

An aerial photograph of a densely packed favela in Rio de Janeiro. The image shows a complex network of corrugated metal roofs in various shades of grey and brown. Numerous blue satellite dishes are mounted on the roofs, many with the 'Via Embratel' logo. Blue plastic water storage tanks are scattered across the rooftops. The overall scene depicts a vibrant, organic urban environment.

# REFAVELA: STRUCTURES OF SPONTANEOUS ARCHITECTURE IN RIO'S FAVELAS

## A PHOTOGRAPHER ON THE LOOSE

PATRICIA PARINEJAD

With her passion for cutting-edge architecture, unique design, and contemporary art, it is not surprising that German-Persian photographer and artist Patricia Parinejad has become enamoured with the favelas of Brazil. For her project 'REFAVELA' she spent several months in the communities of Rio de Janeiro documenting basic elements such as structures, scaffoldings, surfaces, second-hand materials, walls, doors, windows, and roofs. The result is a comprehensive compendium that reveals how much this architecture is a reflection of Brazil itself, and particularly of Rio de Janeiro, the city that constantly amazes.





FAVELAS, named after the Brazilian creeping plant 'favela' have existed in Brazil since the late 19th century. Wretched areas of closely packed dwellings were planted in the cities and on the outskirts, and proceeded to spread rampantly, growing out of all control. The problem became worse around 1950 when the industrialisation of Brazil led to mass migration from rural areas to the big cities. At first, the municipal administration tried to resolve this problem by building social housing. Some of the favelas were bulldozed and their inhabitants were forced to resettle elsewhere. But areas of informal settlements have continued to grow. Today, a billion people across the world live in slums. By 2030 this number will have doubled.

My current project explores the remarkable reality of these informal settlements and the interlacing structures of the spontaneous architecture of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. The tapestry of buildings in such unexpected patterns and the creative energy exuding from the wildly interwoven structures is fascinating. Reminiscent of a honeycomb or a natural organism, as per the name's meaning, they seem to crawl

up the hills and etch their way into the surrounding jungle. An undulating and constantly growing labyrinth inexorably overflowing into the wilderness and into the Mata Atlântica; an intricate maze built from trash and waste, anything available – the living environment for hundreds of thousands of people in which chaos and order seem to coexist. Due to forthcoming events such as the World Cup and the Olympics, new spaces are needed, and some favelas are being cleared as part of an urban clean-up campaign. And thus, part of the country's valuable architectural history is being destroyed.

I spent months documenting countless structures, different surfaces, the materials that had been used, and the items/components fabricated from these materials, such as walls, doors, windows, and roofs. The result is a massive compendium that is at least as unusual and surprising as the structures I photographed. It is striking how much this architecture is a reflection of Brazil itself, and particularly of Rio, a city full of surprising discoveries and delights. Compared with conventional images of parts

COMMUNITIES:  
Cantagalo, Chácara do Céu,  
Complexo do Alemão, Pavão-  
Pavãozinho, Perreira da Silva,  
Rocinha, Santa Marta, Vidigal









of buildings or housing, I found an abundance of unique solutions, shimmering colours, diverse shapes and unusual ways of using materials. This spontaneously created architecture has a thousand different faces. It always reveals something new, and this inventiveness is both typical of Brazil and, in particular, an inherent part of Rio's dynamic identity. Every door is different from the next, and no two adjacent windows are ever the same. Each dwelling has its own unmistakable look and unique singularity. Portraits of individual residents emphasize the human aspect of this entirely distinct way of living. The black and white photographs show sensitive and passionate human beings full of character, who have grown up in these rough but vibrant living conditions.

The documentary is also interesting in the context of modern post-1920s architectural history. Ever since the Bauhaus era and the industrial production of modular architectural elements, housing construction has become generic across the world and no longer reflects cultural differences. Settlements in Tokyo barely look any different from those in Berlin, Queens,

or Ordos. A global 'copy-paste' of architectural elements. In massive housing estates, the way of expressing individuality is by the name on the doorbell, at most.

Beauty is often where it is least expected. In this documentary I have tried to recover and preserve the identity of this appealing but unheeded architecture and return some dignity to a flayed reality. The present informal architectural catalogue is also a tribute to the variance of craftsmanship, artistic vivacity, and architectural potency. At the same time, it's an homage to the numberless and nameless gifted builders of the neglected and, to some extent, despised favela architecture. Perhaps one day we'll realise that the feared slums throughout the world do in fact contain the urban DNA of the future. <

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*May-June exhibitions:  
Favela Cantagalo – Brizolão, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
Residence of the German Consul, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
Curated by Coco Wolf-Gedieh, Berlin*

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