Of dreams and deeds: the role of local initiatives for community based environmental management in Lima, Peru

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PRELUDE: DISCOVERING PAMPAS

We are going there in a small yellow cab, which after many fits and starts stops at the foothill of a dusty and bone-dry hill. At the moment I get out and look up I see a long and broad sandy road. It is nothing more than a stretch of desert land left open. And there are ‘buildings’ everywhere, shoulder to shoulder, as if they want to push the other constructions uphill, or want to prevent the others from sliding down.

We climb up the slope. And within five minutes my image of a ‘shanty town’ has profoundly changed. Shanty town? What is a ‘shanty’ town? Whatever a ‘shanty town’ may be, this one here in Pampas de San Juan indeed has everything to do with poverty, but has nothing to do with indigence. It is more adequate to describe it as a vital outburst of desperate life, lived with meagre means and realistic pretensions. The building materials of all these small rectangular constructions vary from straw mats, cardboard or plywood and corrugated iron to concrete and beautiful bricks. The basic model seems to be that of a box without a cover, with a door made in the side. In some cases a second box has been put on top, serving as a second floor. At first sight it seems coarse and still under construction. Yet if you look better, you can see numerous fine and magnificent details, such as walls painted in deep blue or warm ochre, subtle ironwork in fences, a lot of plants and special doors. If someone in the North lives like this, he certainly has come down in the world. But the people here started ‘down’ and are absolutely determined to get up higher. And if they do not manage, their children will.

Living here means that you have to fetch everything you need from elsewhere: from far in the city or from far inside yourself. Every building here is built out of pure will, every life here is led based on the hope that human life is possible, even if the certainties we can derive from the past have vanished. You can only become someone here if you start taking life as it is now, with all its impossibilities and constraints, and investigating your own modest possibilities. This starts with accepting the waste of others, the ‘discarded past’ of cardboard, plywood and asbestos.

Pampas is the eye of the needle. And when I look at the people of Pampas passing by and greeting me with a sober but cordial ‘buenas noches’, I realise myself that they are working on a new craft, that of making a new image of the human being. The brave constructions, the wonderful details, de dignified reserve, the vicissitudes, the poverty and the daily struggle for survival, they together write a Philosophy of Freedom, born in anxiety. This creative philosophy is not written in books, but it is written in the dry sand of the desert.

From the diary of Jelle van der Meulen
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