Title

Favela Chic

Permalink

Journal

Author

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Publication Date

DOI

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

FAVELA CHIC

A PHOTO ESSAY

By Adriana Navarro-Sertich

Abstract

Currently, the most interesting efforts to address informal settlements, or favelas, are exemplified in Latin America. We are now witnessing spectacular libraries in depressed neighborhoods, gondola systems in marginalized areas, and museums in informal settlements. Following a long history of tabula rasa, public housing, self-help, and sites-and-services schemes, current approaches have evolved to include strategies characterized as urban acupuncture, making design a central component in the approach and aiming to minimize displacement while improving conditions in the area. Although current design-centered interventions could be catalysts to claim rights to the city, conversations about key issues and short- and long-term outcomes are critical: Why, where and how are these interventions operating?

Based on comparative field studies in South America, this essay will illustrate the potentials and limitations of current practices in 'slum upgrading.'

Metro Cable Santo Domingo,
Medellín (Colombia)

0. Definitions

Formal (*Asfalto*): Following the legal codes and norms of the regulated, and planned city.

Informal (*Favela*): In simplistic terms, the informal can be defined as what lies outside of the conventions and rules of the planned and legal city. Urban theorist Manuel Castells states that "the informal economy does not result from the intrinsic characteristic of activities, but from the social definition of state intervention, the boundaries of the informal economy will substantially vary in different contexts and historical circumstances."[1]

One cannot de-politicize nor de-historicize the question of informality. Thus, we must step away from viewing favelas as artifacts and begin to understand them in terms of the uses, values, and lives by which they are shaped, as well as the society and context in which they develop.

Form: The term is used to discuss physical and morphological characteristics of a structure or physical intervention.

Metro Cable in San Agustin, Caracas (Venezuela).
Source: Iwan Baan (http://iwan.com/photo)

I. Introduction

Since the 1950s, cities in developing countries have faced unprecedented increases in urbanization and poverty rates, resulting in an uncontrolled proliferation of informal settlements.[2] Some Latin American countries quickly became laboratories for large-scale urban experimentation, particularly regarding 'slum upgrading.' Initially consisting of mostly clearance and redevelopment projects, self-help sites and services, and public housing programs, 'slum upgrading' in the region has evolved to encompass strategies usually characterized as urban acupuncture, aiming to minimize displacement while at the same time attempting to improve conditions in the area. We are now witnessing spectacular libraries in depressed neighborhoods, cable car systems in marginalized areas, and

Projects by Urban-Think Tank,
source: www.u-tt.com/projectsMenu_All

museums in informal settlements. After a long history of tabula rasa schemes, and based on the foundation of Team 10 and urban theorists and practitioners such as Castells, Perlman, and Turner, favelas are no longer vilified. On the contrary, current urban and design interventions not only acknowledge but also legitimize urban informality. As the favela has returned to the center of urban discourses and practices, a new paradigm has begun to emerge, a paradigm I am calling Favela Chic.

The United Nations estimates that today nearly one billion people live in "slums" worldwide.[3] In this regard, architect Jose Castillo points out that the increase of informal settlements in Mexico City has become "the norm rather than the exception," and has therefore eroded our notion of what the city is.[4] With the unprecedented increase of informal settlements, and a great percentage of the urbanization in cities now happening informally, the discourse of the global city can no longer exclude and is no longer separate from the informal one.

Where as Modernism reflected an interest in unification, prioritizing the whole over the individual, the paradigm in the post-modern city shifted to one of fragmentation, leading to an approach of zoning and enclaving, privileging specific areas in the city while "bypassing" others.[5]

Informal Settlement, Cerro Santa Ana
Guayaquil (Ecuador)

In developing countries, the most noticeable of these spaces consist of informal settlements or favelas. In simple terms, favelas are unplanned, underserved areas, lying outside of the conventions and rules of the planned and legal city. Although favelas remain morphologically distinct from the rest of the city, they are not separate or dichotomous from the formal city, or asfalto, but are in persistent flux and change, constantly redefining their relationship with the formal. In many cases, favelas are located in sites that are difficult to manage (e.g. flood plains, ravines, steep slopes), and sometimes within toxic sites like sewage canals, industrial facilities, and landfills. These sites are also generally separate from formal urban infrastructure and lack access to basic services and formal transportation systems.[6] In cases where services have been self-provided (or "pirated"), conditions can be dangerous and unhygienic. High densities, lack of public space and equipment, and the high danger of being located in polluted sites or landslide risk areas results in environmental, public health, and security problems for its inhabitants. Likewise, the internal hierarchies in favelas (including gangs and drug trafficking) raise strong public safety questions and accentuate marginalization and stigmatization.

By emphasizing image and representation, and heavily relying on design as a central component in its approach, Favela Chic reflects a new typology in 'slum upgrading.' Viewing favelas as integral components in the development of the city, current interventions have returned to the notion of "slums of hope,"[7] thereby reformulating the discourse of the growing city, its configuration of built form and social activities, and the relationship between global and informal. Ranging in types and scales, from small acupunctural projects to expansively designed infrastructural networks, current projects acknowledge auto-construction as a legitimate

way of providing housing, and seek to minimize displacement and integrate the favela with the city. In this respect, projects focus on aspects that are most absent in settlements: infrastructure, public space, and public equipment. Based on comparative field studies in South America, analyzing specific case studies, the first part of this essay provides a redefinition of assumptions, while discussing the potentials and dilemmas in the adoption of a Favela Chic paradigm.

Moravia, Medellin (Colombia)

III. Focus on Latin America

Currently, some of the most interesting efforts to address favelas are exemplified in Latin America. In the last decades, the region has experienced strong waves of democratization[8] and neoliberalization that have "coalesced into a single entangled process of change."[9] Although these initiatives coexist in tension—democratic agendas focus on social justice, equality, and citizenship, while neoliberal agendas privilege entrepreneurialism, competitiveness, and self-regulation— they have created a shift in models of governance, pushing towards the decentralization of states.[10] Growing economies, coupled with decentralization and democratization processes, have resulted in stronger local autonomy and participation in urban development

projects, as well as a new emphasis on reflecting citizen rights through city form.

For example, Medellin, Colombia's second largest city, has executed several initiatives under the term of Social Urbanism. Following former mayor Fajardo's slogan: "Medellin la más Educada,"[11] new interventions were designed to upgrade the city's most depressed areas. Some of the most recognized projects are part of the Proyectos Urbanos Integrales (PUI), or Integral Urban Projects, such as the aerial cable car system Metro Cable, and the city's Library Parks (Parque Bibliotecas) and Quality Schools (Colegios de Calidad).

Metro Cable and Library Park Spain, Medellin

Rio de Janeiro's Favela-Bairro is one of the largest neighborhood-upgrading programs in the world. Seeking to turn depressed areas into functioning neighborhoods, the program emphasizes the provision of services and the construction of community centers, daycare facilities, communal kitchens, new streets, and pedestrian walkways in medium-sized favelas.

Vidigal Favela, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)

Elevator, Pavao, Pavaocinho, Rio de Janeiro, Photography by Andrew Carman

Guayaquil's Urban Regeneration projects, as part of the initial Malecón 2000 beautification scheme, includes the façade restorations in Las Peñas, urban beaches, and waterfront renovation projects such as the "Malecón del Salado."

Also, in Caracas, architects and universities are studying and proposing design-based interventions for the city's barrios. One of the largest and more publicized projects is the recently finished cable car system in the barrio San Agustin.

La Playita, Guayaquil
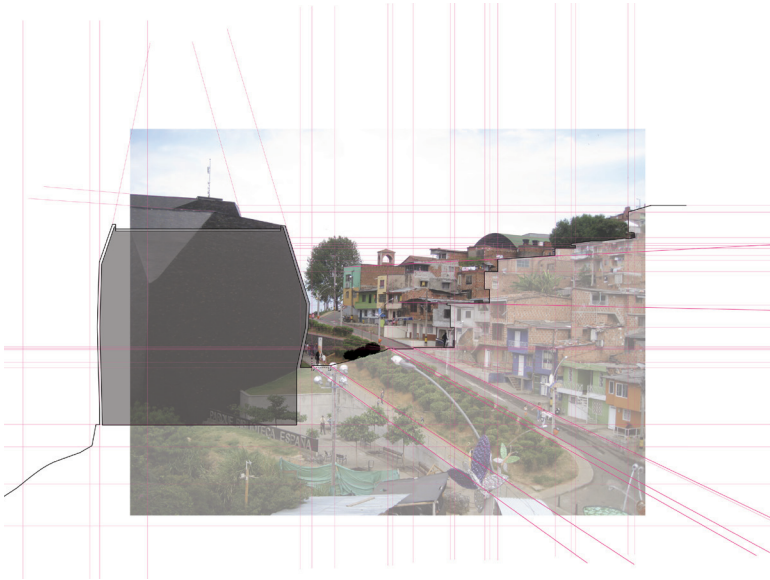

Las Peñas, Guayaquil

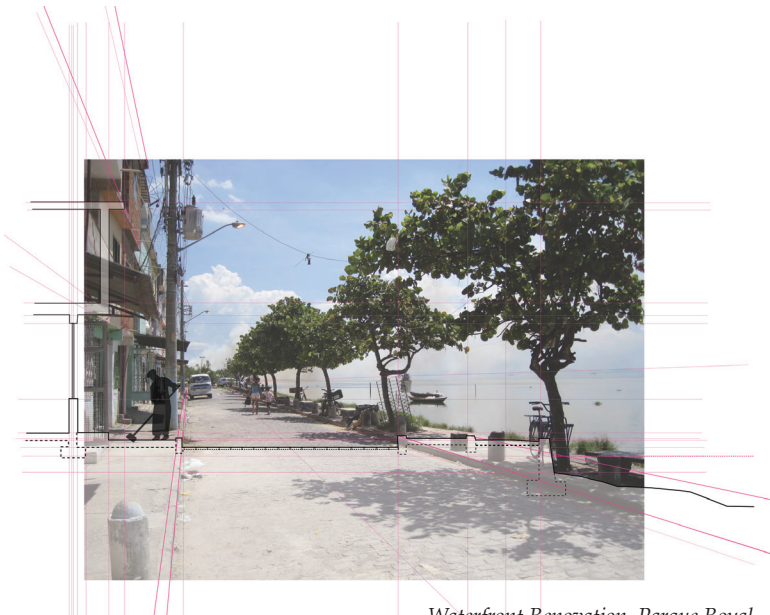*La Vega, Caracas (Venezuela)*
Source: Arqui 5

Malecón del Salado Boardwalk and Waterfront Renovation , Guayaquil

Left: Iporanga (Guarapiranga Reservoir), Sao Paulo
Right: Juan Bobo Creek, Santo Domingo, Medellín

Library Park Spain + surroundings,
Santo Domingo, Medellin

Waterfront Renovation, Parque Royal,
Rio de Janeiro

IV. Outcomes + Observations

Some positive outcomes for many of these physical interventions include improvements in the provision of basic services and sanitation, an increase in physical connections (access and mobility), and the enhancement of physical conditions (public spaces, public equipment, reforestation, the creation of landmarks and visual reference points). Moreover, Favela Chic interventions place a strong focus on image and representation. An image or unique identity is extremely important in the fight against the stigmatization that accompanies so many of these informal and marginalized communities. Loïc Wacquant points out that "poverty is too often (wrongly) equated with material dispossession or insufficient income. But in addition to being deprived of adequate conditions and means of living, to be poor in a rich society entails having the status of a social anomaly and being deprived of control of one's collective representation and identity."[12] In this regard, current interventions hope to, on one side, produce a greater sense of pride, identity, and belonging for the residents of the favela, increasing their social, economic, and cultural participation in the city's "formal" sector. On the other, interventions aim to produce social and physical acceptance and legitimization of the favela in the eyes of the formal city, or asfalto.

Nevertheless, can we begin to talk about a re-unification and "integration" of the city in relation to Favela Chic projects? Integration is a complex problem, and a term that may be used too freely. Thus, it is important to look at the structural limitations of a purely physical intervention. What does it mean to insert a formal intervention in a non-formal city? When is formal too formal? Are these long-term, sustainable solutions?

Shortermism:

A visit to a wide range of projects leaves the impression that long-term sustainability of Favela Chic interventions and programs is very difficult to achieve. In addition to high funding requirements for the maintenance and operational costs of projects, various factors contributing to the difficulty of achieving long-term sustainability are linked to policy. The lack of institutionalization and continuity in policies and programs, as well as the lack of transparency among coordination agencies throughout different levels (state, local, NGO, etc.), are the most apparent of these factors.

Misconceptions: Formal Interpretation of the Informal

Is our "formal" perception still relevant in the informal? Is public space created and used the same way in the favela? By insisting that favelas

have the same needs and aspirations, we are imposing and generalizing a singular idea of "progress." For example, open spaces in the favela may present an opportunity for drug dealers and gangs. Shouldn't we re-conceptualize the notion of public space to suit the scale, multivalence, and needs of the favelas' urban dynamics?

Moravia, Medellin

Ventanita, Lima

Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro

Many of the public programs, community spaces, and other interventions studied reflect a formal interpretation of the informal, resulting in a constructed reality of what "the other" is or should be. Thus, interventions remain disconnected and separate from the internal logic of the favela as well as from the values and uses its residents embed in its form. The following list of observations seek to further the discussion:

Scale: Many designs created large urban spaces, making it very difficult for residents in the community to control and appropriate. Without constant surveillance and policing, gangs and other criminal local organizations can easily control and dominate these vast open areas. Contingent on this, the spaces that seemed more active, well maintained, used, and secure embrace a very different scale, consisting of smaller semi-private and semi-public spaces.

Above: Large, open public space (sports field)
Below: Small, semi-public spaces at the base of the Metro Cable

Mobility: In addition to larger infrastructure projects, there is a need for better pedestrian circulation networks in the area. For example, the lack of sidewalks and other connecting alleys or stairs obligate pedestrians to circulate in main streets. One frequently encounters

dangerous situations where pedestrians, cars, trucks, and playing children are all sharing the same narrow space.

Pedestrian circulation in Santo Domingo

Security: Crafted as crime prevention strategies, many designs adopt fences or walls to control space and the flows within it. In these situations, the dependence on surveillance is usually heightened, relying on constant policing and exclusion, and thus recreating segregation. More successful designs and architecture eliminate walls and open space, producing separations with folding planes.

Maintenance: The maintenance of projects may be difficult given high funding requirements. Therefore selection of materials and operational costs need to be considered in the conception and design phases of a project. Also, design and construction should further acknowledge and prepare for certain realities of the settlement, such as acts of vandalism and "recycling" (of materials, fixtures and furniture). Strictly from a design and planning perspective, projects should aim for self-sustainment. Some cost-reduction strategies stemming from the case studies include programs of mixed-use and commercial spaces as money generators and employment opportunities.

Sports field, favela Vidigal, Rio de Janeiro

Services: Provision of basic services is often done in the most efficient fashion, which sometimes does not result in the most convenient or aesthetically pleasing solution. In various cases, the formalization of services includes a connection to centralized systems, where residents who cannot afford payments quickly get disconnected.

Phasing: As the nature of the favela is ever-evolving, projects should also embrace an incremental and progressive approach in both design and implementation. High ambitions but lack of funding has resulted in the incompletion of various projects.

Employment: Employment creation is one of the most valuable outcomes   of intervention and should be a priority in the approach, especially since it allows further appropriation by the community as well as inclusiveness.

Electric Posts, Township of Alexandra, Johannesburg (South Africa)

What is left of a communal laundry facility, favela Vidigal, Rio de Janeiro

The bases of the San Agustin Metro Cable (Caracas) were originally designed to be open,
accommodating various programs for the community.
The photograph above shows that they were walled-off due to lack of funding.

The Chic in Favela: Confused Priorities

Favela Chic interventions place a strong emphasis on aesthetics and physical transformation. Although the latter could establish and enhance a new image and identity for the settlements, it could also reduce parallel socio-economic programs and overlook recurring critical problems in the interventions and in the structure of the favela. A clear example of this is waste management.

Waste management is a recurring problem

Solely focusing on physical transformations and viewing informal settlements as purely built form can lead to an aesthetization of the area, turning informal settlements into simple representations drawn up by the "bourgeois gaze."[13] How can architects address the favela without dismissing it as a "slum" and without romanticizing poverty and transforming it into a theme park?

"An orderly favela," formal development across
from the favela Santa Marta, Rio de Janeiro

In his article "Learning from Lagos," Mathew Gandy critiques current assumptions and interpretations about Lagos and its urban condition. The first approach he describes generalizes and reduces the city to an urban apocalypse, while the second focuses on Lagos' novelty in urban morphology and "ingenious alternative systems." Ghandy states that "to treat the city as a living art installation, or compare it to the neutral space of a research laboratory, is both to de-historicize and to de-politicize its experience. The informal economy of poverty celebrated by the Harvard team is the result of a specific set of policies pursued by Nigeria's military dictatorships over the last decades under IMF and World Bank guidance, which decimated the metropolitan economy."[14]

In the same respect, one cannot de-politicize and de-historicize the question of informality. Squatting is undeniably linked to the politics of place and as such has specific reasons for being and ways to be addressed. Issues

of gender, ethnicity, race, and class struggle over the use and accessibility of land and housing cannot be neglected, nor can the capitalist market in which many of these systems operate (directly or indirectly).[15] Results like the potential rise of property values, the implementation of "formal taxes," and the integration of squatter settlements into a system that is no longer flexible enough for its poor residents raise questions about how sustainable and potentially beneficial these interventions will be in the long run.

V. Recap

With a large percentage of the urbanization in the world today happening informally, in the realm of the favela, how should we manage urban growth? How should we balance the growing urban population, the rights for shelter and rights to the city, with the aims of environmental management and a more inclusive and equitable urbanism and development?

The architecture of the city is no longer situated "in the autonomous realm of its disciplinary status, but is directly confronted by the rise in urbanization and requisite criteria of habitable space that it entails."[16] With the increase in urbanization, fragmentation, and the resulting marginalization of spaces and people, architecture can no longer simply concern the materiality of inhabited space (urbs) but needs to recognize that the acts of building and claiming space are politically charged acts that define the political status and the right to the city of its inhabitants (civitas).[17] Thus, a redefinition, reevaluation, and reconfiguration of strategies of intervention in the city are essential.

New architectural and urban tools and approaches are changing the manner in which cities and professionals address informal settlements, stepping away from eradication and aiming to re-integrate the favela with the formal fabric of the city. In the world of the "informal city," where choices are limited and informality is sometimes the only choice for survival or resistance, these approaches and design-centered interventions are catalysts and opportunities to be recognized and claim rights to the city. However, to avoid simply adopting an image of social good and instead address the realities of everyday life, we need to focus on the cultural specificities and socio-political dynamics underlying the production of social conditions that often surround informality. Thus, local aesthetics, functional standards, use values, and the social and economic realities of the area, as well as its connections to formal markets, potential future impacts of intervention, and sustainability over time become essential components of the conception, execution,

and maintenance of a project. Consequently, architecture and planning are pushed towards further interdisciplinary practice, needing to work directly with sociologists and anthropologists and become more ethnographic in their approach.

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[1] Castells, Manuel and Portes, Alejandro "World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics, and Effects of the Informal Economy," In The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries, edited by Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells, and Lauren A Benton,Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1989, pp. 32

[2] These settlements are mostly unplanned, under-served, and occupied by squatters without legal recognition or rights. www.web.mit.edu

[3] A slum, as defined by the United Nations agency UN-HABITAT, is "characterized by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure." The term "slum" is too freely used as a term applied to all squatter and informal settlements. Although slums are usually informal settlements, not all informal settlements are "slums." In this same respect, informality is not necessarily equivalent to the action squatting. According to Caldeira and Holston (2008), this generalized definition of "slum," also adopted by Mike Davis in "Planet of Slums" (2006), homogenizes and stigmatizes all non-formal shelter practices. The urban poor now have to deal with another form of social exclusion and many of these working and living neighborhoods and communities are reduced to eviction and demolition.

[4] Castillo, Jose, "Urbanism of the Informal: transformations in the Urban fringes of Mexico City," in Praxis: Journal of Writing + Building 2 (2005), pp. 102.

[5] Graham, Stephen and Marvin, Simon, Splintering Urbanism: networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition, Routledge, 2001; and Caldeira, Teresa. City of Walls, Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo, University of California Press, 2001.

[6] The possible steep topography, narrow streets or alleys, limited vehicular access, dirt roads and paths, and very limited if any sidewalks (cars, pedestrians, and kids share the streets) make access and circulation within a settlement quite difficult.

[7] Perlman has long argued that urban residents labeled "marginal" are not in fact disenfranchised from the city but are very much a part of urban society, contributing to the formal economy and continuously striving to improve their lives. Perlman, Janice, "Six Misconceptions about Squatter Settlements," in Development, Journal of the Society for International Development 4 (1986), pp. 40-44.

[8] Holston and Caldeira argue that Brazil's shift from the previous modernist and authoritarian regime towards democratization was primarily reflected not through electoral politics but rather through "the explosion of popular political participation and the massive engagement of citizens in debating the future of the country." As such, viewing democracy beyond electoral politics is essential. Caldeira, Teresa and Holston, James, "State and Urban Space in Brazil: From Modernist Planning to Democratic Interventions," in Harvard design magazine, no. 28 (2008), pp. 402

[9] Caldeira, Teresa, Democracy, Neoliberalism, and the City: Remaking Urban Policy in Brazil, Colloquium presented at the Comparative Research, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, October 18, 2006, pp. 3

[10] Montero, Sergio, Experimenting with Neoliberalism and Democracy: The Transformation of Urban and Regional Governance in Bogotá, Colombia, in the Context of Decentralization, Masters Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2009, pp.23-39

[11] "Medellin, the most educated"

[12] Wacquant, Loic. Urban Outcasts: Color, Class and Place in Two Advanced Societies, Polity, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 368

[13] "The establishment of an aesthetic and aestheticized (rather than political) relationship between the viewer and the viewed, between professional and city, between first and third worlds- bourgeois gaze." Roy, Ananya, "Transnational

Trespassing," in Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia, edited by Ananya Roy and Nezar AlSayyad. Lexington Books, Lanham, 2004, pp.302

[14] Gandy, Matthew, "Learning from Lagos," in New Left Review 33 (2005), pp.42

[15] Ananya Roy, professor of city and regional planning at the University of California at Berkeley, states that, "To present the stories as embodied in aesthetic structures is to imagine poverty or the informal sector as a pre-capitalist domain, free of material corruptions. Primitive organism, as it turns to, can be directly related to a brutal primitive accumulation […] often government policies of slum upgrading, resettlement, or redevelopment accelerates, rather than negates, such housing and land market […] The material reality of squatting is, of course, that it is very much about territorial exclusions, about the lack of space, about the spatial ties of livelihood that bind squatters to the most competitive terrains of the city." Roy, Ananya, "Transnational Trespassing," in Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia, edited by Ananya Roy and Nezar AlSayyad. Lexington Books, Lanham, 2004, pp.302 and pp.308

[16] The Roman urbs and civitas, respectively, refer to "urbanization" and "citizenship." Vittorio Aureli, Pier, "Toward the Archipelago," Log, no. 11 (2008)

[17] The Roman urbs and civitas, respectively, refer to "urbanization" and "citizenship." Vittorio Aureli, Pier, "Toward the Archipelago," Log, no. 11 (2008) Journal of the Society for International Development 4 (1986), pp. 40-44.