

Sidewalks of Conflict:

Ongoing Spatial Negotiations Within a Brazilian Favela

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ABSTRACT

The following is an altered-photo series unpacking some of the conflicts for space within a consolidated informal settlement in São Paulo, Brazil. My research of informal settlements began with coursework in the Winter of 2017 and was further developed over a summer in São Paulo working with RADDAR, a local research and design firm. With RADDAR, I was able to teach and learn from young adults within the community how to leverage group mapping as a means to communicate needs and urgencies of urban conditions. The following was developed based on primary observations, documentations, surveys, and conversations with local residents, community leaders, and colleagues throughout 2017. Through several means of engagement to facilitate an intimate analysis of spatial appropriation, I gained an appreciation for the complexities of occupying public spaces within the favela. I observed that informal settlements have a complicated relationship to the “public right-of-way” because of the lack of formal regulations, which results in self-policing from the community. In contrast to an American planning perspective, I argue that disparate groups occupying public space at their own discretion both inhibit and create the lively street culture that defines public life in favelas. This essay begins to typologize the methods of occupation of the street as either fluid, meaning transitory or temporary; enduring, meaning permanent; and fluidly enduring, meaning temporary occupations in lasting and predictable locations. Through a deeper reading, it is possible to extrapolate the values and power structures of the favela from the analysis of current encroachments.

Paraisópolis is São Paulo’s second-largest favela, a term specifically referring to Brazilian informal urban neighborhoods.¹ It covers roughly 197 acres and houses approximately 80,000 residents. The neighborhood is located close to the city center and, because of its favorable location within the metropolis, it has an incredible density that puts every piece of land under intense pressure of social appropriation, temporalities, and ongoing spatial negotiations. A variety of districts exist within the neighborhood, including a thriving retail corridor, fenced social housing blocks, steep hillsides occupied by precarious wooden structures, and low lands that are defined by open sewage and flooding. Security of tenure, living conditions, exposure to risk, and access

to services vary across the neighborhood. For instance, some families live in densely packed, unstable wooden structures on steep hillsides prone to large fires, while other areas are experiencing the construction of six- and seven-story buildings, indicative of a booming rental and real estate market. This density has reached beyond the land’s capacity.

The appropriation of public space, specifically concerning sidewalks, is a result of accepted cultural practices and norms in areas of extreme density, high land values, and a lack of formal regulations. Thus, the community self-regulates the use of sidewalks by disparate groups. Drawing on my research and experience, I speculate that an internal sidewalk real

estate market exists, enabling current residents to financially benefit from the entrepreneurialism that occupies the right of way. Certainly, no public space is claimed without the notice of neighbors and community leaders, so it can be inferred that the appropriated spaces provide some broader benefit that outweighs the cost of the loss of public space. However, the holistic political and social structure within Paraisópolis is not made fully available to researchers for a variety of reasons, including censorship of the flow of information both in and out of the community, the desire to control outside resources to assert political power, and illegal businesses that wish to operate undisturbed.

My experience of growing to appreciate the diverse appropriation of Paraisópolis' sidewalks was disorienting. While working as a designer, I measured buildings down to the half inch to avoid encroaching upon public easements. I held a strict reverence for the right of way that I found culturally inappropriate in Paraisópolis. I discovered that compromising public space both simultaneously hinders and creates a unique street life that residents value. On one hand, this practice can enable a social network for entrepreneurs through a row of tiny shops, a place for friends to greet each other over restaurant railings, and a buzz of activity and life that is unique to each favela. On the other hand, the trespass into public space further constrains the narrow streets, reducing access to space, light, and air. While the self-regulation of the encroachments is telling of the community's value of public life, it is also indicative of unseen power dynamics that determine who, what, how, and for how long public space can be appropriated for private benefit.

FLUID CONFLICTS

The spatial delineations of a favela are always in flux, and the sidewalks experience a variety of short-term hindrances. These fluid conflicts are often unpredictable and temporary. While the objects that occupy the right of way are not persistent, the patterns of acceptable interferences are. For instance, vehicles, both running and broken-down, occupy significant space on the sidewalks. There are frequent rows of cars that haven't been moved in months in front of large, blank facades or trucks idling on the sidewalks while goods are unloaded. The sidewalks are also used as space to temporarily gather and store goods or construction supplies. Piles of bricks, empty bottles, and unwanted household goods are common sights. It seems to fall to the responsibility of the occupants of the blocked building to defend their sidewalk and advocate for their portion to be cleared. These fluid conflicts are difficult to regulate due to their unpredictability and short presence in a particular location. However, the multitude of occurrences that are present on every block add up to a phenomenon that is socially accepted within the neighborhood.



Figure 1: –FLUID CONFLICTS– Stacks of crates, similar to these, can be spotted all over Paraisópolis. They are collection points for the return of beer bottles. These crates will most likely remain here until a truck comes to collect them. While the recycling system within the neighborhood is a definite asset and contributes to the reduction of waste, collected materials can sit for long periods before they are picked up, hindering the public's right to use that space.

FLUID CONFLICTS

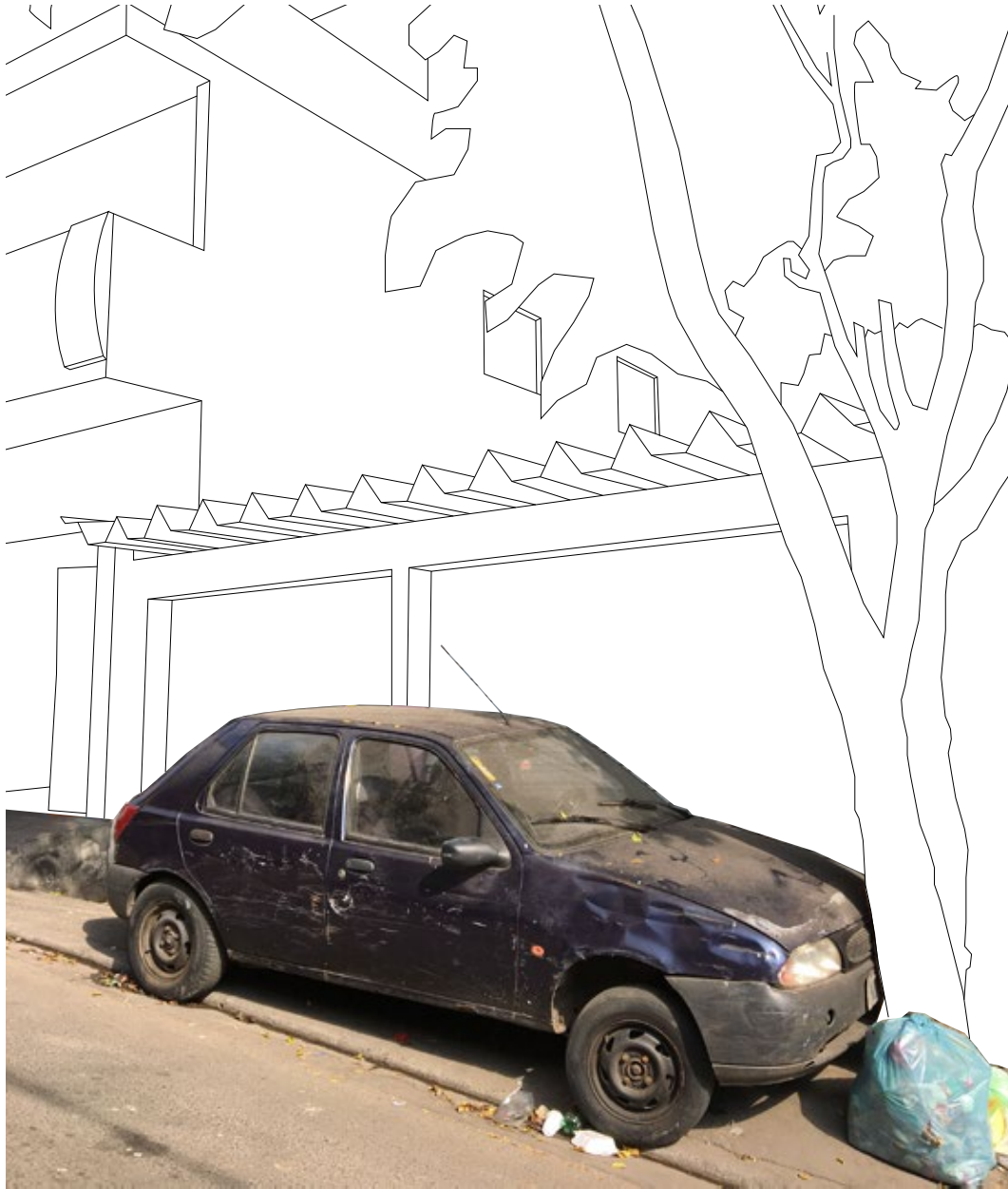


Figure 2: –FLUID CONFLICTS– A dusty, broken-down car has been abandoned in front of a home and appears to be blocking a garage. It doesn't look like it has been moved in months and has trash around it. It is possible that the vehicle was taken out of the garage that it currently blocks. If so, the homeowner could then transform the former garage into living space. This process could be triggered by the family growing or deciding to rent the space for extra income. Either way, the old car occupies the public realm, and the possible freed interior space has been put to a higher use.



Figure 3: –FLUID CONFLICTS– A crib, a vanity, and five chairs have been left on the sidewalk and appear to be in good, useable condition. It is unclear why they were neatly displayed with two of the chairs and the vanity towards the street and the other three chairs and crib back towards the home. Perhaps the family has acquired new furniture and is offering these pieces for free to anyone walking by.

ENDURING CONFLICTS

High land values within Paraisópolis are evident through the “for rent” signs posted on facades and the continued building construction that I observed. Increasing land value has residents and entrepreneurs craving more space to expand the footprints of their shops or restaurants. Commercial space is so profitable that tiny candy and electronic shops occupying only the sidewalks are common and successful. For larger shops, claiming the sidewalk in front of their business increases their usable space. The arrangements of who, when, and how the sidewalks can become permanently occupied by a built structure are unclear, but the practice seems to be sanctioned by the neighbors and residents who have political or social influence. Permanently building on the sidewalks has a significant impact on the urban experience because it further reduces the already-narrow streets. In a high-density neighborhood, the continued spatial appropriation of sidewalks gives a sense of increasing density and population capacity and changes the proportions of the urban street. However, due to their service-oriented functions, these businesses create an activated street and give the favela a unique character. Their presence and popularity suggest that the community believes their benefits outweigh their costs.



Figure 4: –ENDURING CONFLICTS– A large collection of potted plants claims the sidewalk in front of a home. These plants look too heavy to be moved and are probably intended to be a permanent occupation of the sidewalk. The plants may be placed there for the beautification of the community, or they may be intended to defend the sidewalk from other unwanted encroachments.

ENDURING CONFLICTS



Figure 5: –ENDURING CONFLICTS– Small candy and electronic shops are built in the narrow width of the sidewalk. This group of entrepreneurs has most likely made an arrangement with the owner of the home they block. A few possible scenarios are either that the stores are run by the family living behind them, creating a live/work space, or that the family “sold” its portion of the sidewalk for use by others. These little shops serve to create a micro-community, building ties among separate shop-owners and neighbors, while providing small-scale retail and income generation to residents.



Figure 6: –ENDURING CONFLICTS– A small deli uses the sidewalk in front of its business for propane tank storage. Since it is too dangerous to store propane inside of buildings, the store needs to claim exterior space in order to sell the gas. This frees up more interior space for retail, while serving to enclose a portion of the sidewalk on two sides to subtly claim it.

FLUIDLY ENDURING CONFLICTS

There are many hidden spatial appropriation routines within the favela that have typical or predictable sites but are only temporarily occupied. These temporary appropriations conform to a routine that is tacitly agreed upon within the neighborhood. While the occupation is impermanent, the sites and available goods and services of these conflicts are consistent in the minds of the residents. While these encroachments leave no permanent physical artefacts, they are enduring within the collective mind of the community. They are routine and predictable but tentative encroachments that straddle both of the previous typologies. Fluidly enduring encroachments can also be understood as expressions of hidden power dynamics. Who, what, where, and for how long businesses are allowed to occupy the public realm is up to the regulation of those tacitly in charge within the neighborhood. For instance, the corner where entrepreneurs can set up has a great impact on their ability to survive economically. Another rendering of this phenomenon is large piles of trash that routinely collect in the streets as part of the municipal waste disposal system. This shows the lack of power granted to the community to demand adequate and sanitary conditions.



Figure 7: –FLUIDLY ENDURING CONFLICTS– Piles of household waste within Paraisópolis are collected at the entrances to vielas (alleys) to be picked up by municipal garbage trucks. This conforms to a predictable cycle of entrances being clear, then gradually blocked, then going back to clear. This system is indicative of the municipality's failure to provide basic standards of living within the favela. Thus, garbage discarding practices routinely impede access to homes and normalize the sight of large piles of garbage collecting in public spaces.

FLUIDLY ENDURING CONFLICTS



Figure 8: –FLUIDLY ENDURING CONFLICTS– Every day this DVD stand pops up and is operated by a variety of employees. The stand is located next to a popular appliance retailer and stakes a significant spatial claim. This spot is most likely coveted by other informal businesses for its prime location. An informal system of “rent” or site defense is probably in place. While this business is most likely lucrative, the cost of a permanent shop is out of the owners’ reach.



Figure 9: –FLUIDLY ENDURING CONFLICTS– These two stores have merchandise bursting out onto the sidewalks, serving two main benefits for the businesses. First, the brightly colored goods are eye-catching and draw attention to the stores from farther down the block. Second, the additional space allows the stores to be more profitable. Every night, all the goods are packed back into the shop and the overhead door is lowered and locked only to be unpacked the following morning.

CONCLUSION

My recognition and appreciation for the nuanced complexities that surround the varied spatial appropriations of sidewalks within Paraisópolis has shifted my design thinking. Researching both the costs and benefits of this use pattern has made me reconsider my own design ethics for public spaces to include room for informal appropriations of a variety of durations. While some of these practices appear to undermine public enjoyment, such as trash collections and old vehicles, the lively street culture and hum of retail activity are highly valued within this community. From the perspective of an outside researcher, however, investigating the possible power dynamics that enable and protect the disparate occupations of the sidewalks is an insightful strategy to better understand the latent community dynamics. ■

Endnotes

1. Valéria França and Adriana Carranca, Segunda maior de SP, favela de Paraisópolis passa por mudança. Estado de São Paulo (2009). <http://sao-paulo.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,segunda-maior-de-sp-favela-de-paraisopolis-passa-por-mudanca,317413>