INSIDE CIDADE DE DEUS: 
THE COUNTER NARRATIVE OF URBAN INFORMALITY

"Then people from a number of favelas and other towns in the state of Rio de Janeiro came to inhabit the new neighborhood, which consisted of rows of white, pink and blue houses. On the other side of the left branch of the river, The Blocks were built: a complex of blocks of one- and two-bedroom apartments, some blocks with twenty others with forty apartments each, all five stories high. The red shades of beaten earth saw new feet in the hustle and bustle of life, in the stampede of a destiny to be fulfilled."

Paulo Lins, City of God

Popular literature and mass media has forever engraved the story of the neighborhood of Cidade de Deus—Rio de Janeiro’s infamous “City of God”—in our collective memory of South American cities. Portrayed in the film City of God, an
adaptation of Paulo Lins' novel of the same name, the settlement is today synonymous with the movie’s grim depiction of adolescents caught in a vicious circle of drug dealing and crime and residents caught between gangs and the police. The international success of the movie reinforced the stigma of living in the favelas, in parallel worlds under criminal control. Yet a closer look at the neighborhood shows that this image no longer accurately represents contemporary Cidade de Deus, which has changed dramatically since the movie first premiered in 2002.

The one-sided representation of Cidade de Deus as a ghetto is in line with the media’s narration of living conditions experienced by underprivileged, subaltern classes. However, the “theory of subaltern urbanism” might be told differently if it were to concentrate on everyday life in low-income neighborhoods rather than sensational stories. In 2011, the Master of Advanced Studies in Urban Design at the ETH Zurich launched a research initiative to study the layered history of Cidade de Deus and how it has changed since the neighborhood was wrestled from the control of drug gangs in 2009. Popular modifications of and extensions to the original settlement have revealed the transformative potential of informal practice; in contrast to previous dystopian narratives, the neighborhood’s current condition is surprisingly positive. Did the media’s narrow focus on crime overshadow Cidade de Deus’ growth from a suburban commuter settlement into a lively, dense, and popular neighborhood, close to the new urban expansion zone of Barra da Tijuca and the 2016 Olympic Park?

The development of Cidade de Deus is not typical of most informal settlements. The government built the settlement in the 1960s to house residents from favelas demolished by the state. Standardized mass housing was adopted as the solution to illegal construction, squatting, and uncontrolled urban growth. But the program succeeded only in moving the problem of unregulated development from the center to the periphery of the city, where it was exacerbated by the remoteness of its new location. In order to compensate...
for the project’s inadequate housing conditions, residents gradually informalized the serial housing units. As an overcrowded favela, Cidade de Deus faced growing urban violence after Brazil’s military regime folded. Struck hard by the economic downturn of the 1980s (the “lost decade”) and beyond the scope of governmental control, Cidade de Deus soon became known as one of the most violent places in Rio if not in Brazil. However, what many city officials once considered a hopeless case has transformed with Brazil’s economic rise and growing prominence on the world stage. Increasingly, residents from other favelas in Rio are choosing to move to Cidade de Deus, which is developing into a vibrant, local center with a booming economy and its own CDD currency. What’s more, since Cidade de Deus’ pacification in 2009, the positive impact of informal practice is no longer obscured by media coverage that focuses disproportionately on the disastrous consequences of exclusion and social neglect and not on everyday life in the neighborhood.

The present book, *Cidade de Deus: Working with Informalized Mass Housing in Brazil*, looks at a phenomenon that challenges fixed categories of urban development. The hybridization of formal and informal practices serves as a starting point for considering a novel model of urban growth that is equally driven by bottom-up and top-down processes. Through research and project—based instruction, the MAS Urban Design program takes inspiration from the case study of Cidade de Deus: testing the performative potential of the model’s innovative solutions; and proposing projects that will transform Cidade de Deus into an exemplary model for future urban development in Rio.

Inspired by self-organizing systems and daily life in informal neighborhoods, *Cidade de Deus* is a tribute to both the programmatic qualities and casual beauty of popular Brazilian architecture.

Rainer Hehl
The 2032 Marvelous City Award goes to:

CIDADE DE DEUS!

26 Destaques que fazem uma cidade melhor!

Destaque No 1:

Desenvolvimento

CDD cresceu continuamente desde as casas unifamiliares foram construídos na década de 1960. O procedimento foi único, hábil, não planejado, adaptativo e incremental.

GOAL:
- To grow fast

CATEGORY:
- Growth

DESCRIPTION:
Cidade de Deus was built in 1960 by the Brazilian government in collaboration with the Brazilian army. Due to population growth and lack of available land, the design was modified and extended like an original process. The landscape has changed a lot since it was first built. New interventions are taking place everyday, defining Cidade de Deus as a dynamic and popular place.
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Destaque No 17:
Pavimento Permeável

Descrição:
O pavimento em concreto de 60 x 60 cm com abertura de 40 cm de diâmetro para áreas que inundam raramente.

SOMÁL:
- De permeável e não precisa de escoamento sem desviar.
- Sem escoamento, sem escoamento.
- Inunda sem inundação.

CATEGORIA:
- Construção/Infraestrutura

Descrição:
Um sistema permeável fornece diferentes graus de permeabilidade e consumo de materiais. Quando aplicado a uma base de concreto, o grama-vento adaptável a diferentes velocidades de água e duração de inundação. É simples e eficaz, proporcionando uma variedade de usos e superfícies. As telhas são similares a temas para grama-vento, mas com diferentes estilos e aplicativos, tornando esta solução ideal para projetos urbanos.