

## DREAMS OF URBAN RENEWAL: THE FAVELA RECONSIDERED

*“—but if, like me, you have less to protect, you can get high on the energy of the place, and allow it to fascinate and excite you. Town planning never happened: there wasn’t time. The city ambushed its inhabitants, exploding in consecutive booms of coffee, sugar and rubber, so quickly that nobody could draw breath to say what should go there. It has been expanding ever since, sustained by all that ferocious energy. And here, just as in universe, anything could happen.”*

*James Scudamore, Heliópolis<sup>1</sup>*

The city starts where nature ends: when we encounter the tropical metropolis, we wonder if this is still true. Dreaming of Brazilian cities is like dreaming of a place where nature is abundant and the city blends into an urban jungle of highways, skyscrapers, popular architecture, archaic Modernism and the dense tissue of

1. Scudamore, James. *Heliópolis*, (New York: Europa Editions 2010),7.

exotic vegetation—untamed, city and nature merge into a hybrid territory of urban wilderness. Although the favelas of Brazil constitute an integral part of this vision, informal settlements are still considered as a shadow world at the margins of the official urban fabric. If we look at contemporary modes of city-making, we find that the opposition between the two worlds is becoming obsolete.

Despite our continued polarization between the informal and formal—or *morro* (hill) and *asfalto* (asphalt) as Cariocas<sup>2</sup> would say, —we can barely discern between the various actors and forces that shape the city. As the epigraph suggests, the Brazilian metropolis (or the metropolis under the neoliberal regime in general) is informal by nature, if urban informality refers to the ambiguity of instant stability and constant change.

The distinction between the informal and formal fades as informal settlements consolidate themselves into self-sustaining and self-confident neighborhoods: formerly on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro's metropolitan region, Rio das

2. Cariocas are the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro. The original word comes from the indigenous Amerindian language of the Tupi people, meaning 'white man's house.'

Pedras has grown into a local center at the heart of the city's new urban expansion zone; São Paulo's largest informal settlement, Heliópolis, can hardly be recognized as a favela anymore as its communities are better organized than many of its adjacent formal neighborhoods; there is potential for Jardim Colombo, located in the middle of São Paulo's wealthy neighborhood of Murumbi and surrounded by new high-end real estate developments, to become a vibrant commercial and residential area for the upcoming middle class; and Cidade Ipava is situated by São Paulo's water basins, a unique natural resort for an ever-expanding metropolitan population.

Brazil's version of the informal city—the favela—is no longer an exception but the norm, reflecting growth patterns and emergent social realities of a rapidly urbanizing world. A heterogeneous mixture of organizations, urban typologies and lifestyles, the favela is at once hyper-specific and generic, local and global, micro and macro.

However, while urban density and populated streetscapes represent the progressiveness of informal growth, unplanned environments often

lack basic infrastructure, public services and recreational spaces. The advantages of auto-construction are undermined as soon as informal settlements are cut off from larger frameworks.

Brazilian municipal authorities have recognized that physical upgrades to the favelas don't have to upset social and organizational structures. Based on the 'social role of the city' and the 'public function of private property' as established in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, administrative and planning structures have been developed over several decades to face the challenges posed by informal urban growth. If we consider the impressive scope of public interventions deployed in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo since the 1980s, we might recognize an avant-garde for slum-upgrading, and in this respect, for urban planning as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

When the Modernist vanguard of the late 1950s shaped the identity of an emerging world power, Brazil was shaken by an optimism that promoted the development of new progressive

3. According to UN Habitat, one third of the urban population lives in slums and in the next 20 years, that percentage is predicted to increase to about 50%. The informal city can therefore be considered a dominant component of the urban condition. (United Nations Human Settlements Program. *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements*. Nairobi: UN-Habitat, 2003)

lifestyles. Can we return to this transformative vision now that Brazil is regaining self-confidence on the international stage?

We have to replace the Modernist paradigm with new models of sustainable urban growth. Our approach to the informal city—its new forms of urbanism and potential models for sustainable lifestyles—will play a key role in this process. Mediating between micro-environments and macro-scale systems, urban design can learn from the favelas as test-sites for urban renewal.

The present book takes a proactive approach to the informal city, using the Brazilian urban context as a backdrop for visionary ways of city-making. Proposed projects and typologies are meant to be retro-progressive and as heterogeneous as their area of investigation—with a future beginning in *medias res*, they will live through countless variations of the informal city as a proto-town-to-be.

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