

Haiti after the earthquake: camps, shanty towns and housing shortages

Gerry L'Étang

In Haiti, in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, public squares became the sites of makeshift camps to provide shelter to victims made homeless by the disaster. Since then, their status has changed to become places of hope of justice in the face of the inequalities of a nationwide housing shortage. As in other contexts, occupying public spaces appears to be a means of fighting for the right to housing.

On 12 January 2010 at 4.53 p.m., Haiti suffered the most devastating natural disaster in its history: an earthquake of between 7 and 7.3 on the Richter scale, which officially left 316,000 dead, 350,000 injured and 1.5 million homeless.¹ The most significant damage occurred in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area and in the city of Léogâne. Fourteen months after the catastrophe, the estimated number of refugees still housed in camps of tents stood at 680,000 (OCHA Haiti 2011, p. 2).

The investigation which follows was carried out between 6 and 15 March 2011, mainly in the camp in Place Boyer in Pétiion-Ville, in the Port-au-Prince *arrondissement* (administrative division). More than a year on, we wanted to assess the prospects for rehousing for those made homeless; to this end, we surveyed 30 or so refugees.

Place Boyer: a sharp contrast between classes

Place Boyer, a square named after a former president of Haiti, is located at the top of the hill that forms the central shopping area of the suburban town of Pétiion-Ville. This central business district was, for the most part, left unscathed by the earthquake. The neighbourhood around this square is – together with the neighbourhood around nearby Place Saint-Pierre – the most affluent district in the area, and indeed probably the whole country. This urban “showcase” – a collection of comfortable houses, diplomatic and consular representations, luxury boutiques and high-class restaurants – has, since 12 January 2010, been the location of a makeshift camp of tents crowded between trees, covering several hectares previously devoted to the enjoyment of the Pétiion-Ville bourgeoisie, and now home to between four and five thousand homeless people. The square now presents a somewhat paradoxical image: a wealthy, flourishing area surrounding a quadrangle of tumbledown, dirty, grey canvas roofs.

¹ This Haitian government estimate of the number of fatalities and people made homeless following the earthquake is controversial. A report commissioned by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and entrusted to an outside body estimated the number of fatalities due to the earthquake at between 46,190 and 84,961 (Schwartz *et al.* 2011, p. ii). With regard to the number of refugees living in camps in January 2010, the report gives an estimated total of between 866,412 and 894,588 (*ibid.*). However, the figures in this report are themselves contested, even within USAID (Daniel 2011).



Path through the tents, Place Boyer © G. L'Étang

The sudden appearance here of individuals from poor backgrounds, in total destitution, was at first generally accepted by residents and those who regularly frequent the square. But as the months passed, this “cohabitation” became more difficult. The growing permanence of these newcomers was increasingly seen as a nuisance:

“It is shameful for the rest of us Haitians,” one customer exclaimed in a commercial bank on Place Boyer, glancing over at the tents covering this public square, which, before the earthquake, was a prime location for an afternoon stroll. [...] In this district, where one can find the embassies of Brazil and the Bahamas and the consulates of Sweden and Romania, the stink of stagnant water and poorly maintained portable toilets – located right in front of diplomatic establishments – poisons the atmosphere and at the same time sends out a poor image of Haiti.” (Laurince 2010)

On a similar theme, one shopkeeper on the square complained to us about the deterioration of the area that the presence of the camp has brought about, and the consequences of this presence on business: “These people are losing us customers; they shouldn’t be here. What’s more, they have no money to spend and buy nothing from us.” He also mentioned the existence of various forms of trafficking on the edges of the camp. But for him, the greatest problem was the sanitary risk: he found the news of a case of cholera in the camp in November 2010 particularly worrying.²

² A cholera epidemic broke out in the Artibonite *département* in October 2010. According to the Haitian ministry for public health and the population, this epidemic in Haiti had, as of 10 May 2011, contaminated 302,401 people, resulting in 162,651 hospitalisations and 5,234 deaths. These figures are underestimates according to United Nations experts (Haiti News 509 2011). The Port-au-Prince metropolitan area has, to date, remained relatively unaffected.

Housing shortages: a persistent problem

At the time of our investigation, more than a year after the earthquake, Place Boyer was, like the other camps, still home to poor people who were without employment, or with very low-paid employment, most of whom came from shanty-town areas where they were previously tenants. Those with more favourable profiles had already left the camps.

If what had initially been considered an emergency situation has tended to endure, it is because the destruction of 105,369 dwellings and damage to 208,164 others due to the earthquake (Haiti PDNA 2010, p. 80) have so far been only very partially compensated by rebuilding and reparation operations.³ But, above all, the disaster merely worsened a pre-existing shortage of decent housing. For Raquel Rolnik, special rapporteur of the United Nations on adequate housing, the problem is structural:

“The earthquake, while leading to the creation of the camps, made visible a thorny problem which already existed and which had not come under the spotlight [...]. One cannot consider the issue of the camps or the homeless people that inhabit them without also considering the problem of working-class districts that do not even have the most basic of infrastructures.” (MINUSTAH 2011)

The problem is due to the extremely low incomes of the vast majority of the population of a country where the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was just \$672.90 in 2010 (IMF 2011). The distribution of income is, moreover, highly unequal in Haiti: “almost half of total national income goes to the top decile of the population, while the bottom two deciles receive less than 2% of national income” (Haiti PDNA 2010, p. 30). Haitians, two thirds of whom are in situations of unemployment or under-employment, have to make do with derisory remuneration. The daily minimum wage in industry and retail is only 200 gourdes (\$4.90). A further aggravating factor is the fact that Haiti, whose economy is de facto dollarised, increasingly imports consumer goods, including food, from the United States. As a result, the cost of living is disproportionately high compared to the purchasing power of most of the population, who survive thanks to international aid and, above all, the massive transfer of income from an estimated 3 million-strong Haitian diaspora. In some years, these money transfers can represent a quarter to a third of the country’s GDP.

In this context, finding a place to live is a real challenge. For those Haitians who are among the 71% of the population that live on less than two dollars per day – or, worse still, the 50% of the population that have to live on less than a dollar a day (Haiti PDNA 2010, p. 23) – how on earth is it possible to find the year’s advance rent that is required for any tenancy in Haiti? Our investigations showed that a 12 m² windowless room with electricity and a wash-hand basin, but without a shower or toilet (which are located outside and shared by residents), in a rendered and painted breeze-block tenement building in a non-slum area on the outskirts of the capital (Delmas 41) cost 30,000 gourdes (\$743.50) per year to rent. The annual rent for an 18 m² studio in the same area with a window, sink, small kitchen area, shower and toilet was 50,000 gourdes (\$1,239.20). However, this type of housing, of a comfort that many would judge minimal, is inaccessible to most of the 2.5 million residents of the Port-au-Prince *arrondissement* (which covers the metropolitan area around the Haitian capital). Because of rural depopulation, this *arrondissement* has in recent decades experienced exponential processes of densification and urban sprawl. In the absence of financial and political investments and proper urban planning procedures, these densification and sprawl processes have mainly produced slums and shanty towns. The majority of the population has no other choice but to crowd into these slum areas. In these poor

³ The rebuilding of housing in Haiti is mainly carried out by the Shelter Cluster, composed in particular of the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the Catholic Relief Service (CRS), Community Health Evangelism International and World Vision. According to the UN, in March 2011, after a year in operation, it had delivered more than 58,000 dwellings, including 1,580 permanent houses or shelters, and had repaired 3,131 dwellings (Richard 2011a).

districts, dwellings of a similar size to those described above can be rented for around half the price. Ultimately, these dwellings may possibly enable their occupants to escape the rental sector by eventually building their own homes on illegally occupied land.

Since 12 January 2010, though, access to this type of housing, however squalid, has been made more difficult – first, because there are fewer such dwellings available and they have become more expensive; and secondly, because many of their potential occupants, who have lost their formal or informal work activity, and therefore their autonomy, have difficulty finding enough money to rent, build or rebuild them. Extreme situations have developed as a result: in order to escape the streets, some people are forced to take turns sleeping in tiny rooms leased to several people or rented a few hours a day by slum landlords. In a country that is trying to recover from eight billion dollars' worth of damage – 120% of its GDP for the previous year – and which has seen a 5% fall in growth between October 2009 and September 2010 (IMF 2011), precarious situations have become more and more common.



Tents on Place Boyer © G. L'Étang

Camps as a means of transition to permanent housing

In view of the economic and housing crises in Haiti, these camps can, paradoxically, represent an opportunity for some people, owing to the fact that they are free with a number of services provided, such as water, lighting and public sanitation facilities. The central locations of some of these camps are also a considerable advantage for population groups that are often relegated to the edges of the city. In certain cases, they also offer advantages in term of safety. The best placed “canvas villages”, such as those on Place Boyer and Place Saint-Pierre, benefit from measures implemented by the Haitian and UN police forces to ensure the security of the affluent neighbourhoods in which they are located. As a result, anyone who leaves one of these camps is quickly replaced by new arrivals, who may not be genuine earthquake victims, but who are

nevertheless genuinely poor and for whom finding the cheapest possible place to live is imperative. The result is a never-ending cycle that actively contributes to the growing permanence of the camps.

But one of the most paradoxical causes of their continuing existence is the hope shared by many occupants that living in one of these camps will lead to an advantageous rehousing offer, owing to their very presence in these camps – especially when they are centrally located. One homeless individual told us:

“What’s a poor person like me doing in Place Boyer?” That’s what the well-off people here are wondering. But me, I know what I’m doing here: I’m waiting for a home. As soon as I get one, I’ll leave – and it’s the same for everyone in the camp. Since they don’t want us here, they’ll be forced to give us somewhere to live. Because they’re not going to kill us, are they? The dictatorship in Haiti is over. Today, it’s a democracy!”

In addition, distress and extreme hardship does not in way preclude stratagem and subterfuge. One refugee from the Place Boyer camp told us – after making sure that none of his neighbours could hear – that several of the tents were left empty at night. This informer surmised that if these individuals could sleep elsewhere, it meant that they must have another means of housing and so were not truly poor. However, the determination and patience required to spend months living in a camp all day (if not all night) long in the hope of ultimately obtaining a small house can only be inspired by destitution, albeit relative. Such behaviour also illustrates just how high the stakes are with regard to decent housing in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area.

An uncertain management of the crisis

The process that transforms these homeless people’s hopes into reality appears to be somewhat random. While it is true that the foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dealing with rebuilding have, thanks to international funding,⁴ already delivered tens of thousands of small houses throughout the country, the number of homes built remains insufficient with regard to total need, which clearly affects many more people than earthquake victims alone. Furthermore, the way in which these homes are allocated has been called into question. The refugees from Place Boyer we questioned on this subject either did not understand the selection criteria or were convinced that the criteria used were unfair. Having received nothing after more than a year of waiting, they were understandably frustrated. And yet the absence of coordination by the Haitian government with regard to rehousing procedures – if only to prioritise allocations – leaves NGOs and their financial backers (and even the local bodies who work with the NGOs) free to do as they wish and allocate housing according to their own logic and procedures. Consequently, those who were already property owners are the first to be allocated housing, as possession of land reduces expenses for the NGOs. In addition, at the time of our investigation, the lack of government presence in a country that has come to be known as a “republic of NGOs” (Chauvet 2011) was exacerbated by the fact that Haiti was in a period of presidential and parliamentary elections. The government, disputed and impotent, was limited to dealing hastily with day-to-day business.

Since then, the arrival of a president with a proactive attitude to refugees – a significant proportion of his electorate – is seen as a promise of progress by the residents of these camps. However, the president does not have a parliamentary majority and, following two failed attempts, was only able to appoint a Prime Minister and government some five months after his investiture. His promises are therefore slow to be implemented. One of the new president’s initiatives with regard to housing should, however, be mentioned here. It is called the “Kay Pa’m” (“My House”) project, which is intended to enable solvent individuals to access loans at a fixed rate of 8%,⁵ so that they can build a small house. The realisation of this project was, however, compromised by the

⁴ Overseas aid to Haiti in 2010 amounted to “around \$3.27 billion in total (\$1.55 billion in emergency aid and \$1.73 billion for reconstruction and development aid)” (Alter Press 2011).

⁵ “A project such as this would quite simply have the effect of overturning the traditional mortgage market in Haiti, based on “variable” rates imposed by loan sharks” (Valet 2011).

assassination in June 2011 (for reasons still unknown) of the key player in this scheme, namely the president of the Banque Nationale de Cr dit (a state-owned commercial bank). Nevertheless, this housing programme will apparently still go ahead.

In the absence, to date, of any concrete government policy in Haiti concerning the camps, local councils – badgered both by those who live in the vicinity of the camps, who demand their clearance, and by the refugees who want a roof over their heads – are the only public authorities that are attempting to deal with this matter. To this end, the Port-au-Prince city authorities devised plans for a new urban centre at Morne-  Cabrits in order to relocate homeless people living in the camp on the Champ de Mars (in the centre of the capital). But this development of 6,000 buildings, intended for rent-to-buy purchase schemes, requires a budget of \$76 million that the city council is having difficulty finding.

P tion-Ville council, for its part, is trying to secure the departure of the refugees from Place Saint-Pierre by means of a payment of \$500 per family. The process, initiated several months before our investigation, was still in progress at the time of our investigation in Haiti. The refugees were reluctant to leave, as the sum on offer was not enough to pay a year’s rent up front for a salubrious dwelling, let alone finance a building project.⁶ Nonetheless, many of them were resigned to the scheme following pressure from the local council. However, the council had difficulty making the promised payments and, in order to find the necessary resources, had to resort to appealing to public generosity (Daudier 2011). Since then, departures from the camp – more or less voluntary – have accelerated. As for the local council’s intentions with regard to the refugees in Place Boyer, it is possible that the same strategy will be applied. However, in view of the current state of affairs, the lack of resources is delaying the implementation of any such strategy.

In Delmas, the action taken by the local council was more radical. In May 2011, the mayor, claiming that refugee camps were rife with prostitution and banditry, ordered the destruction of three camps of tents, at the same time destroying the meagre possessions of certain homeless people, who received no compensation. This initiative triggered protests from refugees, human rights organisations, US congressmen and the UN mission. However, the operation concerned only three relatively small camps and (because of the outcry?) has not been repeated – so far, at least.

In fact, the destruction of camps is very much the exception rather than the rule in Haiti. However, repeated attempts by landowners (public and private, real or purported) to recover their illegally occupied land have led to collective and individual expulsions, which have affected greater numbers of homeless people. The total number of expulsions is considerable, and the number of people threatened with expulsion is even greater: 44,000 people had already been expelled in March 2011 and 166,000 were threatened with expulsion, which equates to approximately a quarter of the total number of homeless people (OCHA Haiti 2011, p. 3).

Finally, a recent initiative, the “16/6” project (Richard 2011b), aims to rehabilitate 16 neighbourhoods in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area in order to close six camps. But, once again, there are funding problems. Of the \$78 million that this programme will cost, only \$30 million has so far been found. Consequently, the first beneficiaries of this initiative – which will concern some 30,000 refugees in total – have received just 21,000 gourdes (\$520) per family to leave the camps. With this sum, they have only been able to return to slum areas, in the hope that the promised decent housing will soon be built in their neighbourhoods of origin.

For structural reasons, the issue of camps in Haiti is difficult to solve because it is only one aspect of a more wide-ranging problem, namely that of housing – the shortage of which is itself the consequence of a long-standing general state of economic hardship. The only way that these camps will eventually be cleared – short of violently evicting their occupants or allowing these “canvas

⁶ For information, a small 18 m² house made of pine (walls and floor) with a corrugated steel roof, capable of lasting 8 to 10 years and earthquake-resistant, costs Chilean NGO Un Techo para mi Pa s (literally “A Roof for My Country”) around \$2,500 to build (excluding the price of the land). This organisation intends to build 10,000 such dwellings in Haiti, thanks to volunteers and international donations. Permanent houses, which are also built by certain NGOs, are more expensive.

villages” to become new shanty towns – is through an improvement in the country’s economy, a determined policy of urban planning and development, and massive investments in housing.

Bibliography

- Alter Press*. 2011. “[Haïti-Reconstruction : Les Nations-Unies réclament l’octroi direct de l’aide internationale à l’État](#)”, 25 June.
- Chauvet, Max E. 2011. “[Haïti, la république des ONG](#)”, *Courrier International*, 3 February.
- Daniel, Trenton. 2011. “[Bilan du séisme en Haïti : le rapport comporterait de nombreux défauts](#)”, *Cyberpress.ca*, 3 June.
- Daudier, Valéry. 2011. “[Un Téléthon pour reloger les déplacés de la Place St-Pierre](#)”, *Le Nouvelliste*, 11 March.
- Haiti News 509*, 2011. “[Haïti – Santé : choléra dans l’ouest, il faut rester vigilant](#)”, 28 May.
- Haïti PDNA, 2010. *Haïti – PDNA du tremblement de terre. Évaluation des dommages, des pertes et des besoins généraux et sectoriels*. Annex to the *Plan d’action pour le relèvement et le développement national d’Haïti*, Port-au-Prince: Government of the Republic of Haiti.
- International Monetary Fund (IMF). 2011. “[IMF Backing Haiti’s Recovery Drive](#)”, 1 December, Washington, DC: IMF.
- Laurince, Jonas. 2010. “[Haïti : des ‘villages urbains’ qui dérangent](#)”, *Haiti Press Network*, 2 July.
- Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations (OCHA Haïti). 2011. “Réponse au tremblement de terre”, *Humanitarian Bulletin* (10–25 March), Port-au-Prince: OCHA Haïti, pp. 1–5.
- Richard, Pierre Jérôme. 2011a. “[Relogement des sinistrés : plus de 58.000 abris solides construits](#)”, Port-au-Prince: MINUSTAH, 25 March.
- Richard, Pierre Jérôme. 2011b. “[16/6 : Pour le retour de 30.000 déplacés dans leurs quartiers d’origine](#)”, Port-au-Prince: MINUSTAH, 18 August.
- Schwartz, Timothy T., Pierre, Yves-François, and Calpas, Éric. 2011. *Building Assessments and Rubble Removal in Quake-Affected Neighborhoods in Haiti. Barr Survey Final Report*, Washington, DC: LTL Strategies.
- United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). 2011. “[Plaidoyer pour des ‘logements décents’ en Haïti](#)”, Port-au-Prince: MINUSTAH, 10 June.
- Valet, Daly. 2011. “[Ensauvagement !](#)”, *Le Matin*, 17 June.

Gerry L’Étang is a lecturer in anthropology at the University of the French West Indies and French Guiana (Martinique campus) and a member of CRILLASH (Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Literature, Language, Art and Human Sciences). His work concerns cultural creolisation, diasporic Hinduism, Islam in southern India, aesthetics, addiction and Haiti.

His recent publications include *Drive : l’errance ensorcelée* (HC Éditions, 2009), *La peinture en Martinique* (HC Éditions, 2007), and *L’Inde dans les arts de la Guadeloupe et de la Martinique. Héritages et innovations* (Ibis Rouge, 2004).

To quote this article:

Gerry L’Étang & translated by Oliver Waine, “Haiti after the earthquake: camps, shanty towns and housing shortages”, *Metropolitiques*, 2 May 2012. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Haiti-after-the-earthquake-camps.html>.