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Precariousness as a strategy, immersion as methodology: an architect's approach to *favela* intervention. An interview with Manoel Ribeiro

A precariedade como estratégia, a imersão como metodologia: uma abordagem arquitectónica à intervenção em favelas. Entrevista a Manoel Ribeiro

Joana Pestana Lages[1]

Abstract
Manoel Ribeiro, an architect and urban planner from Rio de Janeiro, discusses in this interview the importance of intervening sensitively from within the Brazilian favelas, highlighting the need to respect local practices and the existing culture. The role of the architect is valued, involving them ethically with communities, appreciating their traditional knowledge and the dynamics of each territory through 'immersive' processes. Ribeiro shares lived experiences from a process of active listening spanning more than five decades, recognizing the potential of informal and precarious solutions, with strategies for overcoming challenges. Flexibility, adaptability, and sustainability are key to his work, as he believes architecture must be sensitive to the dynamic and constantly transforming reality of informality, not only regarding physical structures but also in supporting the strengthening of social and cultural relationships within these spaces.

Keywords: informal city, participation, social architecture

Resumo
Manoel Ribeiro, arquiteto urbanista do Rio de Janeiro, aborda nesta entrevista a importância de uma intervenção sensível a partir das favelas brasileiras, destacando a necessidade de respeitar as práticas locais e a cultura existentes. Valoriza-se o papel do arquiteto, envolvendo-o de forma ética com as comunidades, valorizando o seu saber tradicional e as dinâmicas próprias de cada território, através de processos "imersivos". Ribeiro narra histórias vividas, um processo de escuta ativa com mais de cinco décadas, que reconhece o potencial das soluções informais e precárias, com estratégias de superação. A flexibilidade, a adaptação e a sustentabilidade são elementos-chave no seu trabalho, visto que, para ele, a arquitetura deve ser sensível à realidade dinâmica e em constante transformação da informalidade, não apenas no que diz respeito à estrutura física, mas também no apoio ao fortalecimento das relações sociais e culturais dentro desses espaços.

Palavras-chave: *cidade informal, participação, arquitectura social*

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Interview with Manoel Ribeiro, conducted by Joana Pestana Lages on 30 June 2023

I'd like to start by asking how your interest in these places began.

MR — Zuenir Ventura's book *Cidade Partida* (*Broken City*) from 1994, pinpoints the exact moment I became completely immersed in this subject. I was walking along the beach when a massive brawl broke out between two groups. At first, I was taken aback, recalling the gang fights from my youth, which used to involve maybe ten people on each side. But here, it was four hundred against four hundred! I was a bit frightened, but I kept on watching. I noticed it was two distinct groups fighting, while others on the beach, like those playing volleyball, paused momentarily, then resumed their game as if nothing had happened. After the fight, I heard the boys celebrating, shouting, wandering around—an atmosphere charged with excitement. Yet, when I got home, every TV station was airing reports of so-called 'gangs of robbers' coming from the suburbs to terrorise beachgoers. Shocked, I thought to myself, *I was there. I saw it. That's not how it happened.* At the time, there was an initiative called Viva Rio, supported by major newspapers and corporations, which I was invited to join. During the next meeting, I shared a video I'd created, compiling TV reports, but I narrated what had really happened that day on the beach. Shortly after, Zuenir invited me to Vigário Geral, a *favela* he was visiting as part of his research. He was interviewing the 'bandit boss' for his book, and that's where I first met Flávio Negão, a 23-year-old— just a kid. That introduction opened doors for me to start working with a local group in Vigário Geral, who took offense at all the negative stigma attached to their community. It had been the scene of terrible events in August 1993. A group of ex-policemen, known as the *Cavalos Corredores*, had entered the favela and killed 21 residents—at random. Among the victims was an evangelical family. Their house was later bought by a Protestant pastor involved with *Viva Rio*, who asked me to design a project he wanted to set up there—the *House of Peace*. I put together a modest proposal. At the time, I was working at Caixa Económica Federal (the state-owned Brazilian financial services company), where I had founded the 'Citizenship Office', inspired by the sociologist Betinho (Herbert José de Souza). Betinho worked tirelessly for minorities and in the fight against hunger. Through the Citizenship Office, I managed to secure funding from Caixa's advertising department to build the House of Peace, and we eventually completed it. That project marked my initial forays into working with the *favela*.

Later, the *Favela Bairro*[1] programme came along, a favela urbanisation initiative that expanded on earlier *mutirão*[2] efforts—a model of paid collective labour. And so, I began to bid for public tenders, eventually winning seven. Serrinha was my first favela, and it became the place I learned on my feet. In the case of Serrinha, I didn't know anything about the community at first, and I developed a methodology that I called 'immersion.' I stayed there, constantly taking showers at friends' homes, eating meals with them, even sleeping there on occasion, and we went through a few neighbourhood shootouts together. I would regularly speak with Secretary Sérgio Magalhães[3], who was always receptive to my observations. I'd tell him, 'In the time I'll spend surveying, and the time it takes to draw up the construction projects, the neighbourhood has already changed again! It's no longer exactly the same. New houses appear, new roads are created, and the last rainfall reshaped the terrain'. So, I proposed creating an urban intervention plan, one that would give me time to identify the key players. This wasn't about lumping everyone together: it was about identifying communities with shared interests, defining their respective enclaves, and initiating conversations.

1 Favela Bairro upgrading programme was launched by the Municipal Government of Rio de Janeiro in 1994, aimed to integrate informal settlements (the favelas) into the city-at-large. It focused on urban renovations—such as basic infrastructure, sanitation, roads, and public spaces—without displacing residents. Rather than erasing these neighbourhoods, it preserved local social networks and improved living conditions, seeking to bridge socioeconomic gaps and reduce spatial segregation within the city.

2 A *mutirão* is a collaborative community effort, often seen in Brazilian contexts, where people come together voluntarily to achieve a common goal, such as building or improving local infrastructure. Rooted in traditions of mutual aid, a *mutirão* combines shared labour and resources, fostering social bonds and addressing community needs collectively. It's widely used in informal settlements, enabling residents to build or repair housing through cooperative work without relying on formal institutions.

3 Rio de Janeiro's Municipal Secretary for Housing (1993-2000) and Rio de Janeiro's State Secretary for Special Projects (2001-2002).

I want to weave together this complex patchwork that makes up the favela, which, although it's a network of diverse subcultures, still comes together to form a cohesive public identity. When I arrived in Serrinha, Funk music was a youth craze in the favelas, and I thought it could become an interesting source of employment, since they were so crazy about it and because it was an artistic genre that involved all kinds of different possibilities: for DJs, singers, dancers, composers, as well as behind-the-scenes opportunities such as for sound technicians, set electricians, and so on. But when I arrived, a Black leader rooted in African traditions pulled me aside and said, 'Manel, we are a stronghold of popular culture resistance; don't come around here bringing *funk* with you.' At the time, I found his attitude almost aggressive, but it wasn't really; he was simply marking cultural boundaries. This opened my eyes and changed my approach, leading me to work with a greater sense of awareness. My first step was to identify the kinds of culture he was referring to. The task was to understand this identity—to map social and territorial structures and engage with the various groups that embodied this rich, multilayered community. For that purpose, I conducted visual surveys of the neighbourhood, identifying recurring issues with rainwater runoff, energy draining, and soil stability. These observations helped me develop typologies of urbanisation patterns designed to address these persistent challenges, which I mapped and documented. Talking with residents was essential—they gave me critical insights: 'when it rains, the water runs down here', or 'that piece of land collapses from time to time.' While I could see many of these issues for myself, listening to the people who had lived with them for years added invaluable depth to my understanding of them. The existing urban standards were generic—they offered solutions in broad terms. But to truly address the issues on the ground, we needed to adapt these standards in the field, tailoring them to the specifics of the site. This wasn't *prêt-à-porter*; it was *haute couture*, in every sense of the term. The process demanded a custom approach that drew from politics, economics, finance, and technology—a true *haute couture* effort. Proposing this was bold, and even bolder still was the Secretary's decision to go along with what must have seemed like a wild idea at the time. But it worked—and worked remarkably well. The rest of the work involved building houses, installing street lighting, and addressing other basic infrastructural needs, which weren't particularly challenging. However, other 'Favela Bairro' projects followed different criteria and methodologies. Some project teams focused on demolitions and building anew, relocating residents as part of the process. My primary concern, however, was understanding why the neighbourhood had been used in its particular way, drawing on Lefebvre's concept of the 'spatial triad', His triad of the 'conceived, perceived and lived space' offers a framework, though I adapted it for this context. I suggested that first came perceiving the terrain, then building, and finally, living in the space. This adaptation reflected local conditions, where each stage predominantly influences the others over time and space. I developed a diagram to illustrate this evolving relationship. The terrain itself determines its use—dictating where development is possible, where water flows, and where natural contours shape the built environment. After that, people start to construct, led by societal needs and norms. Eventually, the built environment begins to influence behaviours, creating a feedback loop that sometimes even alters the natural landscape. Lefebvre's model applies well to the formal, ordered city, where planning typically begins with a conception of occupation, followed by its perception and then inhabitation. However, I inverted the first two phases, inspired by a samba lyric where someone, upon encountering a piece of land, perceives its potential, deciding if it's a good place to settle. This progression mirrors my proposal, reflecting an organic approach to urban occupation and development. So, to understand this community we must also recognise its practices. For instance, Pedra de Xangô, a ritual space, was practically destroyed by the previous municipality. Its symbolic importance was entirely ignored. *Mãe de Santo*[4] Tia Ira, a friend of mine to this day, asked her *cambono*[5] to lead me there. So he accompanied me and described in detail the ritual: the steps to climb to go and touch the head on Xangô's altar, a place nearby set up for the *Mãe de Santo*'s throne where people would come and receive blessings, exiting from the other side, and so on. The project that emerged was the result of insightful conversations such as these, where we are always learning from the people who live there.

And this very procedural approach of yours was followed by others also within the Favela Bairro programme? Or were there other approaches?

4 A *Mãe de Santo* is a spiritual leader in Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé, hosting rituals, and offering healing and community support.

5 A *cambono* is an assistant to a *Mãe* or *Pai de Santo* in Afro-Brazilian religions, handling ritual tasks and offerings (playing drums, cleaning the place, bringing flowers, etc.).

Looking back, we can now see distinct approaches. My projects all followed a similar method, with variations in the contracting process. I opted for all-inclusive price contracts, with an overall estimate and a contingency budget to address unforeseen needs. At times, I even used this budget as leverage in negotiations. For example, I'd say, 'I need this piece of your land here', and in exchange, 'I'll help with your slab.' To make agreements binding, I would consult with the residents' association. At first, it was all done verbally, but when I went to collect, the person just laughed, and I realised that something more official was needed. I spoke to the association president, who suggested we write down everything in the association ledger. This way, at the next meeting, if someone tried to go back on their agreement, the records would speak for themselves—no one wants to lose face. From then on, that became our *modus operandi*. Instead of handling it as a normal project with a detailed design phase, which is how I had to proceed, I created an administration fee, with two inspectors. One inspector stayed on-site with me daily, monitoring the progress, while the other came every Saturday to review and close the reports for the week's work. This approach was more costly and challenging; being able to work on Saturday was also disrupted due to the routines of the technobureaucracy. The entire project took six years, and the second phase operated under a general contract. By that point, however, I had already addressed the infrastructural issues and ensured the application of the urban standards. But how to get across the ideal process and its poetics? My approach wasn't universally adopted. Some other projects of Favela Bairro had a personal stamp, that could be called architectural or technically brilliant. Personally, I aimed to avoid tampering with the 'chessboard'—the essential spaces where daily life unfolded— where people got on with their routines and habits. Such an approach respected their *habitus*, their everyday way of life. Altering that 'chessboard' meant forcing them to start over: set new routines, adjust their habits, redefine their priority routes, and find new meeting points. In short, it would fundamentally disrupt their way of life. What we're talking about here isn't purely architecture. It intersects with urbanism, but it goes beyond that. It also involves anthropology, sociology, geography—a mix of disciplines with blurred boundaries and overlaps. That, for me, is the most fulfilling part. It's what I find most fascinating: this rich disciplinary crossover.

How do you go about it? Out of curiosity, how do you put a team together?

We call it 'patota'. Do you know what 'patota' means? It's a close-knit group, friends who share common values and approaches to life. These were people I felt closest to, who I trusted and would happily work with—and still do today. Márcio Roberto, for instance, is the son of one of the Roberto brothers, pioneers of modern architecture in Brazil and runners-up in tender for the original Brasilia planned project. Marcelo Vasconcelos is the son of another renowned architect, Ernani Vasconcelos, who, along with Le Corbusier and Niemeyer's team, built the Capanema Palace, a landmark of Brazilian modernism. So, I was fortunate enough to be working with a highly skilled team. There was also a sanitation engineer, and Nádia Rebouças , a media expert who had been in charge of press coverage for both *Viva Rio* and Betinho's Zero Hunger programme. A remarkable bunch of people. I'm still not sure how I convinced them all to work for next to nothing. A friend used to say, 'Those who work for the poor, beg for two.' But I do it because it brings me joy and leaves me feeling emotionally fulfilled.

This brings us to an important question about the role of the architect, which we've touched on already. But how do you see it? In a country as vast and diverse as Brazil, what is the significance of the architect's role?

We have the City Statute[6], though its implementation at the local level has been challenging due to the need for regulatory municipal frameworks. But it's fascinating because while our National Constitution recognises private property, it also stipulates that this right is conditional based on the property's social purpose. The City Statute, meanwhile, enshrines the right to the city as an absolute, unconditional right. This is remarkable because property, according to the Constitution, must have a social purpose. Some argue that simply by existing it already has one, which I find to be an epistemological backflip! Nonetheless, these two elements—the constitutional view of property and

6 The *Estatuto da Cidade* (City Statute) is a Brazilian federal law established in 2001 to guide urban development and promote social equity in cities. It sets forth principles for democratic management of urban spaces, encouraging citizen participation in decision-making. Key tools include the *Plano Diretor* (Master Plan), compulsory land use for underused urban areas, and the regulation of informal settlements to improve living conditions. The statute aims to reduce socio-spatial inequalities, ensuring the right to housing, environmental protection, and access to urban services for all residents, fostering more inclusive, sustainable, and equitable urban environments across Brazil.

the City Statute's right to the city—mark a significant shift. They point towards a new era of territorial and urban planning, one that moves away from a purely technocratic or modernist approach, which often sought to reshape spaces according to predefined ideals, this *tabula rasa*. This is a moment of real richness in rethinking our approach to planning.

And speaking of these regulations, now from your experience here in Portugal, what comparison can you make?

I recall the creation of the Basic Housing Law, a significant achievement championed by Helena Roseta, a dear friend and fellow architect who was serving as a member of parliament at the time. She invited me to participate in a committee hearing to discuss Brazil's experiences, hoping to encourage a more compassionate and clear-cut view on issues such as illegal occupations and what we call 'precariousness.' Often, what is offered is framed as something people 'deserve,' but, as I explained, this isn't really what they deserve — it's market dynamics. The housing solutions we think people 'deserve' are often financially inaccessible to them. This provided an opportunity to make the comparison you mentioned — between the insights we've developed in Brazil and then yours, possibly shaped by dealing with issues on a smaller scale. Differences in scale also impact the pace of response and the evolution of legal frameworks. I believe these two factors — time and scale — are crucial. However, a smaller scale can sometimes serve as an excuse to avoid working towards the solutions that are really needed.

As a counterpoint to Zuenir Ventura's *Cidade Partida*, another literary reference comes to mind, Torto Arado by the Brazilian author Itamar Vieira Junior. This novel, set in rural Brazil, vividly depicts the restrictions imposed on the poorest communities: they were only permitted to build with wattle and daub; they could neither reside permanently on the farmland nor make their homes more stable or durable. Reading it, I was profoundly struck by how often the narrative taps into issues of housing rights and the right to place. The story becomes even more telling when later its characters are seen establishing a quilombola community, in which they finally find stability and are able to make improvements to their homes once and for all. Yet, for the longest time, this basic right was denied to them.

In the urban favelas of cities like Rio de Janeiro, there used to be a law prohibiting the transport of construction materials up to these areas. This law effectively imposed a state of permanent precariousness on these neighbourhoods, in what was an astonishingly cruel measure. When these restrictions were finally lifted, the favelas rapidly transformed from clusters of wooden shacks and wattle-and-daub structures into buildings made from concrete and masonry—something that was long overdue. In my talks, I often show a photograph from the early 2000s of a concrete and masonry house emerging from the wattle-and-daub underneath. It looks to me like a dragonfly emerging from its cocoon, a potent symbol of resilience and transformation. We can see how many places have been left to crumble for 40 or 50 years now. This neglect is due in part to the specifics of these areas, which are in the minority and are often seen as transient. For example, in Brazil during the 1930s, French urban planner Alfred Agache was commissioned to develop an ambitious urban plan for Rio de Janeiro, known as the Agache Plan (1928-1930). At the time, Agache described favelas as 'cancers to be got rid of' to make the city a healthy place to be. Such an attitude, however, overlooks one crucial point: where then do these people go? Occupants of areas like hillsides, settle there because what other options do they have for a more stable place to live? They fall back on recycled materials or traditional rural building techniques such as rammed earth, commonly found in early informal settlements. Agache's dismissal of these areas as 'tumours' on the urban landscape that should be demolished, disregards the social complexities and everyday realities of these communities, who are often forced to settle in unconventional locations and adapt to them with the limited resources they have. From my experience visiting homes in even the most precarious of neighbourhoods, I've seen all manner of conditions. Some homes are indeed in a perilous state, but others are a reflection of the investment residents have made over time in their comfort, renovating their homes little by little. Those who manage to save some money may, for example, make improvements to their kitchen. Just yesterday, while visiting Montemor (a self-built neighbourhood in Loures, on the outskirts of Lisbon), I noticed two large bags of gravel outside a home built near a wall. When I asked a local community leader whether it was for building new houses, he explained that this wasn't new construction. In actual fact, a resident was redoing her kitchen, something she had wanted to do for a long time but had only got round to now. Call it a strategic, incremental investment approach. Or

precariousness as a strategy. People stockpile building materials over time until they have enough to get the job done, as saving the money to buy everything all at once is often unfeasible. And transporting materials up hillsides is costly, sometimes doubling the price of a cement bag, as they need to hire laborers to carry 60-kilo bags up steep paths. But this bit-by-bit way of going about things is no freezeframed snapshot of poverty; rather, it's an ongoing scene in a film. Such a piecemeal approach to construction is also the result of a general feeling of insecurity—many fear they might be evicted. However, government initiatives like altering transport restrictions for building materials send a powerful message, providing the assurance residents need to invest further. In one favela in particular with approximately 1,200 houses, even a modest investment of €5,000 per house over the years amounts to millions of euros, or reais, in community capital. This is on top of the unpaid labour involved— labour that isn't 'free' but rather demonetised, non-financial capital, created through social and collaborative networks. This is one of the favela's strengths, though official channels often overlook it, focusing rather on the favelas' faults, as seen in dispatches from the UN, Brazil's statistics institute, and other sources. They present favelas as places defined by what they lack and their problems alone. But nobody talks about the strengths of the favela—the social bonds that these enclosed spaces can forge, the collaborative networks that form. A neighbour watches my kids while I take my husband to the hospital or lends me a cup of rice until Saturday when I get paid by my boss. The cultural production within these communities is also a force to be reckoned with: the music, *jongo*, *samba*, *capoeira*[7], the cuisine, slang, and the immense resourcefulness with which they go about solving their everyday problems. These are strengths that we don't often hear about in public perceptions of the favela and that I only came to understand by spending time there and living alongside the residents.

But this notion of precariousness as a strategy seems to go beyond merely perceiving absence, doesn't it? It becomes a means to navigate and ultimately overcome adversity…

I believe that this approach—both in terms of physical conditions, encompassing the built environment and urban elements, as well as in family dynamics—can be effective. The first generation of migrants arrives driven by a need for economic, financial, and housing security, seeking a base that offers a roof over one's head and a foothold in consumer power. However, the second generation often pursues a different kind of capital, perhaps cultural or social, including relationships, knowledge, and connections. These are both material and symbolic processes, and it is essential to understand them in order to create opportunities, incentives, and conditions for people to follow this path, as it is often their only option. These individuals are not heirs—neither of fortunes nor a cultural and social heritage. They start from scratch. When they arrive as newcomers, they bring no inherited social position or standing. If this situation and its challenges are what we have to work with, we need to be highly attentive, keeping our minds and ears open to fully understand the dynamics at play here. Through our 'interventions, we should seek to assist them in their strategies rather than work against them. Instead of saying, 'Your home is unfit to live in; we're going to demolish it and give you an apartment somewhere else,' we ought to support a process of incremental improvement. Recognising and valuing their cultural capital is crucial. A dear friend, the late anthropologist Maria Lúcia Montes from USP, used to say, 'Work with their existing culture and resources; tie a nice bow around what they already know how to do, and put it on the market because that's where they'll find a way to earn an income tomorrow—hunger cannot wait.' This is precisely the point. Cova da Moura (a self-built neighbourhood in Amadora, on Lisbon's periphery) serves as an interesting example in this regard. Kola San Jon[8], for instance, is now recognised as intangible Portuguese national heritage. The next logical step, I believe, would be to recognise the neighbourhood itself as a historical entity vital to this cultural manifestation. After all, how can cultural heritage survive without the place that sustains it? The cementing of this cultural practice within that place anchors both the people and

7 Jongo, samba, and capoeira are Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions with deep historical roots. Jongo is a rhythmic, call-and-response dance and musical genre with origins in African traditions, often associated with Bantu communities and performed with drums in ritual contexts. Samba is Brazil's most iconic musical genre, blending African, Indigenous, and European influences; it features lively beats, improvisation, and dance, celebrated especially during Carnival. Capoeira is a martial art combining dance, acrobatics, and music, developed by enslaved Africans in Brazil as a form of resistance. Each embodies resilience and cultural memory, central to Afro-Brazilian identity and history.

8 *Kola San Jon* in Cova da Moura is a vibrant cultural celebration rooted in Cape Verdean heritage, brought to Portugal by immigrant communities. This Afro-Portuguese festival, held annually, blends Cape Verdean and Catholic traditions, honouring Saint John (São João) with music, dance, and colourful processions. Festival-goers play drums, sing traditional songs, and dance the *batuku* in the streets, in what is a lively atmosphere. The event is both a joyful community gathering and a powerful affirmation of Cape Verdean cultural identity within the diaspora.

their homes, as it is a tradition that was born, and continues to take place there.

How do you observe the relationship between social mobility and the physical transformation of spaces, particularly in informal settlements?

If we don't give these people a voice, their history doesn't exist, does it? Jailson de Souza e Silva often speaks about the power of places. Born and raised in the Maré favela, he's a geographer, educator, and social activist, and one of the founders of the Favelas Observatory. Then there's Eliana Sousa, who also comes from the favela and runs Redes da Maré[9]. Her brother, another product of the favela, has a doctorate degree as well. Their family came from Serra Branca, a town in Paraíba in the Cariri Sertão region, seeking a better life in Rio, a story similar to that of many other families in Maré. Back then, it was all wooden stilt houses, and their father had a little bar, a 'birosca.' With the project to fill in the land and build houses, he turned that little bar into a beverage warehouse that supplied other bars. He had a real head for business and managed to provide an education for his children. Eliana and her brother later supervised many of my projects in the Maré favela. Is this social mobility trajectory visible? One way I often check this is by looking at the quality of the place where they live. By looking at that, you can see capital there. For example, in Rocinha, I came across a hardware store. Rocinha is constantly growing. So, I went in and started talking to the shop owner. After a while, he invited me to lunch with him at his home. He had a building there, four or five stories high—I can't recall exactly. His home was on the top floor, with a terrace and beautiful plaster Solomonic columns. He told me his story. He arrived in Rocinha at the age of 12, knowing no one. He came from the Northeast of Brazil. He was good at soccer, and there caught the eye of someone who invited him to work in their warehouse. He used to sleep on bags of rice and beans, wake up early, clean the space from top to bottom, ready for when his boss arrived. Now, he owns two hardware stores, a delivery truck, and twelve apartments for rent. He once said something to me that made it into my thesis. He said, 'Here in Rocinha, if a guy is determined enough, he'll make it.' By 'determined', he meant someone who is relentless, unwilling to sit on one's hands, and be prepared to fight for a better life. And he was certainly determined.

That's interesting because the strategy you mentioned touches on another crucial aspect: the informal real estate market within favelas. These areas often serve as entry points for people without proper documentation, where it's easier to find rental housing. Many arrive through a friend from the same country, island, or town. But there's another more precarious side to it, as rental agreements are often verbal, and prices aren't necessarily lower—in fact, often quite the opposite.

There's a favela where I also worked under the Favela-Bairro programme, located above Copacabana. Favelas serve as mechanisms for migrant integration into Copacabana's urban economy. They're full of small boarding houses and rooms for rent. This is a crucial business, as people who already live there often connect newcomers to available jobs, like restaurant work. They may invite a cousin to stay a short while, and the next day, that cousin gets a job. In fact, the rent for a studio in the favela can be the same, or even exceed, that of the city proper. I looked into why this happens. It's because no guarantor or proof of income is required. If a tenant doesn't pay, they're swiftly evicted. So, informality works both for and against people, and prices are higher because renting is easier there; the risk is accepted. In Rocinha, my first impressions also came from a conversation with migrants from the Northeast who told me, 'There is not one Rocinha, but many'. From there, my work focused on identifying these many Rocinhas—these various territories that together make up the favela. In my view, Rocinha is a self-contained whole. Many residents only leave to go to the beach, as it has everything to offer: banks, 24-hour pharmacies, and restaurants. I consider Rocinha to be the central hub of São Conrado, a high-end neighbourhood without a commercial centre. If, for example, you have a plumbing emergency at 1 am., you can call Rocinha for a plumber. I once suggested to a local community president that they should create an online system to market these services. If relatives arrive unexpectedly, they could order mattresses or supplies and have them in two hours, or so. Rocinha has a population of 90,000, according to official statistics, though they claim it's higher. In fact, from the end of the year until carnival, an additional 5,000 to 8,000 people arrive looking for temporary jobs. They stay in hostels, at friends' houses, etc. The aim of our intervention

9 Redes da Maré is a community-based organisation in the Maré favela complex in Rio de Janeiro. Founded in 2000, the organisation provides support for residents in areas such as health, education, culture, and human rights, while also advocating for policies that address the needs of favela communities.

in Rocinha was to enhance its heritage, respecting what was already there as being a legacy of past generations—an accumulation of gestures and culture that shaped the urbanisation patterns and housing standards in the area. Our proposal was to add new levels and create accessibility arches to improve mobility for residents. Spontaneous pathways, and stepped spillways, were designed to provide pedestrian access while also ensuring the safe drainage of water. We also planned areas for housing relocation due to soil instability, aligning them with existing centralities. In most cases, the idea was to consolidate central locations to provide better accessibility for the surrounding neighbourhoods. For the built environment, we decided not to install elevators; access points at an intermediate level, leveraging the slope, would make it easier for users to either ascend or descend just three floors. There was also a 24-hour shopping centre that some thought should be demolished, but we believed it should be given pride of place. Instead of tearing it down, we sought to increase its market potential. We suggested building a walkway above the Gávea road, inspired by the old Ponte Vecchio in Florence—transforming it into a vibrant bridge with spaces for street vendors, as it was a highly trafficked passage for people commuting to the South Zone of Rio. This was the proposal my team and I came up with after two and a half months being fully-immersed in Rocinha. We didn't win the open call, coming in second place. The jury preferred a proposal for demolition and the construction of apartment buildings, which went against our approach to preserving the heritage accumulated over many generations that had made the place what it is today.

Recently, in 2019 you were involved in the OUTROS BAIRROS initiative in Cape Verde, on the island of São Vicente. Can you elaborate on what experiences you brought from Brazil to that African archipelago?

In Alto Bomba, Mindelo, on São Vicente Island in Cape Verde, I served as the methodological coordinator for the settlement project in Alto de Bomba. With only two months on-site, and a longer stay not an option, our approach focused on analysing occupation patterns. We identified dense, semi-urbanised areas, moderately dense regions, and scattered *tambor* houses[10] in the higher hillside areas. One memorable exchange involved community members from the hilltops, who initially clamoured for roads. The urban plan had roads proposed in these areas, and they saw additional access routes as beneficial beyond the already paved road leading to Caixa d'Água. However, I shared the following insight with community leaders: that road access could attract the middle class, who would acquire land, build high walls for privacy, and perhaps not engage with the existing community, especially given the sweeping views over the bay. After some reflection, a community leader agreed, deciding it might be better to focus on other priorities besides the road. Instead, we focused on more immediate needs such as drainage, paving pathways, and improving stairway access. The project placed a strong emphasis on integrating local culture, collaborating with *tamboreiros* (drummers), rappers, and both new and longstanding traditions. We also aimed to adapt the housing programme, 'A House for Everyone', to local conditions. As one resident aptly put it, 'A house for everyone is the cemetery', referring to how that the programme's preconditions—such as a steady job and regular income—were unattainable for most members of the community, who often had off-the-books or casual employment. The limitations of bank-financed housing models within the informal economy sector were clear as day. I also believed it was vital to recognise the pre-existing fixed capital, which was the result of the savings and labour of these communities, and to view informal, precarious infrastructures as first steps towards legitimisation and improved housing. This approach involves acknowledging these self-built neighbourhoods as a unique urban typology—distinct from conventional models yet suited to the socio-economic, geological, and environmental conditions found in these areas. In designing the programme, we aimed to test certain methodologies I introduced as the methodological advisor for this project, optimising procedures and embedding them into the institutional cultures of public entities. This was challenging but crucial for our long-term success. We collaborated with two universities—the M_EIA Institute for Art, Technology, and Culture, and Jean Piaget University—both of which contributed by involving students as interns. The project also involved the setting up of technical support offices, staffed by architects just as committed as we were to this approach. We offered training courses, which proved highly enriching. Working across two rainwater harvesting basins, two colleagues and I outlined the common kinds of issues and then developed a standardised approach to terrain containment and drainage distribution. Although the region receives little rain, occasional storms can be devastating.

10 Tambor Houses are precarious constructions, usually built with panels from old oil drums (called tambores). They are built by people with fewer resources, on the fringes of Cape Verde's cities, in spaces with no infrastructure.

Our solution involved pedestrian footsteps, stepped spillways, and channels to control water flow. This method was similar to what I'd successfully implemented in Serrinha, decades before. In the case of the city down below, whose urban areas had only superficial drainage infrastructures, we devised an innovative system to manage stormwater. First, we built an overflow box; water from the stepped spillways would be channelled into this structure, then be siphoned off to a platform with concrete ridges to create turbulence, thereby lessening the water's force before it reached urban streets—a necessary precaution given Cabo Verde's intense but infrequent rainfall. We also focused on public spaces. Given the volcanic terrain, the community was adept at working with stone, using it for foundations and paving. We took advantage of these skills to build small squares with seating, trees offering shading (a rare resource in Mindelo), and communal spaces for leisure and sports. In these areas, we installed facilities such as a single basketball hoop for streetball and a communal drinking water fountain that was regularly replenished as the area lacks piped water. Additionally, we paved certain streets, enhancing accessibility and livability in the community.

Any final notes? Or conclusions from what has been more than five decades addressing urban and housing rights?

How administrative bureaucracy is applied in these communities has a cultural impact, which could make for an excellent topic of research. This administrative framework often frames local populations in extremely negative terms, presuming they bring no capital—neither social nor economic. And yet, these are the very same people who clean our offices every morning, prepare our coffee and take care of our children. Making our lives run smoothly.

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