

Carla Conradie 260412276
ARCH 251 Professor Türelí
TA Gonzalo Muñoz
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Forming the Informal City

The contemporary city is marked by a tension between formality and informality, an interaction amongst supposed opposites that is easily visible in the urban fabric. On one hand, the formal city is static, permanent, and two-dimensional; it appears on conventional city maps and is read through its built environment planned by architects. It is ordered not only in terms of its urban and architectural shape but also its cultural, political, and socio-economic organization. On the other hand, its contrasting image is found in the informal city: dynamic and three-dimensional, made from temporary, recycled materials, it is in a constant state of flux, inventing and reinventing itself. This “kinetic city” is understood not through architecture but through spaces and the patterns of occupation within them. Developed without the input of architects, the informal represents the “shapeless areas of the city where economic and socio-political structures are particularly unstable and in which culture is characterized by its apparent incoherence.” Despite this supposed disjointedness, however, the informal city is no less rational than its formal counterpart. Instead, it is simply following its own logic that works to correct or compensate for unequal distribution of both tangible and intangible resources, from infrastructure to culture. Brazilian photographer André Cypriano captures this contrast between formal and informal in his black and white pieces of Rio de Janeiro, a city defined by such sharp disparities; one shot looking down upon the famous Sugar Loaf mountain and Guanabara Bay (fig. 1) depicts the city’s largest slum-city Rocinha spread organically from an organized collection of high-rises up onto the rocky slopes like moss. Favelas, the result of illegal land occupation directly adjacent to formal neighbourhoods, represent the height of informality in large Brazilian cities. Rocinha, then, becomes the embodiment both of this binary tension within contemporary urban centers, and of the “local” logic that makes the informal distinctive in its own right. While the informal city is often defined externally by what it is not (read: formal), Brazilian favelas provide an understanding of their unique, internally produced identities. This essay will address how but that it is

Favelas Described

The birth of favelas in Rio de Janeiro can be traced back to the late 19th century, a period of rapid urbanization for the most populous city in the young republic. Taking their name from the first squatter settlement on *Morro da Favella* (or Favela Hill) in 1897-98, these informal communities multiplied as affordable housing became increasingly scarce and the poor were displaced by urban reform. *Fin-de-siècle* renewal projects, aimed at civilizing and sanitizing the narrow colonial streets of Rio into a “tropical Paris,” demolished over 500 buildings in the central district to create what is today the *Avenida Rio Branco*. The poor were further marginalized as Rio worked to modernize throughout the 20th century. Large parts of the urban tissue were leveled and expanded (such as the historic Castelo Hill to make way for Santos Dumont airport in the 1920s), and the city became more segregated “as racial disparities increasingly coincided with patterns of residence.” Legally defined in 1937, favelas dramatically rose in number during the postwar decades despite attempts by the government to eradicate slums and integrate *favelados* into the formal framework of Rio society. Indeed, the consistently rapid growth of these informal settlements (typically on hillsides in the affluent southern

integrate *favelados* into the formal framework of Rio society. Indeed, the consistently rapid growth of these informal settlements (typically on hillsides in the affluent southern zones or industrial suburbs of the north and west) has firmly rooted them into Rio's urban fabric. By the year 2000, there were 704 favelas in the city, housing over a million residents or nearly 20% of the total population. In the same year, Rocinha was reportedly home to over 56, 000 residents, though unofficial estimates reach as high as 150, 000 people.

Though set apart from formal areas by discrepancies in racial representation (*favelados* are predominantly mixed race or mestizo, due to the fostering of socio-spatial segregation during Brazil's industrialization), service provision, and drug-related violence, such large favelas like Rocinha have gradually come to be viewed as "established urban neighbourhoods" and an undeniable part of Rio's urban makeup. The study of the informal city as a distinctive entity, beyond its characterization as the negative inverse of the formal, is therefore significant in understanding Rio as a contemporary metropolis. Though urban sociology research concerning theories of marginality and urban poverty has been carried out from the 1960s to the 1980s, the study of a built environment which is "not designed by architects but constitutes a large majority of Brazil's urban landscape... has not yet received the attention it deserves." This statement by Fernando Luiz Lara, a researcher of vernacular modernism in Brazilian cities' informal sectors, works as an inspirational point of departure for my own research on the unique character of Rio's favelas.

The Informal Formed by the Formal

The informal city does not exist in a vacuum entirely divorced from the formal, but is rather a product of exchange between the two. In fact, despite the apparent organicism of the favela's built environment (fig. 2), Fernando Luiz Lara argues for the existence of a "clear pattern, or formal vocabulary, that permeates the apparently chaotic environment of the informal." More specifically, the physical characteristics of the favela are a product of a top-down dissemination of modernist architectural ideas and formal building techniques. For instance, Le Corbusier's Domino frame, an independent structure in reinforced concrete, infiltrated all social strata in the early 20th century to become the "basic spatial configuration of low-income communities" not only in Brazil, but also across the developing world. Other characteristics of modernism, such as inverted roofs, concrete canopies, thin steel columns, ceramic tiles, and *brise-soleils*, also became incorporated into housing in the informal sector without the input of architects. Construction workers living in favelas increasingly adopted and adapted the forms and methods used to build high-income housing to their own homes, creating a situation in which, before external treatment, "the houses of the elite and the poorest favela *Barraco* [shack] look exactly alike." Ironically, informal settlements have in this way used the same modernist vocabulary that originally advocated for the eradication of favelas to foster their own growth.

At the same time, urban space within an informal settlement is shaped by the barriers imposed on its citizens by their formal neighbour. Indeed, because space has political and ideological connotations, the negotiation and construction of urban areas is inherently linked to power relations. Furthermore, the development of *favelados'* surroundings is directly tied to restrictions on their autonomy made externally by the formal political, cultural, and socio-economic framework. Autonomy in this context can be understood as "the right to the city," described by David Harvey as the freedom "to make and remake our cities and ourselves" and "to exercise collective power to reshape the process of urbanisation." It is the ability for communities to "establish their own means of action and interaction" based on self-defined norms. Therefore, even municipal interventions in Brazilian favelas that work to implement participatory planning (such as the *Plano Global Especifico*, or PGE, used in Belo Horizonte since 1995) tend to act in a heteronomous fashion, silencing the communities with which they are meant to be working. Because *favelados* cannot take part in the creation of the logic within which decisions are made, they lose the opportunities to set the agenda and to self-manage, and are subsequently forced to adapt to the legal regulations, private expert teams, and strict procedures of the formal agency. The reality of life in the favelas as dynamic and diverse

decisions are made, they lose the opportunities to set the agenda and to self-manage, and are subsequently forced to adapt to the legal regulations, private expert teams, and strict procedures of the formal agency. The reality of life in the favelas as dynamic and diverse as well as the inhabitants' knowledge and experience is ignored in favor of a technical, institutionalized approach. Without input from the *favelados* themselves, planners misunderstand what is needed within their specific context, and fail to improve everyday life for those affected. For instance, while the new street network created by PGE in Belo Horizonte increased automobile access to favelas, it also inhibited mobility by foot within by blocking shortcuts and stairways; at the same time, the closed design of new apartments had an isolating effect on inhabitants accustomed to communal living. The top-down nature of so-called participatory planning is a pertinent example of informal space becoming inadvertently shaped by the external world of the formal.

Along a similar vein, state interventions in Rio's favelas in the context of the 2012 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics is also of significance in terms of formal-informal exchange. This kind of initiative, with the goal of urbanizing all favelas by 2020, looks to integrate the informal city into the formal urban fabric through the pacification of crime and through municipal remodeling projects in Rocinha and elsewhere. Though the formal voice, such as that of Brazilian architect Luiz Carlos Toledo and other reform-minded *urbanistas*, advocates for a reactivation of the informal economy, the provision of services, and ultimately the demolition of the "invisible wall" between formal and informal cities, the question remains of whether the voices of the *favelados* will be considered in the development of their surroundings. At the same time, the anti-crime missions being carried out in favelas, aspiring to "reclaim urban territories outside of state control," emphasize the power dynamics inherent in formal-informal relations. Though successful in reducing the power of drug gangs like Comando Vermelho, such Pacifying Police Units (or UPPs) have been accused of police brutality and therefore struggle to gain public approval. Again, communal autonomy within the favela risks being compromised by its formal neighbour. Thus without an understanding of this interaction with the formal, a view of the informal city is rendered incomplete.

The Informal in its Own Right

Despite these interactions and impositions associated with its formal counterpart, the informal city possesses a distinctive identity developed within its limits. Moreover, though in many ways molded by the actions of the formal, favelas are not simply the negative image of the ordered metropolis. In fact, "ironically, often it is the informal city that is the site of meaningful production in the city." Rio's ambiguous relationship to its informal neighbour has evolved over time, with the force of the "favela rising" shifting perceptions from that of "an atavistic element to be eliminated by Europeanized modernization and progress" to a focal point of cultural authenticity, aesthetic inventiveness, and community agency. For instance, a short Al Jazeera documentary called "Good Morning Rocinha" presents the viewer with the hard realities of life in the favela, but also includes the work of a local radio DJ who broadcasts positive messages into his community and even built a playground as a safe space for children. Moreover, the favela is now seen as a setting for artistic expression, where graffiti and street art are treated not as vandalism but as vehicles for community development. International artists also use the informal city as a canvas for their work: Dutch artists Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn's community painting projects (fig. 3) have brought vibrant colour to Rio's favelas, while French photographer J.R. projected the faces of local women who had lost loved ones to gang violence on the façades of Morro da Providência favela (fig. 4). Coupled with the emergence of international trendy spots like the *Favela Chic* nightclubs in Paris and London, the favela has become a trademark brand and a motif for the authentic alternative to a formal cultural framework.

Indeed, the favela is seen as the organic representation of the "real" Rio, a symbol of popular culture triumphing against the adverse side effects of modern urban life. For this reason, in recent years "reality tours" in favelas like Rocinha have been included in the city's list of official tourist must-sees, an exotic spectacle of genuine culture and poverty next to upper-middle-class neighbourhoods. Indeed, the term "favela" encompasses an urban diversity that complicates the existence of one definition; while it is a place of resistance, creativity, and agency, it is also the stage for violent drug-related

encompasses an urban diversity that complicates the existence of one definition; while it is a place of resistance, creativity, and agency, it is also the stage for violent drug-related crimes, a symbol of economic disparity and social injustice. These contradictions make the favela and such tours within them places of contested meaning, but also reveal their dynamic, three-dimensional nature. In this way, they work to comment upon the incapacities of the state to correct socio-economic inequalities and of the informal city to possess an authentic cultural identity like its own.

Conclusions

The informal, by definition, is often understood through the formality it lacks. Mobile, temporal, and recyclable, the informal city is characterized by flow and instability. It has often been regarded by architecture in a derogatory sense as a place illegitimated by this heterogeneity, as the inferior other of the static, formal city created by professionals. However, informal settlements like the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, though shaped in several ways by socio-spatial segregation and power hierarchies imposed by the formal city, cannot be defined simply as the opposite of that formal city. The task of the architect, perhaps, is to understand its special qualities and develop methods that respect its temporality and fluidity. Favelas are not only the negative product of inequality, but distinctive urban entities in their own right. They are not defined solely by their marginalization, but by their own unique social and spatial experience. No longer simply a by-product of exclusionary urban modernization, favelas constitute an integral part of contemporary Rio and highlight the “changing roles of people and spaces in urban society.” Because of the permanence of favelas in the urban tissue, the question arises of whether they should be embraced and celebrated as informal entities, or incorporated into the formal urban tissue. Moreover, is it even useful to understand these urban spaces in such a categorical manner? According to Felipe Hernández and Peter Kellett, a move away from the reductive formal-informal dichotomy is necessary to understand the challenges faced by modern urban centers. The “kinetic” quality of the informal is, after all, becoming a reality within the formal realm as we continue to globalize and modernize. The line between static formal settlements and dynamic informal ones is blurring, creating not so much an interdependent pair of opposites as one intertwined whole. Therefore, as “the future of Rio now seems inextricably linked to the fate of the favela,” the contemporary city will likely be characterized not by a tension between formal and informal, but by a mix of the two.