

ANNA PIĘTOCHA

ORCID: 0009-0002-4740-3133

Warsaw University of Life Sciences, Poland

# HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE OF RIO DE JANEIRO. A TORN SPACE – THE FAVELA AS A SHADOW OF THE BIG CITY

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## HISTORIA I ARCHITEKTURA RIO DE JANEIRO. PRZESTRZEŃ ROZDARTA – FAWELA JAKO CIEŃ WIELKIEGO MIASTA

### Abstract

This paper analyzes the relationship between favelas and the official urban fabric of Rio de Janeiro in a historical and architectural context. The aim is to show the conflict between informal and formal urban development and the threats resulting from the exclusion of individual areas. The methodology is based on socio-architectural analysis and interpretation, along with the author's observations. The results indicate a persistent spatial and cultural conflict, as well as challenges and opportunities related to responsible urban design. The conclusions emphasize the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the planning and integration of urban disorder zones. The topic fits into the dialogue on the non-heterogeneous urban fabric, developing in difficult and uncontrolled conditions.

*Keywords: favela, architecture, urban planning*

### Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca analizuje relacje między fawelami a oficjalną tkanką miejską Rio de Janeiro w kontekście historycznym i architektonicznym. Celem jest ukazanie konfliktu między nieformalnym i formalnym rozwojem miasta oraz zagrożeń wynikających z wykluczenia poszczególnych obszarów. Metodyka opiera się na analizie i interpretacji społeczno-architektonicznej oraz obserwacjach autorskich. Wyniki wskazują na trwały konflikt przestrzenny i kulturowy, jak również na wyzwania oraz możliwości związane z odpowiedzialnym projektowaniem urbanistycznym. Wnioski podkreślają potrzebę interdyscyplinarnego podejścia do planowania i integracji stref nieładu miejskiego. Temat wpisuje się w dialog dotyczący nieheterogenicznej tkanki miejskiej, rozwijającej się w trudnych oraz niekontrolowanych warunkach.

*Słowa kluczowe: fawele, architektura, projektowanie urbanistyczne*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Brazil is currently an economic and political powerhouse at the regional and international levels, and Rio de Janeiro is one of the most visited cities in the Southern Hemisphere. The city is renowned for its beautiful natural landscapes, Carnival, samba, and nearly 80 km of sandy beaches. It is a center of exceptional activity. Rio de Janeiro is situated in a picturesque setting between

the Corcovado Hills (with the famous Christ the Redeemer statue) and Pão de Açúcar – Sugarloaf Mountain. Most of the city’s historical monuments are located in the city center. The southern zone, with Copacabana and Ipanema beaches, is the richest and most touristy area. In the northern zone lies the Maracanã Stadium, which hosted the FIFA World Cup finals in 1950 and 2014, while in the western zone is the garden complex, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2021. Despite being one of the world’s largest metropolises, Rio de Janeiro struggles with immense poverty and uncontrolled urban sprawl. A spatial duality is evident. It could be divided into two separate cities or a single divided city. Representational spaces are occupied by the upper middle class, with residents living behind high walls and protected by sophisticated security systems. Poor people inhabit slums, where there are high levels of informal work, alarming levels of violence, and limited access to public services. Brazil’s shantytowns are called favelas. They are found on the hills surrounding the centers of large cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. They consist of buildings constructed from the cheapest materials, often salvaged from garbage dumps. Rio de Janeiro has 763 favelas, home to 1.4 million people, representing 22% of the country’s total population.<sup>1</sup> This represents a significant percentage of the population. In 1996, Michael Jackson flew to Rio de Janeiro to shoot a music video for the song “They Don’t Care About Us.” The goal was to expose the government’s indifference to poverty. The 2002 film *City of God* (Portuguese: *Cidade de Deus*) and numerous other reports depict this dramatic reality. However, favelas are also places teeming with life and culture.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the contrast and spatial division between the city’s formal and informal development, as well as the related issues of spatial integration. Particular emphasis was placed on considering tensions, conflicts, and mechanisms of socio-spatial exclusion. A key element of the research process was the author’s field observations, which included study visits to various parts of Rio de Janeiro, including the entrance to the Morro dos Prazeres Colina favela and the outskirts of the Pereira da Silva favela (both in the Santa Teresa district). The analysis focused on architectural structures and the relationships between the city’s formal and informal fabric. The observations were immersive, placing the researcher in the city’s physical and social context. The author had the opportunity to personally experience Rio’s duality and observe architecture, urban planning, and the processes occurring within them in situ. She supplemented the collected data with photographic documentation. Another method was a review of the scientific literature, which aimed to contextualize field observations within existing urban planning and sociological theories. The study utilized renowned search engines, including Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. Rio de Janeiro’s development was compared to three theories: the social ecology of the Chicago School (Park, Burgess), the dual city, and urban informality. The most important elements of the city’s identity were identified and described: Corcovado Hill with the Christ the Redeemer statue, Sugarloaf Mountain, Guanabara Palace, Tiradentes Palace, St. Sebastian Cathedral, the Selarón Steps, the Museum of Tomorrow, the Maracanã Stadium, the Sambódromo, and the Santa Teresa district. The favela was characterized, and

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<sup>1</sup> L. Olavarria-Berenguer, *The Favelas of Rio de Janeiro: A study of socio-spatial segregation and racial discrimination* “Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios de Desarrollo” 2014, no. 1, pp. 104–134.

the duality of space was described. The research approach was interdisciplinary, combining elements of architecture, urban planning, and sociological analysis.

### 3. HISTORY

#### 3.1. RIO DE JANEIRO

Rio de Janeiro is Brazil's second-largest city, with a population of 12 million, including its suburbs. Founded in 1565 in the southeastern part of the country on Guanabara Bay, Rio de Janeiro became the capital of the colony of Brazil in 1763. In 1808, when the Portuguese royal court moved to Brazil, it became the seat of Queen Maria I. Following the outbreak of the Brazilian War of Independence, the capital of the colonizing country was officially moved to a city in one of its colonies. Rio de Janeiro became the capital of the Empire of Brazil and served in this capacity until 1889, and then of the Republic of Brazil. In 1960, the capital was moved to Brasília. The city boasts numerous parks, ecological reserves, and a botanical garden. In the western part of Rio de Janeiro, the largest urban forest in the world is located: the Floresta da Pedra Branca (White Rock Forest). The second largest is Tijuca National Park (Parque Nacional da Tijuca), which surrounds the city. Corcovado is a 710-meter-high granite mountain located in this forest. Several paths and roads lead to it. The statue of Christ the Redeemer atop Corcovado is considered one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. It offers panoramic views of Rio, Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas Bay, Copacabana and Ipanema beaches, and favelas, including Santa Marta (Ill. 1). Sugarloaf Mountain (Port. Pão de Açúcar) is a peak located on a peninsula at the mouth of Guanabara Bay. Its height is 396 meters, and its shape resembles the traditional condensed refined sugar loaf (Ill. 2). The name was coined in the 16th century by the Portuguese during the heyday of the sugarcane trade in Brazil. The granite and quartz mountain is serviced by a cable car. It offers stunning panoramic views, and visitors can also watch the sunset behind the statue of Christ. In 2012, Rio de Janeiro had part of its territory (including Sugarloaf Mountain) added to the UNESCO World Heritage List as a “cultural landscape.”<sup>2</sup> Rio de Janeiro is Brazil's main cultural center. It houses historic buildings from the 16th to 19th centuries, as well as icons of contemporary architecture. Portuguese, English, and French influences are evident in its historic architecture. One of its landmarks is the Tiradentes Palace (Palácio Tiradentes), an eclectic government building opened in 1926. Its construction coincided with the centennial celebrations of Brazil's independence. The style and interior decoration reflect the Republican government's goal of perpetuating the aesthetics of Brazil's national past, with references to the country's historical events. The paintings on the dome depict the history of Brazil, from the European discoveries to the Republic.

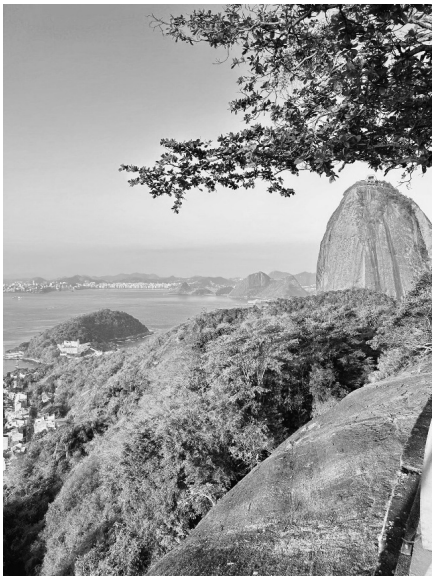
Guanabara Palace (Palácio Guanabara) is the official seat of the Rio de Janeiro state government. The building was originally built in the neoclassical style (1853), when it served as a private residence. In 1864, it was purchased by the Brazilian imperial family and renovated to become the residence of Princess Isabel and her husband. Until 1889, the palace belonged to the princes but was confiscated by the government and donated to the Union. A 1908 renovation gave the façade an eclectic character. The palace was renovated again in 1920 for the visit of the King of Belgium.

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<sup>2</sup> L.A. de M. Pereira, *Da Providência à Favela: os trabalhadores e a ocupação de um morro da região portuária do Rio de Janeiro (1856–1901)*, “Revista de História” 2023, no. 182, pp. 1–28.



III. 1. View from Corcovado Mountain, where the statue of Christ the Redeemer is located, photo by Anna Piętocha



III. 2. Sugarloaf, photo by Anna Piętocha



III. 3. St. Sebastian Cathedral, photo by Anna Piętocha

The Cathedral of St. Sebastian (Catedral Metropolitana do Rio de Janeiro, Ill. 3), located in the city center, is conical in shape and represents the last of the three main symbols of the city (Sugarloaf Mountain, Christ the Redeemer, and St. Sebastian Cathedral). It was inspired by ancient Mayan temples. Unlike the original (square), the architect designed the building on a circular plan, thereby emphasizing its originality and symbolically rectifying past events. The cathedral was built between 1964 and 1976. Its height is 80 m and its external diameter is 106 m.

In the center is an altar, and above it are colorful figures in four enormous stained-glass windows. Escadaria Selarón (Ill. 4), in the Lapa district, is a set of famous stairs, the work of Chilean artist Jorge Selarón. The painter-sculptor lived and worked in over 50 countries around the world before deciding to move to Rio de Janeiro. The dilapidated staircase ran along the front of his house from Joaquim Silva and Pinto Martins streets. In 1990, the artist decided to restore it using colorful ceramic tiles. Initially, he collected materials from various construction sites and urban refuse, and then covered sections of the steps with them. After years, he became obsessed and began selling paintings to finance his project. Ultimately, he covered the entire set of stairs with over 2,000 tiles from more than 60 countries. Selarón considered this work an unfinished project, as well as his unique, wild dream. The artist was found dead in 2013 on his famous Lapa Steps.

The Santa Teresa district is located atop Santa Teresa Hill, near the city center. It is known for its narrow, winding streets and is a popular tourist destination. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was an upper-class district, home to numerous luxurious villas. Today, it is a fashionable neighborhood to many artists and galleries. In 1872, a tram line was built connecting Santa Teresa with the city center. Initially, mules were used to pull trams; horses were later used until colorful electric trams replaced them in 1896. The current yellow color has become the symbol of Santa Teresa (Ill. 5).



Ill. 4. Escadaria Selarón, photo by Anna Piętocha

Ill. 5. View of the yellow tram in the Santa Teresa district, photo by Anna Piętocha

The Museum of Tomorrow (Museu do Amanhã, Ill. 6) was designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava right on the Pier Maua waterfront. It opened in 2015, with one of its goals being to strengthen the city's cultural and international identity. It was built in a deprived port area undergoing urban renewal. Its form is inspired by plants from the bromeliad family (pineapple, guzmania), which can be found in the city's botanical gardens. A second inspiration came from a ship intended to appear to float above the water – the reflecting pool creates a floating effect and also helps lower the temperature on the pier.



Ill. 6. Museum of Tomorrow, photo by Anna Piętocha

The famous Maracanã Stadium is located approximately five km west of the city center. It opened in 1950 and played a fundamental role in the FIFA World Cup. The opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games also took place here. Seven Brazilian architects were responsible for the design. The stadium was named after the river. After renovations for the 2014 FIFA World Cup, its original capacity was reduced to 73,139. However, it remains the largest stadium in Brazil and the third largest in South America.<sup>3</sup>

The Sambódromo is a special parade avenue used during Carnival, located in the center of Cidade Nova. It was designed by Oscar Niemeyer and completed in 1984. Annual samba schools hold parades here, attracting thousands of Brazilians and foreign tourists each year during Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. The Sambódromo was intended not only to serve as a focal

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<sup>3</sup> J. Florez, J. Muniz, L. Portugal, *Pedestrian Quality of Service: Lessons from Maracanã Stadium*, "Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences" 2014, vol. 160, pp. 130–139

point for the festivities but also to house an elementary school beneath the stands. In preparation for the Olympic Games, a nearby factory was demolished and additional stands with a capacity of 18,000 seats were built in its place. Rio de Janeiro is also home to numerous universities and institutes.

The city is home to oil, mining, and telecommunications companies. Due to the high concentration of industry in the metropolitan area, Rio de Janeiro authorities struggle with air pollution problems. The region is severely affected by vehicle and industrial emissions.<sup>4</sup> Guanabara Bay is struggling with sediment from domestic and industrial sewage. The concentration of suspended particulate matter in the air is twice as high as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). This is also due to the city's heavy traffic, which often causes traffic jams.

### 3.2. FAVELA

Slums emerged in Rio de Janeiro in the late 19th century, likely related to a population explosion and housing shortages. Between 1870 and 1890, the city's population more than doubled, from 235,381 to 518,292. The origin of the name is not entirely clear. It is believed that the word *favela* comes from the town of "Alto da Favela," which was the site of the outbreak of the "Canudos War." However, this is not the only hypothesis, as *favela* is also the name of a plant (*Cnidocolus quercifolius*) from the euphorbia family that grows on the hills.<sup>5</sup> In 1897, Brazilian army veterans settled in this type of space, which they called "Morro da Favela"—because it reminded them of the overgrown hill on which they had previously fought. The rapid growth of favelas is linked to the process of intensive industrialization, especially between the 1950s and 1970s. Collective housing was a response to the urban crisis. Due to the demand for housing, small houses were built on vacant plots, and older buildings were divided into smaller apartments. Owners rented their properties to third parties, who invested their savings in the construction of small houses. Unofficial data indicate that the largest tenement house in Rio (Cabeça de Porco on Morro da Providência) housed approximately 4,000 residents. After its demolition and the exorbitant real estate prices, makeshift shacks were built, creating the first favelas. Low-income people began climbing hills, undervalued by the real estate market. Currently, Rio de Janeiro has 763 favelas, home to 1.4 million people. The scale of the problem is therefore enormous. The city's shadow is not just a metaphor; poor communities seem to cling to the hills (Ill. 7), right next to wealthy neighborhoods, such as the enormous Rocinha near São Conrado, Leblon, and Ipanema Beach. It is one of the largest favelas in Latin America. Established in the early 1930s, it is characterized by poor water quality, deteriorating building conditions, and a lack of drainage and sanitation systems.<sup>6</sup> According to the 2010 census, Rocinha's population is nearly 70,000, and unofficial data suggest a population of nearly 220,000. *City of God* – a 2002 film depicts the lives of residents of this neighborhood, built in 1960 by the government as part of a plan to clear favelas

<sup>4</sup> A.M. Da Silva et al., *Regulating (ecosystem) services of an urban natural area: A case study in the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*, "Chemosphere" 2025, vol. 370, art. no. 144026. DOI: 10.1016/j.chemosphere.2024.144026.

<sup>5</sup> F. Queiroz, *Sobre as origens da favela*, "Mercator" 2011, no. 23, pp. 33–48.

<sup>6</sup> A. Arcidiacono et al., *Environmental Performance and Social Inclusion: a Project for the Rocinha Favela in Rio de Janeiro*, "Energy Procedia" 2017, vol. 134, pp. 356–365.



Ill. 7. View of the Morro dos Prazeres Colina favela, photo by Anna Piętocha

from the city center and relocate their residents to the suburbs. Rocinha was also included in the resettlement program, but with the expiration of the governor's mandate in 1965, the plans were ultimately abandoned. Today's Rocinha was granted district status in 1993, but it still struggles with a lack of infrastructure. Only 1.8% of the homes are accessible by car, the rest are accessible via stairs, sidewalks, and pedestrian streets. Electricity has been provided to only half of the homes in the favela. The population living in slums struggles with a lack of access to basic amenities such as water, sewage, healthcare, and education. Social exclusion is widespread, with slum residents often trapped in their homes for life. Drug gangs operate in many favelas, leading to stigmatization and associations with crime. The popularization of favela culture and widespread media coverage have contributed to growing interest in tourism in favelas. The slums have inspired numerous paintings, and colorful photographs adorn many service spaces. Favela da Rocinha is the most frequently visited. Most tours end at a social center or school, often partially financed by the proceeds from the tours. Favela Dona Marta – one of the steepest in the city – was the setting for the filming of Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care About Us" music video. However, it's important to note that favelas are also cultural spaces. Some samba styles were born here, and capoeira is widespread. Graffiti and street art are a form of social commentary and self-expression. Community theaters and dance groups also emerge in slums. Favelas are also a symbol of the fight for freedom, resistance to exclusion, and a place of pride and belonging despite the stigmatized opinions of urban elites.

#### 4. ATTEMPTS TO INTEGRATE SPACE

Favelas are a phenomenon that stems from the lack of public policies guaranteeing access to housing for the poorest residents. Until the 1960s, informal settlements were perceived as a phenomenon that would disappear with the natural development of the city. In 1992, Rio de Janeiro hosted a major global climate event, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). At that time, participants were interested in seeing places of exclusion. This also contributed to changing the state's perception of favelas as subnormal phenomena. In 1992, the General Plan for Rio de Janeiro (PDCRJ) was drafted, recognizing the need to implement a global slum urbanization program. The goal was to integrate favelas into the city. Based on the plan's guidelines, the Favela-Bairro Program (PFB) was created, whose primary goal was to promote the integration of slums with their surroundings. This was the first government initiative in Rio de Janeiro, implemented between 1994 and 2007. Its core purpose was to expand access to the city for all Rio de Janeiro residents and to promote social and spatial integration. The program was promoted by the Institute of Architects of Brazil (IAB RJ) and aimed to create conditions for the favela to be perceived as a city district. The program also emphasized promoting sports, cultural, and recreational activities. The favelas' spatial integration was to be achieved by connecting streets with surrounding neighborhoods and introducing public spaces, while social integration involved implementing programs that generated income and improved professional skills. It largely involved the construction of buildings for social projects.<sup>7</sup> In 1997, Brazil was selected to host the FIFA World Cup, and Rio was to host the final match. Consequently, the city began preparing projects to improve urban infrastructure and public safety. In 2007, the government's main infrastructure program, the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC), was launched. It encompassed a set of economic strategies and investment projects aimed at accelerating Brazil's economic growth. It was also a key component of a group of initiatives related to the organization of world-class events. As part of the program, Peace Police Corps units were established in 2008 in the main slums of the city in southern Rio, where roads to the venues for the sporting events ran. The first actions were taken in Dona Marta and Cidade de Deus to displace criminal groups that had clearly occupied the community.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, with the changing economic climate and the possibility of hosting the FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, the "Morar Carioca" program was presented, aiming to urbanize all slums by 2020. Ultimately, the city did not implement it. The dispute over being the host city and winning this title is part of a global competition among cities for international capital.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> B. Freire-Medeiros, *The favela and its touristic transits*, "Geoforum" 2009, no. 4, pp. 580–588.

<sup>8</sup> V. Riccio et al., *Community policing in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro*, "Police Practice and Research" 2013, no. 4, pp. 308–318.

<sup>9</sup> E. da S. Corrêa, R.L. Cavallazzi, *Entre a promessa de futuro e o presente de retrocessos. O legado de desconstrução do Programa Morar Carioca no Rio de Janeiro* [in:] *XII Seminário Internacional de Investigación en Urbanismo, São Paulo-Lisboa, 2020*, Lisboa: Academia de Escolas de Arquitectura e Urbanismo de Língua Portuguesa 2020, <http://hdl.handle.net/2117/336581> (access: 15.07.2025).

## 5. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Slums are a continuous urban process involving the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of a fragment of the city. They are organized around socio-spatial deficits and their own potential. Favelas can be defined as communities or “neighborhoods.”<sup>10</sup> It can be called the shadow of the big city of Rio de Janeiro, for social, economic, and spatial reasons. A clear division is visible between luxurious spaces inhabited by the wealthy and poor areas inhabited by the excluded. The Chicago School’s theory of social ecology analyzed the city as a diverse social space. The book *The City* by Park and Burgess (1925), is considered a primer on the Chicago School of sociology and one of the most important urban models of the 20th century. According to Park and Burgess, urban ecology assumes that cities are environments similar to those found in nature, governed by numerous forces, among which competition is dominant. Limited urban resources lead to competition between groups and ultimately divided the city into ecological niches occupied by groups sharing similar traits (usually dependent on the social pressures they experience). This leads to the division of urban space into functional zones, where social groups compete for available space. The struggle for existence results in increasing segregation and differentiation of the fabric. Based on these assumptions, Park and Burgess created one of the earliest models of the city – the concentric ring theory, where zones existed around a central core, the city center.<sup>11</sup> This strong spatial division of society is evident in Rio de Janeiro. A symbol of Brazilian development, tourism, and culture – one of the most iconic destinations in the world – simultaneously harbors pockets of poverty, informal work, and a lack of access to basic services.

The idea of a dual city as a spatial model is linked to the concept of modern urban poverty. Metropolitan areas are becoming divided into a globalized part and an excluded part – deprived of access to resources. The spatial concept of poverty is both a consequence and a component of the limited opportunities faced by urban residents.<sup>12</sup> The favela is a symbol of such marginalization. The informal development, constructed from recycled materials and without any planning or permits, lacks basic infrastructure such as roads, sewage, or public transport. Located simultaneously close and far from the heart of urban life, the slums reveal a darker side of the city. Life “on the hill” is characterized by a greater degree of improvisation and negotiation in social relations than life down in the city below.<sup>13</sup>

The theory of urban informality is typically attributed to the urban poor. Research on this topic, particularly in Latin America, is becoming increasingly widespread. Urbanization from below is a mode of space production – a procedural category. Informality has become a topic in works on urban resistance to hegemonic narratives.<sup>14</sup> The example of Rio de Janeiro clearly highlights this type of activity: residents build their own homes, schools,

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<sup>10</sup> N. Silva De Noronha, A.L. Silva, E. Barki, *The sociospatial organization of favela*, “Cities” 2022, vol. 126, art. no. 103649. DOI: 10.1016/j.cities.2022.103649.

<sup>11</sup> A. Hess, *Concepts of social stratification*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2001, <http://link.springer.com/10.1057/9780230629219> (access: 15.07.2025).

<sup>12</sup> E.T. Van Kempen, *The dual city and the poor: Social polarisation, social segregation and life chances*, “Urban Studies” 1994, no. 7, pp. 995–1015. DOI: 10.1080/00420989420080911.

<sup>13</sup> C. Mafra, *Dwelling on the hill: Impressions of residents of two favelas in Rio de Janeiro regarding religion and public space*, “Religion” 2008, no. 1, pp. 68–76.

<sup>14</sup> F.I. Müller, *Urban informality as a signifier: Performing urban reordering in suburban Rio de Janeiro*, “International Sociology” 2017, no. 4, pp. 493–511.

and self-organize social life. Despite the lack of formal recognition, the favelas are active players in city development, with local residents' committees and artistic initiatives, such as murals. Rio de Janeiro's problems are highly complex. It's a problematic area characterized by unstable infrastructure, slums, and irregular city divisions. Integrating favela into the rest of the urban fabric and society has been a subject of research for architects, urban planners, sociologists, and Brazilian authorities for many years. The question arises: how can planners create the unplanned when informality is a state of exception from the formal order of urbanization? Brazilian architecture and urban planning departments have not yet developed substantial approaches to planning and design activities for favela modernization, both in urban development and construction.<sup>15</sup>

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#### Author's Note

##### **Anna Piętocha, PhD**

Research conducted at the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW), Institute of Civil Engineering, Department of Architecture. She has lectured at international universities in China (Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics – 2023, 2024, 2025), Niterói, Rio de Janeiro (Universidade Federal Fluminense – 2024), and Coimbra (Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra – 2025). Her research interests include pro-ecological and energy-efficient solutions, biomimetics, sustainable development, and urban planning theory. She is an architect and co-author of architectural designs. Her professional achievements include conceptual, construction, and executive designs of multi-family, single-family, and office buildings.

anna\_pietocha@sggw.edu.pl