Lima barriadas today
The unaided self-help solution: a demonstration of the common people’s initiative and the potential of their resources

Pampa de Comas, the built-up area in the photograph above, is a squatter settlement with a present population of about 30,000. It is part of the Caraballo group of barriadas which has a total population of about 100,000. Comas was the first to be established in this area; the initial invasion was carried out in 1967 by a group of families evicted from a slum in the centre of Lima in order to make room for an office and apartment block which, as a matter of fact, is still largely uninhabited.

No positive government intervention was made until 1961 (this is described on page 377) and the entire development was organized and carried out by spontaneously formed associations of lower-income blue- and white-collar workers along with their families in much the same way as that described by Margan on page 366. The majority of the dwellings in Comas are in the second and third stages of development. There are no public utilities (though these are now being installed) but there are a few schools and other basic community facilities.

The un-built-up area in the lower part of the photograph is a legal, commercially financed, speculative development complete with all public utilities and with made-up roads.

Pampa de Comas is typical of the Peruvian squatter settlements in which 8-9 thousand people live at the time of writing. Other types are illustrated in the photographs opposite. On page 365 we show the type which has grown on the hillsides near the centre of Lima in much the same way as the ‘ranches’, ‘callampas’ and ‘favelas’ have grown up around

Pampa de Comas barriada, Lima, in 1962
Photo Alberto Rojas. Courtesy JNY

Stages of settlement: invaders—squatters—city dwellers

Below: air views of first stage of settlement of barriada land after invasion by squatters. The huts (left), of cane matting and poles, are a first declaration of land occupation
Photos John Turner
Caracas, Valparaíso and Rio de Janeiro respectively. Though all barriadas are without services, or were so until very recently, most are capable of considerable improvement and will, eventually, become integral parts of the cities they adjoin, as is already happening on a large scale in Lima itself. Some, however, are slums that cannot be improved owing to their extreme disorderliness and overcrowding.

If 'housing' consists of three distinct elements—land, shelter and utilities, Pampa de Comas goes a long way towards solving the problem. The family has a plot of land—normally about 2000 sq. ft.—and has at least a temporary shelter, or a half-built house, either of which is an improvement on the slum the family occupied before moving out to the barriada, and both of which will, eventually, be converted into a proper house built of brick and concrete. But, except for a deficient, part-time and extremely expensive supply of electric current from some neighbour with a generator, it has no laid-on services at all, the streets are unpaved and even interrupted with huge boulders and great natural depressions, there is no garbage or sewage disposal (but, fortunately, very little garbage to dispose of and in most barriadas the majority use latrines) and community facilities are in even shorter supply than in the city itself. But, if there is a good chance that these deficiencies will be made good, the family will wait. For the time being a major part of its problem has been solved, at least to its members' satisfaction: the family has carved a place out for itself (literally if it owns a hilly site), it has the security of a de facto property, it has a better and healthier shelter than before and, usually, it has a bigger savings margin, as well as something to invest in.

Visually the barriadas are dramatic, especially if seen from a helicopter, but otherwise they are shocking to the outsider; the ordinary inhabitant, on the other hand, has a different point of view: he sees it as the architect sees his building in the delicate stages of its birth—not as a present mess and, for the uninitiated, an apparent chaos, but rather as the promise of things to come, and, above all, as an achievement whose existence is self-justifying and whose appearance is irrelevant.

The sheer achievement of these 'barriadas' is astonishing: the area shown in the map surpasses, in built-up area and population, the second city of Peru, Arequipa, and not one house is more than 15 years old. The vast majority of the builders are ordinary working-class families with, by Western standards, extremely low incomes and very little opportunity of any kind. Yet they manage to produce these planned, though admittedly primitively designed, areas, on a city scale, and build tens of thousands of acceptable permanent structures—more than has been or even could be, at present, provided for them by the State or commercial enterprise. And, in most barriadas, the inhabitants have also laid the foundations for a strong community organization, socially and quantitatively, even if not architecturally speaking, the barriadas are, undoubtedly, the most effective solution yet offered to the problem of urbanization in Peru.

Below: Pampa de Cuevas, March 1963, 16 months after the initial invasion; in this case there was little delay in allocating the plots and construction is going ahead fast—the majority of the squatters have put their foundations down, at least, and many have masonry walls completed. Virtually all the roofs, and many dwellings, are of woven cane mats.