

# Nomadic Settlements

*Understanding marginal settlements as a nomadic condition*

NOMADIC SETTLEMENTS  
*understanding marginal settlements as a nomadic condition*

Allard Meijer  
St. number: 4274865

Technical University Delft  
Faculty of Architecture  
Studio: Borders & Territories  
part of master's thesis

2021

# Contents

1	<b>0. Introduction</b>	
	0.1	<i>Nomadism</i>
	0.2	<i>Marginal settlements</i>
3	<b>1. Nomadic settlements</b>	
	1.1	<i>Origins</i>
	1.2	<i>Negotiated territories</i>
	1.3	<i>Smooth space</i>
	1.4	<i>Deterritorialization</i>
7	<b>2. Nomadic life</b>	
	2.1	<i>Movement</i>
	2.2	<i>Precarity</i>
	2.3	<i>Marginality</i>
11	<b>3. Conclusion</b>	
	3.1	<i>Nomadic settlements</i>
	3.2	<i>Reflections on the nomadic lens</i>
13	<b>Bibliography</b>	

# 0 Introduction

## 0.1 *Nomadism*

Nomadism, the counterpart and predecessor of sedentarism, is a way of living, a way of being in the world. Already before Homo Sapiens made its appearance on the genealogy of life, Homo Erectus and Homo Heidelbergensis formed hunter-gatherer tribes that moved around following desirable climate and weather conditions<sup>1</sup> and to find food and information (Careri, 2002, p19). The roots of this kind of living go as far back as 2 million years ago and still persist today in multiple places across the world. This paper does not focus on hunter-gatherers nomadism, but on its evolutionary successor: pastoral nomadism.

In the book Walkscapes, Careri argues that the evolution from hunter-gatherer to pastoral nomad happened as a result of the taming of the biological realm. While sedentary life was formed through the taming of plants, which transformed into agriculture, nomadic life was formed through the taming of animals, which became their cattle. Careri romanticizes about nomadism as a highly specialized 'wandering' that is distinguished from hunter-gatherers because nomads know where they are heading and their "return trip is planned" (Careri, 2002, p38). "They are not aimless since they bring their cattle to the market, goods to a place of trading and families to food and water" (ibid, p7-8). Next to that, nomadic trajectories are not the same as sedentary roads as Deleuze and Guattaru explain: "The nomadic trajectory distributes people in an open space, one that is indefinite and non-communicating." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p44) In this open space, nomads move back and forth from summer to winter location, bringing along their cattle and tents. Those locations are not fixed.

Nomads have been living this way for millennia and still do in large (but decreasing) groups<sup>2</sup>. The territory of the nomad is ambiguous, moving and

---

1 History.com gives a quick introduction into the hunter-gatherer life (History.com Editors, 2019)

2 Contemporary nomadic tribes live across the globe. In the Western context the Roma and Sinti are well-known. Other large peoples are the Bedouin, Qashqai, Kuchi, Mongols, San and Sami.

morphing: it is ever-changing. Living in such a space requires a certain flexibility, a fluidity that ensures adaptability and resilience.

The nomadic condition, as pointed out by Kaplan (1996), has been highly romanticized and compared with positive Western values. Sergei Eisenstein, in 1920, used nomadic metaphors to underscore values of freedom, hybridity and modernity, while for others the nomad represents an “idealized model of movement based on perpetual displacement” (Kaplan, 1996, p90). Baudrillard, in his turn, relates the act of “emulating nomadism” to unquestioned power and abilities of ‘deterritorialization’(ibid, p101). This Orientalist vision towards the condition of the nomad, can however also be regarded as a way of seeking opportunities and potential that are lacking in the sedentary paradigm.

## **0.2 *Marginal settlements***

To add to the long list of topics that nomadism has been compared to, this paper will discuss the condition of marginal settlements and their residents. Marginal settlements<sup>3</sup>, the poor conditioned areas in cities and their peripheries, also known as slums, favela’s, informal settlements or shantytowns, show similarities to the nomadic condition discussed above. Ambiguous spreading of territories within a smooth space, informal claiming of land within that space, migration movements and the fluid life needed to “manoeuvre amidst the limited resources that informal residents posses [and that are available]” (Tunas, 2008, p4), are all nomadic conditions as will be argued in this paper. Marginal settlements will be approached by looking through a nomadic lens.

The territory of the marginal settlement is negotiated and creates a new topology within the smooth space through (de)territorialization processes. This will be discussed in the first chapter. Where the first chapter describes the nomadic condition in marginal settlements physically and spatially, the second presents the nomadic condition of life within marginal settlements. The chapter is divided into notions of movement, precarity and marginality. It explains the constantly changing condition opposed to the sedentary settling.

The paper hopes to present how a nomadic lens can give new insights that generate opportunities and potential that reside in marginal settlements.

---

3 Marginal settlements, of all possible words commonly used to describe poor conditioned areas of cities and their peripheries, will be used in this paper, because of its overarching meaning, closeness to reality and lack of negative connotations. Marginal settlements are characterised by high density, insufficient housing structure, a large informal economy, majority of inhabitants having low and irregular income, and inadequate public and private infrastructure (Overmayr, 2017, 30).

# 1 Nomadic settlements

## 1.1 *Origins*

Marginal settlements have most often been formed by a combination of factors that are quite similar across the world.<sup>1</sup> Mike Davis (2006) argues that rural to urban migration accelerated in the late 1970'ties because of the debt crisis, followed by IMF-led restructuring of economies of developing countries. The liberalization of third-world economies rendered domestic enterprises uncompetitive, reduced agricultural and rural-infrastructure investment, and handed public services over to the private market with falling wages, soaring prices and urban unemployment as a result. This combined with phenomena such as drought, inflation, rising interest, falling commodity prices and illness, made many people move to cities (Davis, 2006, p15). Not only, rural to urban migration, but also refugees settling in cities and population growth in general have caused marginal settlements to grow (United Nations, 2019a). Marginal settlements in the entire world peaked in the 1990'ties<sup>2</sup>, but ever since, the percentage of the world living in them decreased from 47% to 24% between 1990 and 2018. The absolute number however rose to over 1 billion people (UNHabitat in Ourworldindata, 2020; United Nations, 2019b,c).

## 1.2 *Negotiated territories*

When people move to the city, the choice for housing is a difficult trade-off. Housing costs, tenure security, quality of housing, journey to work, and personal safety are the variables that influence the location and type of housing.<sup>3</sup> In some

---

1 American and European slums of the 19th century followed a different path and were a product of industrialization. Dublin's slums were an exception since they suffered more from the de-industrialization which contemporary slums show resemblance to. (Davis, 2006)

2 For Davis, the world seemed to become a planet of slums. He addressed the opportunistic fallacies of slum programs by the Worldbank, the IMF and other NGO's. (Davis, 2006)

3 The location of being near a job can sometimes be even more important than having a roof over one's head. (Davis, 2006, p27)

cases migrants first settle in city centres because of the availability of work and later move to the outskirts where ownership of a house is feasible (Turner in Davis, 2006, p29). In those outskirts the informal life begins. Residents have to claim a piece of land on which they will build their house. This claiming happens in an informal manner, but does not mean it is completely arbitrary: it is mediated and this makes it a negotiated space.

The space that a migrant inhabits is negotiated because it does not happen in an empty space. Whether the house is built adjacent, within or on top of existing structures, there need to be agreements with other inhabitants, which create an informal topology. This informal negotiation of the territory constantly changes because new people move in and because those negotiations are not formally documented. It creates a constantly changing topology because it is not formally predefined like in the sedentary city. This informal topology is twofold.

Firstly, economical informal negotiations come in the form of a price: “Urban space is never free” (Davis, 2006, p185). Squatters have to pay bribes for their inhabited space to street gangs, police, or politicians, sometimes even for years (ibid, p38). Even for living on the pavement, it can be required to be a member of networks like ethnic militias or street gangs (ibid, p185). This subsequently means that the right to stay is not a great privilege in those areas (Verma in Davis, 2006, p78) since the inherent mode of marginality does not change even if it “stops the bulldozer from clearing slums” (Davis, 2006, p78). The fact that urban space is not free leads to migration towards the peripheries, the geographical margins of cities, where land is cheaper, but comes with the price of larger commuting distances.

Secondly, informal spatial negotiation can also be regarded as called ‘pirate urbanization’. Private developers of land legally own, but illegally subdivide and sell or rent the land, without complying the building permits, planning or zoning rules (Obermayr, 2017, p37). Spatially it means that informal patterns are created in the urban fabric of the marginal settlements and that buildings can take any shape on top of that division of land.

### **1.3 *Smooth space***

The constantly changing topology of the marginal settlements can be considered a paradox. On the one hand it is a settlement, a practically sedentary part of a city, and on the other hand, it behaves like a nomadic space in which a constant state of movement prevails. This movement (or trajectory) is expressed in a continuous manoeuvre between scarcities like jobs, food, water and sanitation. The trajectory seems to be more important than the house that is accompanied by insecure tenure. Similarly, for the traditional nomad the settling is subordinate to the trajectory. Deleuze calls this kind of space a ‘smooth space’, in which the striations of money, work and housing are no longer relevant (Deleuze, 1980, p481). This is

also relevant for the marginal settlements, because the absence of this striation, meaning a lack of formal planning, regulation, and organization, is a breeding ground for protest and uprising.

Three major similarities can be found between marginal settlements and Deleuzian 'smooth space'. Firstly they are "spaces of distance, rather than of measures and properties" (Deleuze, 1980, p479). In Ajegunle for example, 1,5 million people spend more than three hours every day on commuting to work (Davis, 2006). Secondly, they are both spaces "without organs instead of [being] organisms or organizations" (Deleuze, 1980, p479). Marginal settlements consist of militias and street gangs instead of workers associations and waste services. Quite literal were the so-called 'kidney-farms'<sup>4</sup> in India removing organs from the marginal settlers to sell them for transplantation (Davis, 2006, p190). Finally, the marginal settlements are not mapped. Houses do not have street names or numbers, and they are not registered in an institutional cadastre. Marginal settlements are not "closed-off surfaces that are allocated according to determined intervals, but are distributed according to frequencies. It is a space of nomas instead of polis" (Deleuze, 1980, p481). The conventional organizational characteristics of a polis, a city, are not present in marginal settlements.

## 1.4 ***Deterritorialization***

Marginal settlements have territories that are informally negotiated and act as a smooth space. It can be said that these negotiations are natural processes. Next to that, there are also anthropogenical processes such as deterritorialization, which is enacted by governmental policies. Deterritorialization is a term theoretically defined by Deleuze and Guattari and it is connected to nomadic smooth space. They explain it by comparing it to the differences in the games of Chess and Go in which chess represents the city space and go the smooth space:

*"In chess, it is a question of arranging a closed space for oneself, thus of going from one point to another, of occupying the maximum number of squares with the minimum number of pieces. In Go, it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 5)*

Governments deterritorialize marginal settlements in three ways. The first is slum clearance, which was a common practice in the late 20th century because

---

4 According to a Frontline investigation, "for eight years between 1987 and 1995 the slum in Bharathi Nagar in Vill Vakkam, a Chennai suburb, was of the hub of the kidney trade in Tamil Nadu. At the height of the boom, partly fuelled by foreigners flocking to South India for kidneys, the slum was called Kidney Nagar or Kidney-bakkam." (Davis, 2006, p190)

slums were seen as threats and were dealt with as criminal organizations by the repressive state apparatus (Davis, 2006, p36, p111). This policy does however not improve the circumstances because the slum conditions are only displaced to elsewhere in the city, while at the same time have a big impact on the lives of the inhabitants<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, public and private investments in marginal settlements can lead to gentrification, soaring land prices and causing the poorest to get bought out or be pushed out of the area because they cannot afford the higher rent (Ascensão, 2018, p225). The existing culture is replaced from its territory and so the neighbourhood is deterritorialized. Finally, interventions that ensure marginal settlers to get land tenure can result in them selling their land to wealthier people and move out of their settlement, also causing the area to deterritorialize<sup>6</sup>.

The smooth space of marginal settlements contrasts to the space of the city in that it does not consist of elements of 'authorized institutional power' - "pavements, streets, free-ways, elevators, offices" (Allen, 2005, p53) - but of rubbish and toxic dumps<sup>7</sup>, cemeteries, rooftops, floodplains, volcano-slopes, unstable hillsides, railroad sidings and desert fringes (Davis, 2006, p121). This means marginal settlement space is non-institutional. In city space, the symbolic power of monumental buildings<sup>8</sup> "makes us acknowledge the authority and power of institutions and work within the social parameters that they set" (Allen, 2005, p51). Thus, the absence of monuments in smooth space makes us not do these things. It makes marginal settlements nomadic, anti-state, which alters flows of thought, movement and action.

If marginal settlement space is smooth, then the settlements themselves are nomadic.

---

5 Slum clearance is not a popular policy anymore, because it has been proved a non-working intervention. But when important events are happening slum clearance is still used without exception. At the Olympics in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro, favela's were cleared to give way for the Olympic park. 700 families were moved. In 2008, the Olympics of Beijing were worst of all: 1,5 million people had to move out of the way to give way for stadiums and parking lots. (Donahue, 2020)

6 In the Philippines, a pilot country for the world bank's new global strategy, investments according to Erhard Berner "trickled straight up to the land developers and the construction industry." Within five years "all the original dwellers had left because their lots had been sold to wealthy families." (Davis, 2006, p73)

7 In Buenos Aires, one of the Feng Shui's (local name for marginal settlement) was built on top of a "former lake, toxic dump, a cemetery, and in flood-plain." (Davis, 2006, p121)

8 Monumental buildings are buildings like cathedrals, banks, libraries, schools, musea, shopping malls, town halls, courts, etc.

# 2 Nomadic life

The first chapter has discussed the nomadic lens physically and spatially. This second chapter continues on that by looking into *the life* manifested in it.

## 2.1 *Movement*

When migrants move to the city, they hope to find opportunities for a better life, but their hopes are most often turned down quickly (Cavalcanti, 2018, p43). They cannot afford the price of a house, food, transportation, and other services, requiring them to sooner or later move to marginal settlements. Upon arrival in the marginal settlement, the house might be more affordable but resources, like jobs and affordable food are scarce and often there are little to no services (ibid). To be able to cope with this situation, a way of living is required that is flexible, fluid, and gives space to the constantly changing availability and location of resources. Informality is such a flexible trait that helps inhabitants “manoeuvre amidst the scarce resources” (Tunas, 2008, p4). This condition can be called nomadic, because in this space it is more about the movement between moving elements, creating a constantly changing topology. On the contrary, in the sedentary city, elements are located at fixed points in space. There is also movement there, but it is the same movement every day: home, job, supermarkets, sanitation and water rarely displace. The sedentary city does not have constantly changing movements.

*“Pastoralists [(nomads)] must be well attuned to their environment to raise their animals successfully. Among the key factors they must understand are elements of climate, topography, vegetation, human and animal population profiles, and sources of disease.” (Salzman in Kardulias, 2015, p5)*

This description of the life of pastoral nomads translates well to that of the marginal settler that also needs to be well attuned to his environment to survive: the key factors that need to be understood by the marginal settler can be translated to elements of natural hazards, topology, valuable dumping grounds, services, informal and formal work opportunities, and sources of disease. By understanding these elements, a marginal settler can survive with less than 1,90

dollars a day, which is also defined as 'extreme poverty'. The Worldbank estimated that around 9 per cent of the world population (665 million people) lives like this<sup>1</sup> (Worldbank, 2015, p5).

The extreme flexibility means that every resource is used to its maximum potential. Waste dumps are places of recycling where the very poor find new value in scrap materials. The upside to this is that this recycling process offers a potential to present-day environmental problems and should be maintained when the marginal settlers are pulled out of poverty.

## 2.2 *Precarity*

As unemployment defines the living conditions of many marginal settlers, they have to seek work day by day, day and night. This precarious condition becomes evident in two distinct forms. The first is based on the distribution of the marginal settlers in an open space which they territorialize and deterritorialize by ongoing movements from opportunity to opportunity<sup>2</sup> (Davis, 2006, p175). Similarly, nomads are directed by rhizomatic vegetation (e.g. in the desert) which is temporary and shifts [its] location according to where the rain falls (Deleuze, 1986, p46). Each year, vegetation displaces, which causes the movements of the nomad to change as well. In this, the kind of destination and its location are unknown. In marginal settlements work opportunities<sup>3</sup> might randomly jump up and so the continuous searching makes the destination subordinate to the journey. In practice, this boils down to construction workers having to search for many hours to find a day job, let alone even succeeding to find any (Thomas, in Davis, 2006, p182).

The second condition is the precarious nature of the available work. Most often jobs are temporary or seasonal. Such work can for example be found in the countryside around cities (Davis, 2006, p46) or in brick kilns<sup>4</sup>, where work is affected by seasonal changes in weather. The big changes in incomes during the year make it hard to have money the year around: money needs to be saved

---

1 The corona-crisis of 2020 has caused a setback in the reduction of extreme poverty. Forecasted was a further reduction to 7,9%, but estimations now come between 9,1 and 9,4%. (Worldbank, 2015, p5)

2 In Naples of the 19th century 'huxters' were selling vegetables, chestnuts, shoelaces, pizzas, mussels, recycled clothes, water, corn cobs and candy. In the 20th century, the same phenomenon occurs in slums such as the ones in Lima and Kinshasa. (Davis, 2006, p175-176)

3 Such opportunities can include activities such as "fishing, crafting, trading, collecting garbage, recycling, farming, hawking or offering services like sewing, hairdressing or nursing." (Cavalcanti, 2018, p44).

4 In Iran, brick kilns have played a major role in providing jobs for the informal settlers. The seasonal character of the production kilns only provisioned work in the months without much rain from April to October.

carefully.

Due to the informal nature of most jobs, the working conditions are very bad, because employers are not following any laws or rules, and there are no workers associations that are standing up for the workers' rights. Jobs available in the settlements are most often characterised by its long working hours, heaviness, polluted environments, low salary and no rights. Child labour is another precarious aspect of them and widely prevails around the world, mostly in marginal settlements. The stability that is needed for a child is replaced by a precarious flexibility.

## 2.3 *Marginality*

The marginal settlements themselves are places in-between the city, and the countryside. For the inhabitants of those places this is a paradox: they fall in-between the two clearly defined places. They don't enjoy the freedom of the countryside, the space of the nomad, while their life does have the nomadic conditions and is situated adjacent to the sedentary city of which they are not a part of.

But there are also transitions of this in-between and the city. For pastoral nomads, markets are places that can serve as such transitions: as edges or gradual boundaries between the city and nomadic space. For marginal settlements, work connects the informal and the formal. Markets remain places where work can be found for marginal settlers. For example, next to the Grota do Telégrafo (GDT) favela in Brazil, a market is placed where many favela's residents work<sup>5</sup> or make purchases (Cavalcanti, 2018, p44). It is here that the nomad does not only "live in contrast but also in osmosis with the settler" (Careri, 2017, p30).

*"Farmers and shepherds need to continuously trade their products and require a hybrid, or more precisely neutral space, in which this trade is possible" (Careri, 2017, p30)*

These informal markets are part of the informal economy that is interlinked with the formal market. Informality can go hand in hand with religious and ethnic differentiation and violence (Davis, 2006, p185) because of the absence of formal control. On the other side, it is an economy of resistance. It brings about a sense of honour in people. (Mayamba Nlandu in Davis, 2006, p198)

Within the marginal settlements resides a sense of pride. It is a distinct culture that arises not only to deal with the miseries of being marginal, but also with an economy and society that does not work for them. Movement, precarity and

---

5 In this specific Favela, products that are produced within courtyards are sold to other cities in Brazil. (Cavalcanti, 2018, p44)

marginality require flexibility to deal with this situation. These characteristics are nomadic conditions and so the settling in marginal settlements makes their life a paradox: it is both nomadic and sedentary.

# 3 Conclusion

## 3.1 *Nomadic settlements*

Marginal settlements can be seen as a paradox of living a nomadic life within the settled city. They are often located on the fringes of cities, situating them in-between the city and the countryside of which the latter contains the space of the nomad. The territories of the marginal settlements are informally negotiated through bribes, neighbours, landowners and militias. This negotiation is constantly changing and so are the territories. Furthermore, marginal settlement space is space of distance, does not consist of a formal organization with organs, and is not mapped. Finally, there is a detachment happening between place and culture, a deterritorialization of the space of the settlement resulting in a nomadic topology.

Life within marginal settlements is characterised by constantly changing movements of scarcities like jobs, food, water and sanitation between subsequently movements of people are established. To cope with these changes, the marginal settler needs to be well attuned to his environment and needs to be flexible and fluid. This subsequently leads to a precarious life: which is mostly visible in the state of work. Jobs are most often temporary and seasonal, and its informal nature lacks employment conditions.

Work connects the city and the marginal settlements. It is part of the informal economy which is one of resistance. This informal economy creates a sense of pride and distinct culture in the area. The absence of institutions in the economy, as well as the physical space of marginal settlements, creates a place that allows protest and revolt.

Marginal settlement space and life together result in a constantly changing topology that is nomadic. The paradox of such space and life is that it happens in a sedentary place. Thus, the marginal topology is paradoxically nomadic.

## 3.2 *Reflections on the nomadic lens*

This paper has elaborated on marginal settlements by looking through a nomadic

lens and found that there is an inherent need for flexibility and informality. This is done by looking to marginal settlements on a large scale, although including the life within them as well. To be able to understand the situation of marginal settlers on a smaller scale, the theory needs to be extended and specified on specific marginal settlements in parts of the world. It must be acknowledged that this paper generalizes marginal settlements as an attempt to create a nomadic understanding of them. However, there exist a wide variety of marginal settlements in the world, all having different characteristics and context.

# Bibliography

Allen, M. (2005). Towards a nomadic theory of architecture: shelter, dwelling, and their alternatives in the architecture of homelessness. (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Washington, Seattle WA, USA.

Ascensão, E. (2018). Slum gentrification. In *Handbook of Gentrification Studies* (pp. 225–246). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Careri, F. (2017). Walkscapes: walking as an aesthetic practice. Ames IA, USA: Culicudae Architectural Press. Originally published in 2002 by Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona.

Davis, M. (2006). Planet of slums. London, UK: Verso.

Deleuze G. Guatarri, F. (2001). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press. 202. Originally published in 1980 by Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris.

Deleuze, G and Guattari, F. (2010). *Nomadology: the war machine*, translated by Brian Massumi, Seattle WA (USA): Wormwood Distribution. Originally published in 'A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia'

Donahue, B. (2020, July 6). The Price of Gold. *The Washington Post Magazine*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2020/07/06/inside-troubling-legacy-displacing-poor-communities-olympic-games-one-villages-resistance-brazil/?arc404=true>

History.com Editors. (2019, August 15). Hunter-Gatherers. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/topics/pre-history/hunter-gatherers#:~:text=Hunter%2Dgatherers%20were%20prehistoric%20nomadic,to%20Asia%2C%20Europe%20and%20beyond>

Kaplan, C. (1996). *Questions of travel: postmodern discourses of displacement*. (third edition) London, UK: Duke University Press.

Kardulias, P. (2015). *The Ecology of Pastoralism*. Colorado, USA: University Press of

Colorado.

Obermayr, C. (2017). Sustainable city management: informal settlements in Surakarta. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG

Tunas, D. (2008). The spatial economy in the urban informal settlement. (Unpublished doctorate's thesis). Technical University Delft, Delft, The Netherlands.

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019a). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision (ST/ESA/SER.A/420). New York: United Nations.

United Nations Economic and Social Council. (2019b). Special edition of the sustainable development goals progress report: report of the Secretary-General.

United Nations Economic and Social Council. (2019c). Special edition: progress towards the sustainable development goals, report of the Secretary-General.

World Bank. 2020. Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi: 10.1596/978-1-4648-1602-4. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO