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Urbanism between favela and chic



Representations of favela territories are multilayered and contested. In this post, Ann Deslandes discusses the promises and perils of 'favela chic' projects, particular representations and reinterpretations of favelas in the Anglosphere. (Versão em português aqui)

The favela, as Bianca Freire-Madeiros shows us, is a **travelling signifier**. The favela appears for Adriana Kertzer as a cipher of **Brazilianness** and for **Janice Perlman** as urban informality. Elsewhere, it approximates some kind of renovated-neighbourhood combined with all-night-dance-party.

As a signifier, in the English-speaking 'Anglosphere' the Brazilian favela is easily recognised as a high-altitude gangland. More recently, the signifier has started to **melt into our own struggles to re-imagine cities as affordable, sustainable, and socially just**.

In 2009 futurist and *Wired* magazine columnist Bruce Sterling drew on both ideas of the favela – its lawlessness, as well as its sustainability – to coin his version of the term '**favela chic**'. An extension of **cyberpunk's** 'high tech and low life' future, favela chic marks the infrastructure of a "post-scarcity" world. Sterling mobilises the favela, in this instance, to signal a networked urbanism of temporariness, cheapness, and 'always-in-beta' provisionality. His account includes applause for **a successful urban renewal project on the east coast of Australia**. '**Renew Newcastle**', which has become a **prototype for similar projects in hundreds of cities**, takes empty commercial buildings and 'activates' them for creative use on a temporary and low-cost basis. Sterling points up Renew Newcastle's re-use of abandoned buildings, its use of social media and provision of free wireless internet, and its invitations to non-profit activity. That the project is fundamentally enabled by open-ended urban planning and para-legal land title also aligns it with a favela chic future.

In such a way, Sterling incises a correspondence between the urbanism of the favela and Anglosphere practices of 'do-it-yourself urbanism'. Indeed, the discourse of DIY urbanism is characterised by commitments to favela-esque informality and innovation. As **I recently speculated**, favela chic and DIY urbanism may also be linked in what they are yet to account for. Like so many invocations of the favela, Sterling's takes place outside the historical specificity of Brazil's favelas. The question of whether a favelad@ would recognise themselves or their built environment on the streets of a



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post-industrial Australian town is missing in action. The discourse of DIY urbanism similarly risks silencing the inhabitants of cast-off, or 'abjected' types of urban informality, amateurism and marginality. DIY urbanists cite sweat equity, voluntarism and refusal of sanctioned experts to celebrate their productive use of abandoned space: re-populating it with economic activity. This, as I observe in my article, is pursued as a counter to the abjected phenomena of squatting, graffiti and vandalism, which might otherwise lurk therein.

Sterling calls up a "post-scarcity" world, but I wonder if we're quite there yet if we need to abject particular use(r)s of space in order to claim the productivity of our preferred uses. The promise to return capital to 'abandoned' parts of town is surely informed by the anxiety of felt scarcity: the extent to which we know that shelter and sociality is locked up in property regulations, inflated prices, and professional expertise. I have wondered, too, if that scarcity also shrinks our ambition, compelling us to assent to the abjection of the 'favela' in order to claim a capitalisable 'chic'.

Where Sterling risks eliding the historical specificity of the favela, the discourse of do-it-yourself urbanism risks the omission of those too easily labelled squatters, graffitiists and vandals – criminalised people who may yet deserve to live in our cities too. Perhaps that is also how we can come to have a discussion about the meaning of the favela entirely without the input of those who live there.

Dr Ann Deslandes is a freelance writer and researcher in Sydney. She is currently investigating the global signification of the favela in discourses of 'do-it-yourself' urbanism and placemaking. More info available at XTerraFirma.

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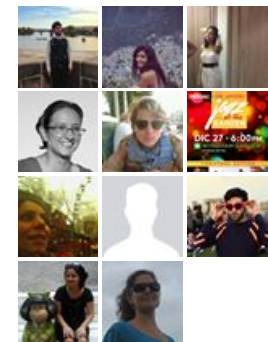
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