

From Shack to House to Fortress: the favela dwelling as a total social fact

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Abstract

This paper examines the social phenomenon urban planners have come to call “favela consolidation” as an ongoing political re-articulation between poverty, (il)legality, and urban space in contemporary Rio de Janeiro. It seeks to unpack the paradoxical ways in which the favelas’ (shantytowns) social reproduction hinges simultaneously on their progressive commoditization, legalization and incorporation into the fabric of the so-called “formal” city (favela commoditization) and on their constitution as residual “territories” of global flows of drugs and weapons by a drug trade that thrives on reinforcing the favelas’ spatial and social boundaries (favela territorialization). Through an examination of the transformations in the favelas’ built environment over the course of the past three decades, I argue that favela consolidation traps favela residents in a double bind: the conditions for their political visibility and leverage rest on their constitution as a threat to the city; and yet it is this very perception that has brought them unprecedented political recognition and material improvements.

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This paper examines an ongoing political re-articulation between poverty, (il)legality, and urban space in contemporary Rio de Janeiro. It seeks to unpack the paradoxical ways in which the favelas’ (shantytowns) social reproduction hinges simultaneously on their progressive commoditization, legalization and incorporation into the fabric of the so-called “formal” city and on their constitution as residual “territories” of global flows of drugs and weapons by a drug trade that thrives on reinforcing the favelas’ spatial and social boundaries.

Poverty and illegality have historically been the terms constituting the core of both official and commonsensical definitions of the favelas, wherein they were constructed as portions of urban space usually located on hill slopes and illegally precariously occupied by extremely poor people. These features do little to grasp the favelas’ specificity as urban formations. Not only are there areas in the city that do not fall under the category of favela despite being illegally inhabited by the poor but, more importantly, the favelas’ constitutive illegality of settlement is

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inscribed in a larger historical context of non-compliance with urbanistic legislation. In large Brazilian cities, illegal landed property is the norm: it is estimated that over fifty percent of real estate properties do not conform to current legislation regulating soil usage and occupation, and/or do not observe zoning or construction laws.

A similar reasoning could be applied to poverty as a defining characteristic of the city's favelas. In one of the world's most unequal countries, poverty in and of itself does not account for the specificity of the favela as a social, political or urbanistic category. Not all the Brazilian poor live in favelas – in fact, historically it has been the case that the highest rates of poverty are not found in urban areas, but in the rural hinterlands. Hence the migration flows that constantly fed the favelas, the periphery, and the metropolitan region of the city over the course of the twentieth century.

Shifting the scale of analysis to urban areas only, or restricting it only to Rio de Janeiro (whether or not taking into account the impoverished metropolitan region), the fact remains that it is no longer accurate to claim that the most extreme levels of poverty or deficient urban services are found in the favelas. Quantitative research based on census and household survey data show an increasing differentiation among the poor, and particularly the urban poor, with changing consumption patterns and improved access to public services, especially health, education and sanitation, despite increasing economic deterioration, social and economic inequality (see Preterceille and Valladares 2000, Lago 2000). A few groundbreaking studies have unequivocally shown that the most extreme levels of poverty are *not necessarily* found in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, and particularly not in consolidated favelas located in the midst of well of neighborhoods as is the case of my field research site.

These transformations can be partially attributed to a paradigm shift in governmental policies vis-à-vis Rio's favelas that in the past two or three decades has transformed their legal, spatial, social and economic characteristics. Through the passing of progressive legislation such as the Statute of Cities and the 1992 Master Plan emphasizing the "social function of the city", the favelas have ceased to be legally categorized as 'squattments' and are now governed by the guidelines regulating "Special Social Interest Zones". This shift has done away with what have been the defining features of favelas: their constitutive transience, extremely precarious infrastructure, and fostered by decades of (occasionally fulfilled) removal threats.

The lifting of the specter of removal has radically transformed the favela landscape, the uses and appropriations of its space: internally, it gave rise to a private construction boom by residents, who transformed their stucco shacks into masonry homes, thus constituting an extremely dynamic, albeit informal, real estate market. Externally, it has established a series of previously non-existing services, that range from piped water to electric connections, from sewage systems to paved roads, from daycare centers to elementary public schools.

The scope of these transformations is such that urban planners and government technicians now refer to them as "consolidated favelas", a term that would have constituted an incontestable oxymoron only thirty years ago. In its current usage, the term falls short of constituting a concept: developed from the God-like perspective of planners (de Certeau 1984), it captures a recent trend in the spatial distribution of poverty and inequality in the city that forces

us to rethink customary assumptions about the spatialization of poverty in the city. Rather than taking the consolidated favela as a *fait accompli*, my intent here is to elaborate what is currently a descriptive term into an analytical concept. I do so by constructing favela *consolidation* as a means of narrating a spatio-temporal process embedded in a particular web of power relations and social practices, that constitute the favelas as a social space and renders legible a certain politics of contested and often contradictory territorialities.

The fact is that infrastructural upgrading has done little to ensure residents' rights to the city: their daily lives unfold in the context of an extremely violent political economy, a joint oeuvre of the favelas' territorialization by drug factions organized on a city-wide level and of violent police repression. Constant shootouts, brutal police incursions, the establishment of a law of silence and of a proxy judiciary system by the drug trade came to pervade the favelas' quotidian life, engendering an atmosphere of uncertainty and routines of risk avoidance. This daily context of armed conflicts instills peculiar temporalities and spatialities, reinforcing the drug trade's symbolic order and feeding the dominant representation of the favelas as particular territories defined by "violence".

But, paradoxically, it is the very politicization of favela territorialization that secures the conditions of possibility for infrastructural upgrading. In other words, if we construct favela consolidation as the result of this larger context, we find that the dynamics of favela territorialization and commoditization are, in fact, mutually constitutive. That is, favela consolidation traps favela residents in a double bind: the conditions for their political visibility and leverage rest on their constitution as a threat to the city; and yet it is this very perception that has brought them unprecedented political recognition and material improvements. I will take up these issues through an illustration of what favela residents most often describe as the transition from "shack" to "house" to "fortress".

From Shack to House to Fortress

Favela residents' narratives of the transformation from 'shack' to 'house' render legible their perception of the progressive but undeniable material improvement of their surroundings over the past, concatenating a story of personal progress. The accumulation of capital in the form of home ownership operates a massive transformation in residents' lifeworlds: the same site that once harbored the "valueless" stucco shacks can become a major source of economic and symbolic value through their own "hard work".

To be sure, this imagination of progress over time coexists with common expressions of despair regarding the immediate future, marked by a context of labor insecurity and informality, as well as the social effects of drug trade territorialization. The imagination of progressive material improvements is necessarily reflective: it requires an abstraction from the vicissitudes and hardships of daily life, past and present, for the long-term processes – viewed as the myriad components of 'improvement' as a native category – to concatenate a story. Still the access to a mass consumer market, more generalized levels of inclusion in educational institutions and improvements in the sanitary conditions of their environment have been engraved in the memory

of those in their mid-twenties or older. The recollection of how things were “before”, coupled with the relative economic stability of today in comparison to the succession of economic crises of the 1980s and early 90s, tend to offset the present predicament of un- and underemployment. Such a reflexive imagination requires visible proof, concrete evidence. And that is found in the built space of the favela, particularly in one’s house. House construction and the collective improvements upon the space of the community thus emerge as future-building activities, through which residents constitute themselves as subjects of their own history, of their own “improvement”.

It would all be a very happy tale were it not for the fact that this feverish building and investing takes place in the drug trade’s territory. The embeddedness of the trade in the social fabric of the favela brings each and every episode of violence close to residents, if only in the form of a sense of heightened insecurity and a constant fear of possible victimization – by the police, by the trade, or by stray bullets. Such a context of uncertainty has had significant effects on the spatialities of the favela, particularly in the proliferation of gates, bars on windows, and fortified walls to offer multiple layers of protection. All these measures inscribe in physical space residents’ attempts to keep violent conflict outside the private spaces of their homes. Such efforts are furthered by investments in videogames for children, television sets, personal computers and DVD players to keep as much activity as possible indoors and therefore minimize the chances of being caught in the crossfire of frequent shootouts.

Take the case of my informant Helena, a thirty-five year-old assistant nurse and mother of three raised in one of Rio de Janeiro’s consolidated favelas. Helena got married in 1983. As newly-weds, she and her husband Pedro moved into their first (autoconstructed) masonry home. Two years – and a daughter – later they started the first expansion of their home, building two additional rooms. They also seized the opportunity to secure their house from the constant shootouts between drug dealers: they moved the kitchen to eastern side of the house, so as to reduce the vulnerability of the house’s interior to the shootouts from the neighboring favela. They also took the chance to keep the bedroom on that side of the house, so as to keep the kids safer, since the outside wall already bore the marks of the decade-old conflict with the neighboring favela. By the time Helena’s third daughter was born in 1996 they had already built an enclosed balcony for the house, that was kept closed by an ever-locked gate to enhance the security of their home. Finally, as I was conducting field research, I witnessed the last expansion of their home. This effort was as unplanned it was as urgent and unwanted; it took place in the middle of a crisis in the brought about by their neighbor on the lower eastern side, Carlos, who had recently joined the trade.

Less than two weeks after the news of Carlos’ recruitment by the trade broke out, a wall went up enclosing Helena’s roof to avoid police invasions. When it was finished, Helena told me for the first time that she was considering moving out of the favela. “But” she said “where could I go?” Helena knew very well that anywhere she could possibly afford she would encounter similar dilemmas; that she would never sell her house for the amount of money she has already invested in it; that their house’s location allowed her to keep two jobs, because it was close enough to both hospitals; and that she already had a hard enough time getting her kids to and from one of the last

good public schools in the city. She sighed and said: “While I can’t move out, I’ll just build my fortress here”.

Helena’s fortress building efforts provide a window onto the (at times paradoxical) symbiosis of commoditization and territorialization that dovetail in the constitution of this urban form planners have come to call “consolidated favelas”. My account of Helena’s “fortress” demonstrates how, paradoxically, the subjective value of Helena’s house building efforts has converted it into an inalienable possession that finds no equivalent economic value. Hence Helena’s sense of being trapped in her own relative prosperity.

But, perhaps more significantly, Helena’s fortress-building offers one of those rare hermeneutic opportunities for examining social phenomena wherein “everything intermingles”. Helena’s fortress, in other words, offers a window onto house construction in the favela as a total social fact. As Marcel Mauss wrote long ago, in total social phenomena,

“all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time – religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise, economic ones, which support special forms of production and consumption, or rather, of performing total services and of distribution. This is not to take into account the aesthetic phenomena to which these facts lead, and the contours of the phenomena that these institutions manifest” (Mauss 1990: 3).

So it is with Helena’s fortress: inquiring into its conditions of possibility brings at once the international flow of drugs and its spatialities, as well as the neoliberal fostering of the so-called informal sector, and the resulting consolidation of favela real estate markets, as well as the material transformations brought about by favela “integration” policies to bear on a wall built on a hill slope of one of more than six hundred favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

Now, applying Mauss’s “vague but suggestive” (Gofman 1998) concept to housing puts me in no position to make claims to originality. Dwellings long captured anthropologists’ attention for their hermeneutic potential², particularly in small-scale

² Lewis H. Morgan (1965) and Franz Boas assembled compendiums of detailed descriptions of dwellings², a wealth of comparative data to be compared and interpreted; Marcel Griaule and Germaine Diertelen (1965) deciphered the Dogon house floor plan as “the world in miniature” in its depiction of the God Nommo procreating; Victor Turner (1955) found in the spatial distribution of houses by generation the key to work out kinship and alliance structures; Stanley Tambiah (1969) found the spatial configuration of houses in northeastern Thailand to be homologous to classifications regarding marriage rules and animals; Claude Levi-Strauss (1982; 1987) abstracts the materiality of houses to develop the notion of the House as a “moral person”, an institution resulting of a grouping of people united through ‘antagonistic principles’ – alliance, descent, endogamy, exogamy – in societies in transition from a kinship-based type of organization to one in which political and economic interests begin to shape the social field; Pierre Bourdieu (1979) responds with a thoroughly structural reading of the Berber house, construed as the privileged medium for the incorporation of social dispositions. And this is just to mention just a few key studies and theorizations that have turned to houses or housing as a means of capturing and/or reproducing the underlying social order

societies. My research, on the other hand, must come to terms with a metropolis of six million inhabitants, former capital of a nation of continental proportions, where capitalism is well rooted and the market economy not only flourishes but also produces the social structure in which my informants are caught. Could it be that in complex, capitalist societies caught in the myriad processes we have come to name globalization housing does not offer important insights into the larger social order? By no means: housing conditions comprise one of the cornerstones of statistical knowledge about society. Real estate markets and their differential valuations provide concrete maps of social inequality and segregation; gentrification, ghettoization, and suburbanization constitute social phenomena – and fields of scholarly inquiry – that refer not only to spatial dynamics of urban development but to distinct modes of producing housing; indeed, the very centrality of home ownership in capitalist societies allows for the theorization of housing, its production, and its inhabited experience, as a process, as a total social fact. In my case study, house construction offers an hermeneutic onto the phenomenological experience of favela consolidation from the standpoint of its embeddedness in the trajectory of situated subjects: “shacks”, “houses” and “fortresses” correspond to different ways of being in the world, and of inhabiting a favela. For the anthropologist, they shed light on favela consolidation as an historical process and future predicament.

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