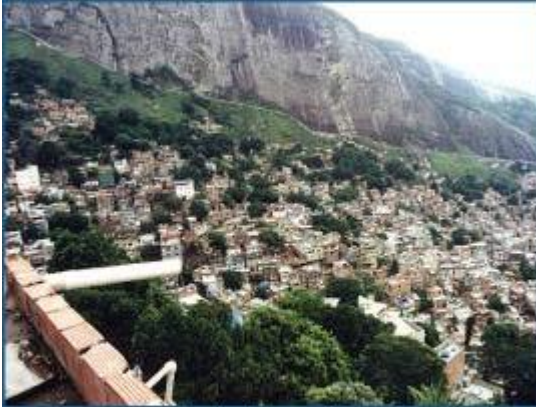


Shack attack

20 Apr 2004



The slums of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on steep hillside liable to landslides

@Derek Burger

Rocinha, Brazil's most well-known hillside slum, has been in the news for all of the wrong reasons in April.

The largest of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, Rocinha is often held up as example of a greatly-improved area of squatter housing. However, pitched battles between police and drug lords have drawn attention to its underlying social problems and the challenges that still lie ahead for city planners. With young men being murdered at a rate of two per thousand per year, Rio's middle classes have long been clamouring for tougher police action and last week the city authorities finally responded.

The sheer size, topographical complexity and social structures of Rio's *favelas* – with nearly 1 million residents – mean that police are reluctant intervene unless serious violence or drug trafficking has been detected. Rocinha is the largest favela in South America, with some 127,000 residents. Despite a violent past, it is now relatively peaceful - thousands of tourists even visit each year, often on [organised tours!](#) With its close proximity to high-class beachside areas, Rocinha has gained an air of respectability with businesses, banks and even a branch of McDonald's in its lower reaches ([The Guardian, 17 April 2004](#)). Yet beneath the surface, it remains one of the principal points of drug trafficking in Rio, generating an estimated \$3.3 million each year, according to police. Rio is a major transit point for Colombian cocaine going to Europe and a big market itself for the drug. Higher up the hill, in a community that is both socially and spatially segmented, lie parts of Rocinha that are largely controlled by drug lords, not the city authorities.

The recent explosion of violence had been developing for some time due to the rivalry between two drug lords known as Dudu and Lulu. 26-year old Lulu finally met a sticky end last week, his bullet-riddled body hauled out from the favelas by an elite police unit. It was the culmination of one of the bloodiest weeks in Rocinha's history. When news leaked out that one hundred of Dudu's armed men were launching an attack on Lulu, military police moved in and a three-way battle ensued during which Lulu was shot and killed. There were fifteen other fatalities and many more were wounded.

Rocinha: progressing or regressing?



Before slum upgradation

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Despite its severe social problems, structural improvements have begun to be made to Rocinha in recent years. The shanty town possesses a basic structure of local government and the community has developed services for itself, such as crèches. Three-quarters of residents now have access to electricity, usually through communal payments involving several homes sharing a single meter. The majority of houses are constructed from local honeycomb brick and far fewer are now made of wood or mud than in the past. Parts of Rocinha are accessible by bus and there are a handful of small health clinics that provide at least one gynaecologist and two paediatricians ([New Scientist, 05 September 1992](#)). Standpipes provide a basic water supply, even in the poorest districts.

However, many challenges remain to be overcome in addition to widespread economic dependence upon the violent drug trade. The services referred to above still have to be shared amongst more than 100,000 people. Incomes are very low at around \$100 a month, while a lack of sewers and thriving indigenous diseases such as dengue fever result in infant mortality figures up to 50% higher than elsewhere in Rio State. The area is also vulnerable to landslides as the houses are often built on steep slopes and hills that have been left undeveloped by the formal housing market. In 1996, several Rocinha families were killed in a rock-fall. Flooding is also a problem and hundreds died in 1988 during floods that ran down deforested hillsides into the favelas.



After slum upgradation

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A tale of two shanties

The permanence of Rocinha is now accepted by the Brazilian government, despite the fact that the land was initially occupied illegally. Basic infrastructure has been provided and Rocinha has become an area of permanent settlement, integrated into the formal city through the legalisation of some land holdings. In contrast, parts of Kibera, one of the largest shanty towns in Africa, were demolished by the Kenyan government recently ([The Guardian, 20 April 2004](#)). Bulldozers tore through the slums surrounding Nairobi in preparation for the construction of a new road. Plans for the area were not unknown but land is now in such short supply - population density reaches 80,000 per square kilometre in parts of Kibera - that shanty dwellings had been built there. While Kenya, like Brazil, has given legitimacy to some of its slums, the government must also press on with plans to develop national infrastructure and modernise. Unfortunately, large parts of Kibera are now a physical obstacle to this plan. This reminds us of the fundamental difference between poor areas of housing in MEDCs and in LEDC shanty towns - the latter are usually *illegal*. Housing is constructed on land that is not being used. However, rights of ownership do not pass to the slum dwellers. Their homes remain vulnerable should the true owner make claim to the land.

What are the causes of shanty town growth?

A shanty town is an area of poorly built, low-cost and often illegal housing found in and around cities in LEDCs. There are two types: *squatter settlements*, although illegal, may have been planned by their inhabitants and possess basic infrastructure, whereas *spontaneous settlements* lack infrastructure and are entirely unplanned. Shanty towns are usually found on the edge of cities or wherever land is not used (due to flood or landslip risk); major roads and centres of employment also attract squatters.

The growth of Rocinha was driven by the lack of a government policy to address the housing problems of the poorest members of society as far back as the 1800s. The poor population, which also grew with migration from rural areas to the city, settled on the hills found throughout the city where there was vacant land near their workplaces. These included Morro dos Telégrafos, Mangueira and Morro de São Carlos. Returning soldiers had also been given official permission to settle the hills in the central area of the city. The same process of informal housing growth also began to take place in areas near railways and roads that connected the centre of Rio to the North Zone of the city where industries were located. By 1997, the total favela population was estimated at 940,000, having grown by 34% between 1980 and 1991. The total area now covered by the 608 favelas in Rio is 30 square km, with an average population density of 37,000 per square km.

Worldwide, shanty towns like Rocinha grow rapidly due to the following reasons:

- Migration to cities is triggered by **overpopulation** in rural areas in LEDCs (resulting from high rates of natural increase as modern medicine and improvements in food supply reduce mortality rates). Over 500,000 people arrive in Sao Paulo every year, for instance.
- Modernisation of agriculture in rural areas leaves many peasants landless. 50 million lost their land during India's Green Revolution, many of whom migrated to cities.
- Natural hazards (drought in Ethiopia) or civil war (Sierra Leone) could also contribute to rural-urban migration.
- Migrants often exhibit a youthful population structure. On their arrival in cities they may push the crude birth rate (CBR) there even higher, leading to natural increase (NI) in urban areas in addition to migrant-led growth.
- Early industrialisation often focuses upon a single region where a **multiplier effect** is occurring. In comparison, other settlements may still lack the infrastructure for growth. Resulting "**Primate Cities**" such as Cairo or Mexico City will experience particularly severe housing shortages as a result.
- The pull of employment draws rural migrants, either in the formal sector (perhaps working for Transnational Corporations, especially in cities in Indonesia and other "Asian Tigers") or the informal ("cash-in-hand") sector.
- The pull of amenities, education and healthcare may draw young families. In Tunisia, nearly 100% of urban dwellers have access to safe water whereas this drops to 30% in some rural districts.

What are the consequences of shanty town growth?

As the account above explains, there are many challenges to be faced by shanty town dwellers including social problems, low incomes and physical risks from landslips and flooding. A low quality of life for residents may be a consequence of this type of urban growth, especially if city authorities are unsympathetic and do little to support residents. However, shanty towns can also be seen as a "mixed blessing", both from the point of view of the residents themselves and for the nation as a whole. Favela dwellers may well have low incomes and live in unsanitary conditions (by western standards) but conditions are harsher still in parts of the drought-stricken rural areas of north-east Brazil that many migrants have left. Even the poorest favelas have basic standpipe facilities, for instance.

The inhabitants of shanty towns also play an essential part in LEDC urban economies, providing labour for formal-sector industry, mining and hotel work as well as meeting informal-sector demand for cleaners, gardeners or labourers. They are contributing to the economic growth that will, hopefully, allow proper housing to be built for future generations. In the short-term, self-build housing also solves a housing crisis for cities that lack the resources to build new homes for wave after wave of rural migrants. For instance, Rio is now the second largest city in Brazil with a population of around 6 million and is growing by nearly 10% per decade. In Sao Paulo, half a million migrants arrive every year! Average population density in both cities is now more than 4,000 per square km. Shanty towns are the only short-term solution to this housing crisis.

Conditions in shanty towns will always be heavily criticised whenever judged by western standards. However, it is also important to view them pragmatically and to consider what, if any, alternative or realistic housing strategies are available in the short-term for rapidly growing populations.