015). To this day, Belén and

Iquitos are inextricably linked to each other as the city's main market is in the flooding neighbourhood, with stalls that expand onto the streets and onto the river.

During the latter half of the 20th century, Iquitos continued to expand as other extraction cycles came and went (oil and mining), fuelling the arrival of migrants from the rainforest and beyond. As the Amazon River shifted away from the city's port and its *malecón* (broadway), amphibian settlements proliferated by occupying the area between the city and the river. With this, density and pollution increased, exacerbated by the absence of water and sanitation networks, causing tensions as their presence represented a threat for the idea of order and modernity that the local governments sought to implement (Boano and Astolfo 2019). In 2014, without previous consultation, the national government announced that Belén was henceforth categorised as a "non-mitigable high-risk area" - barring any kind of future public investment and mandating the relocation of 16,000 inhabitants. This announcement was made after studies by the Peruvian marine determined that the Amazon river will eventually (in 20 or 40 years) take over the area where Belén is currently located. No dwelling nor infrastructure can withstand the volume and speed of the river. This decision opened the gates for local governments to emulate this designation for other amphibian settlements, halting demands for their legal recognition and for neighbourhood upgrading.

The newly established settlement, Nuevo Belén, is located 13.5 km from the centre of Iquitos and, due to the poor conditions of the road, it takes over an hour by bus to travel between them. This shift has not only meant extended travel time and increased costs of travelling, as Belenians usually walked around the city or moved using boats in the floating area, but also an increase in gender inequality as women stay in the new site, unable to work or sell products in the market. Their inability to work has increased their dependence on men to generate income (Chávez 2021). The housing and spaces provided in Nuevo Belén exhibit significant disparities when compared to houses in the old



**Figure 1.** Houses in Nuevo Belén. Credits: author, 2017.

settlement in terms of area, materials, and typologies. Houses are built of concrete and glass windows, with an area of 40 m2 (Figure 1) unable to host large families and are not built on stilts. Beyond being an adaptation to flooding, stilts provide better ventilation, protect the interior from wild animals and mud and create permeable streets during the dry season.

In this difficult context, Belenians immediately began transforming (or repairing) the houses provided by the government to meet their needs, expanding and modifying them to create a sense of place and engaging in emplacement – the creation of place – as a political practice to challenge top-down impositions of displacement. The diversity of transformation to the houses speaks of the heterogeneity among the new settlers. Some families transformed the government housing into *bodegas* or other forms of commerce, preferring to sleep in a wooden house built at the back, while others transformed the front terrace of the house for it to become a social space (Figure 2). Emplacement (Hammond 2004) can consequently lead to inhabitation, understood as political relational acts in which alternative ways of governing, of co-existence, and of managing social and material resources emerge. Inhabitation becomes a bottom-up and autonomous reaction to the depredations of agents of capital and the state whose dominance produced abstract spaces, inhabitable spaces like Nuevo Belén.

The continuous imposition of "universal" urban models and planning regulations threatens the invisible interdependency between settlements and the forest. While the current living conditions in flooding settlements present hazards, the relocation of these settlements away from the river and away from urban services obliterates indigenous modes of living and inhabiting, limiting the possibilities of learning from them towards



Figure 2. Transformation to houses in Nuevo Belén done by residents. Credits: author, 2022.

the configuration of urban areas that better respond to this unique territory currently being transformed and occupied in unsustainable ways. The recognition of already-existing practices of emplacement – the forging of social and environmental relationships – and the promotion of practices of co-production between inhabitants and the state – collective practices of emplacement – can transform donor-driven dwelling provision to allow homemaking in new settings of climate mobilities (Desmaison, Boano, and Espinoza 2021).

## Bar Elias. A small town immersed in agricultural fields along the Beirut-Damascus highway

Mostafa, a Palestinian man living in the Berbayta neighbourhood of Bar Elias since 1974. With the growing of his family the house expanded to become a three-storey building. He and his family live on the first floor, his sister on the ground floor and his brother and his family on the second floor. Mostafa and his brother built an extended part of the second floor in 2017 to create two apartments for their children. "We didn't do the apartment for the Syrians, they are only here for one year. We did the apartment for our son [. . .]. An NGO gave me money for a year to complete these apartments to house four Syrian families, an amount of 6,000,000 LBP, to complete the two apartments: doors, plastering, tiling, link electricity, water, everything." In Mostafa's apartments more than eight people share the kitchen and bathroom; four Syrian households were renting through a NGO shelter program.

In the Makkawi neighbourhood, Fahim transformed his previous horse stable into housing units: "I added a small bathroom, a kitchen, I painted it, installed tiles, and fixed the ceiling, I even decorated it." Fahim rents these units to three Syrian households for 150,000 LBP per month. These households pay for their electricity and water bills separately. Each housing unit is no more than 24 sqm and includes a living room/bedroom space, a small kitchen and bathroom. These units accommodated families of five since 2018. "Even though we thought in the beginning it would be for six months, one or two years that the Syrians will be here, we didn't expect this to last until today" said Saleem, "the demand increased for both commercial as well as for dwellings. A shop on the Beirut-Damascus highway was rented before for 100 USD [. . .] now the rent is up to 400 USD."

Saleem's house is in Al-Nahreya neighbourhood. He is a Lebanese man, in his 70s. Saleem owns two plots of lands on which there is a two-storey house with a garden where he lives with his and his son's family. It also has another small building with some commercial activity occupying the ground floor while upstairs it is still unfinished, but he now rents it to five families worth 200,000 LBP (circa 150$) per month. Saleem also has a carpenter's shop for his son, an old cow farm converted into a series of renting out units, and an agricultural field (growing plums) and another land rented off to a Informal Tented Settlement- ITS (60 tents, each tent worth 100,000 LBP per month, circa 80$). "The settlement is in front of our house, in front of our eyes, we are in control" he said. "Agriculture died, the government does not remunerate the losses of farmers, it doesn't encourage the farmers anymore, it doesn't care about the agriculture sector – so the opportunity came to make money, and we took it" he continued.

Mostafa, says: "Tell Serhoun was empty until ten years ago, when people started to buy land here." His land has Informal Tented Settlement (ITS)now, 39 tents. "I didn't choose to make an ITS, no *shawish* [broker] approached me either. It happened naturally, and the number of tents grew without my knowledge as I rarely go there" he told us while walking. In the wake of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, displaced Syrians sought refuge in Tell Serhoun. This led ITSs beginning to form incrementally (see Figure 3), with the protracted nature of the refugee crisis, from two Informal Tented Settlements (ITS) in 2012 with no more than 20 tents, to six ITSs with around 450 tents in early 2020. In Bar Elias, both the displaced people and their hosts have put in motion a series of micro-practices of doing, undoing, renting, partitioning, subdividing, roofing and occupying space that allow them to negotiate their presence in the city but, at the same time, producing housing and producing the city itself. This complex spatial entanglements between different forms of spatial arrangements, incremental aesthetics and the rent transactions depict an exhausted territory, predated by the absence of the public, brutalised by the fragility of the common, and vandalised by the preclusion of a thinkable and imaginable future (Dabaj, Boano, Abdallah, 2022). The kind of organic, incremental micro-practices shaping life in Bar Elias-Tell Serhoun have created modes and mechanisms of coping with space and its urban surroundings that allow us to



**Figure 3.** Informal Tented Settlement Bar Elias-Tell Serhoun in an agricultural landscape. Credits: author, 2022.

understand its history and relations as a process of inhabitation. Bar Elias's displaced urbanism is created by multiple actors that constantly make it liveable. The *shawish* is a mediator, a broker, and a constructor; a figure that ensures the functioning of such a place and helps to make it possible and livable. Even in the direst situations, people engage in place making activities that forge relations, they enhance their connectedness, they get attached to a place, they make a home to sustain life. Emplacement, in other words, is not opposite but rather constitutive of displacement. A form of urbanism made of acts that create friction within an existing system of oppression and opportunities.

## Overlapping displacement and recomposition in Hlaingtharyar, Yangon, Myanmar

The mostly self-built township of Hlaingtharyar in Yangon is the result of multiple intersecting logics of expulsion, extraction and incarceration. This township's exponential growth since its creation in 1985 stems from a confluence of factors starting from forced relocation, to land grab and climate induced and rural to urban migration. Following the 1988 uprising, nearly one million people were forcibly relocated from inner parts of Yangon to the area (Forbes 2016; Morley 2013; Nwe 1998; Seekins 2005). The government's purpose was to annihilate political resistance by spreading political opponents. Over the following decades, Hlaingtharyar developed to become the largest and most populated township of Yangon. It now attracts a vast number of rural migrants as well as subjects displaced by conflict and disaster, whose presence complicates the layers and conditions of displacements, displaceability and precariousness (Astolfo 2023).

Hlaingtharyar represents a site where the disposable population – whether political dissidents, ethnic minorities, rural migrants and urban outcasts- have been confined as a long-standing planning practice. It also represents the northern frontier of urban expansion where territorialisation and re-territorialisation interplay (Rhoads and Wittekind 2018; Rhoads 2018, Rhoads 2020a; Astolfo and Boano 2020; Sarma and Sidawa 2020). In this sense, beyond a single moment of crisis, recursive displacement, unhoming and re-homing in Yangon can be seen as a sustained process that has contributed substantially to the physical expansion, composition and re-composition of the city (Ortiz and Rhoads 2022; Simone 2018). Hlaingtharyar is a quintessential example of how people live with normalised crises, amidst awareness and endless exhaustion.

Not dissimilar from what Nail's (2015) has termed "expansion by expulsion," the inhabitants of Hlaingtharyar embody distinct multifaceted and overlapping forms of expulsion spanning colonial and postcolonial times. Displacement in Yangon extends beyond being a mere process, or the resultant outcome of the process – it has become a normative and ordinary condition. People live in a state of displaceability (Yiftachel 2020) whether related to the negation of citizenship status (Rhoads 2020b), or the absence of titling and tenure, or to military restrictions and brutal violations. The aftermath of the coup d'état in 2021, has intensified the levels of evictability of the people in Hlaingtharyar even further (Sakuma, Rhoads, and Ortiz 2021). Residents have been forced to either demolish their houses, or flee the township to avoid military violence. Some have even been evicted by landlords because they were unable to pay rents (Sakuma, Rhoads, and Ortiz 2021). Others, however, have been displaced in place. As a form of incarceration,

martial law strengthened territorial control, imposing checkpoints and curfews and restricting mobility. It has also extended control to the spaces of the home – by reinstating old regulations, such as the household registration, say Sakuma, Rhoads and Ortiz (2021), and transforming residents into temporary occupiers of their own houses.

This raises a fundamental question: is Hlaingtharyar an uninhabitable place where home is an impossibility? In a paper published before the coup, Kyed (2019) portrays the township as a perpetually insecure place, where social cohesion is impossible, and where people most often recur to "individualised forms of self-protection" (Kyed 2019, 79) sticking to themselves. While fragmentation is certainly unavoidable, there are however different forms of collective action (Kyed 2019:84; Astolfo and Boano 2020; Kolovou Kouri and Sakuma 2021; Kolovou Kouri et al. 2023; Astolfo 2023) that show how shared precariousness implies sociability and forms of survival.

In Hlaingtharyar the act of inhabiting the supposedly uninhabitable becomes the right to stay put, to resist the hypermobility and permanent displaceability to which people are forced into (Figure 4). It also becomes the right to transform and repair; the right to change domestic interiors, to expand, extend, trespass and occupy the surroundings. Between plots of empty farmlands, garment factories and unploughed fields, new housing projects continue to be built (Kolovou Kouri and Sakuma 2021; Kolovou Kouri et al. 2023). Collectives of residents' forged relations, enhance connectedness, get attached to places, and make home (Astolfo 2023). These acts don't counterpose but rather are



Figure 4. Hlaingtharyar urban landscape in the making. Credits: author, 2018.

constitutive of a condition of continuous displacement. All these gestures are affirmative of the possibility to settle down "properly" where properly means on one's own terms. Inhabitants have created systems of "provisionality" (Simone 2018) via informalising the formal and formalising the informal, repositioning themselves as equals (Astolfo and Boano 2020). This includes caring for the territory, for the community, for urban life. This implies taking responsibility over a sense of being part of a collective, over a sense of utility, of restoring functions, of surviving. Individuals in Hlaingtharyar do stay with the trouble of displacement but they also engage in fixing their worlds.

## The shared precariousness of life

The three vignettes offer a comparable, albeit partial, representation of how displacement and precarity intertwine to define the spatial present of our broken world. While looking across the territories through a diffracted lens, we came to interrogate what the bare minimum conditions are to sustain a life. At the forefront, is the presence of a home, serving both as a shelter and a socio-material infrastructure, and as a "lifeline" (Boano and Bianchetti 2022). However, if the presence of a home is the basic requirement to survive, what does it happen when the house is at constant threat or, in the worst case, lost? Does displacement represent the opposite of survival and signify the impossibility of sustaining a life? By seeing home as a condition of life, we often see displacement (the lack of a home) as the creation of a condition of non-livability, or a self-destructing process and the absence of a future. Yet, Iquitos, Bar Elias and Yangon challenge this dichotomy and teach us how displacement does not solely signal a negation or subtraction. On the contrary, all three places point at how inhabiting the uninhabitable is possible. In these territories, people learn to live with the fragments, confronting the challenges of displacement (Haraway 2016; Lancione and Simone 2021; Thieme 2021), coexisting amongst adversity (Simone 2016), mending holes (Mattern 2018), and restoring functions (Jackson 2014), in an attempt to preserve human – and more than human – value. They engage in "assembling relations, artefacts and materials … bodies and labour power [with which] literally building and expanding the city" (Bakonyi and Chonka 2023, 173).

As Thieme (2021) argues, "staying with the trouble is a disposition that gives permission for things not to work (necessarily) and not to be fixed (right away), at least not in the way that adheres to familiar and mainstream metrics of expertise" (p.1095). As we have seen in Iquitos, Bar Elias, and Yangon people put in motion a variety of gestures of making and unmaking, resisting and collaborating, giving up and resuming, that allow them to negotiate a sort of presence in the city. In this light, these three uninhabitable territories endure "a continuous creative process through which inhabitants withdraw from death in order to escort it, constituting an industrious community capable of building, maintaining and repairing its living space" (Boano 2021a, 42).

However precarious, unstable and fragmented, living in Iquitos, Bar Elias and Yangon means not only inhabiting, but also transforming an abstract space into a place that generates some form of possibility of welcoming and being welcomed, where the space to be defended "coincide with the life being constructed through the movement itself" (Aarons 2023, 398). Here, displacement is simultaneously the possibility and the "impossibility of becoming home; of hosting futures; of dwelling relations and to inhabit political projects" (Boano 2021a, 43). The displacement encapsulates a duality, simultaneously

reflecting the result of coerced or restricted movement and dispossession and the result of individual and collective spatial practices – which are often made marginal and invisible, or too visible – yet also contribute to processes of urbanisation. Such spatial practices in Iquitos, Bar Elias and Yangon, allow to temporarily or permanently re-inhabit urban spaces, even the most extreme and uninhabitable ones.

Underpinned by the notion of agency, a spatial practice is a process that occurs through using, occupying, altering, and transforming space as a form of resistance. The term "serves to describe both everyday activities and creative practices (. . .) to resist the dominant social order of global corporate capitalism" (Rendell 2018). Rooted in the Lefebvrian spatiology, it encompasses acts that "create friction within existing systems of oppression" (Beeckmans 2022; Sturlaugson 2019). This is to say, spatial practices have an inherently reactionary dimension, as they "describe a broad range of activities that seek to reshape the built environment in counter-hegemonic ways" (Sturlaugson 2019).

The incremental occupation of vacant land by displaced groups in Myanmar present a challenge to the spatial order and logics of capital established by post-colonial regimes (see also Astolfo and Boano 2020). Spatial violations (see also Maqusi 2019) in camps and camp-like conditions in Lebanon, transformation of domestic interiors, and resistance to given building rules, can counter the dominant order. Autoconstruction is per se a site of resistance in Peru, and an affirmative gesture to "challenge wider structural forms of violence, including patriarchy, racism, class exploitation and, of course, deprivation of shelter" (Lancione 2019, 3).

However, not all spatial practices are overt, visible, affirmative or insurgent. Despite this, some of them are capable of retaining the same critical and transformative power. Across the three territories of displacement in Iquitos, Bar Elias and Yangon, the authors encountered several such invisible or less visible yet interconnected practices. They emerged as ordinary political gestures that rendered places- barely – inhabitable – through incremental, small self-built housing, silent occupations, and forms of encroachment. They offered insights into self-reliance, survival, and endurance. Given the precarious conditions of inhabitation in all three sites, the inevitable and necessary makeshift practices of living in precarity become more as repairing, building and caring are charged with agency and symbolic meaning, transforming into acts of resistance (Dadusc, Grazioli, and Martínez 2019; Power and Mee 2020). These practices showed how precarious communities can mobilise networks, resources and imagination for emancipatory ends. However, they also signal a lack – of state provision, legality and rights. They represent mutual support and survival as much as gender and racial exploitation and reproduction of difference. Again with the words of Simone's (2023) "there is always 'something else besides' what we know" (p.3).

## Towards an urbanism of displacement

Displacement will continue to exist side by side with survival and shared precariousness. This is a crisis that extends beyond being a matter of repair (Thieme 2021) or a return to the whole, to integrity. Various concepts such as "dwelling in liminalities" (Lancione and Simone 2021), "improvised lives in uninhabitable spaces" (Simone 2016), "surrounds" (Simone 2022), "life-lines" (Boano and Bianchetti 2022), are all different ways to capture the same idea: that things can somehow constantly be reworked, but not sorted. There is no redemption nor any messianic outcome that awaits us but there is still a simultaneous affirmation of life, of another idea of life.

The only choice is to learn to live with the fragments, confronting the troubles of displacement, working with what is available, mending holes, partially restoring functions, in an attempt to preserve human and more-than-human value. Precarious is a life without the promise of stability (Tsing 2015), yet it harbours a possibility of living. Embracing the continuous commitment to the present as proposed by Deleuze, confronting the negative, the lack of stability, the uninterrupted crisis – as a possible counter-ontology – is the only possibility we are left with. Tsing notes that, "an appreciation of current precarity as an earth-wide condition allows us to notice this – the situation of our world" (p.4).

Can stability ever be achieved or is it just an illusion? Displacement urbanism advocates for understanding inhabitation as a constant reworking and repairing material temporalities, where stability is not seen as an end goal, rather, spatial and material change permanently seek adaptation within the unpredictability and precariousness of life.

Drawing from the kaleidoscope of vital fragments in Iquitos in Peru, Bar Elias-Tell Serhoun in Lebanon and Hlaingtharyar in Yangon, we learnt that spaces are being produced, yet they remain incalculable. These territories cannot be framed under any calculation, norm, or formal quality of valuation. These are sites where one asks what it means to inhabit in the abyssal ambivalence of resisting death and holding onto life. Their spatial practices foreground displacement not as exception but as the unfinished possibility of inhabiting, a tenacious struggle to resist the violent subtraction of future, space and possibilities, therefore contributing to the wider reflection on the challenge of inhabiting the uninhabitable as urban conditions of the present.

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