

Podcast Transcript – Group 5

Music É samba que corre na veia
Laroyê e Mojubá, liberdade
Abre os caminhos pra Elza passar
Salve a mocidade
Essa nega tem poder
É luz que clareia

Safia
Riley
Victoria
Ellis Oi, oi, oi, oi

Victoria I'm Victoria
Safia And I'm Safia
Riley I'm Riley
Ellis And I'm Ellis

Safia Imagine you are walking through a winding maze of hilly streets, densely lined with colorful awnings and towering stacks of brick buildings. It is loud and lively.
To your right you see local kids pass a worn soccer ball between themselves and against bare brick walls
To your left, a delightfully familiar savory smell wafts from the cherry-red walls of the neighborhood hot dog shop.
Above you, a complex tangle of webbed wires sway from building to building. Baile funk pulses throughout the street and is met by the friendly buzz of daily exchanges. It is bright and warm and the sun radiates deeply on your shoulders, nose, and neck.

Reaching the top of a hill you look upward, beyond the brick stacks, to see a peculiar cluster of austere, luxurious towers
They comprise Morumbi, a wealthy enclave

You are in Paraisópolis, São Paulo's second largest favela.

Ellis Today we will be diving into the placemaking and community building efforts that arise in response to urban exclusion.
In this episode, we examine the intersection of internet access and informal housing.
Especially the role in which internet cafes serve as an extension of the home and as a form of public space.

We're going to use the Brazilian neighborhood of Paraisopolis as a case study for thinking about all these things together
Social media, and the makeshift and not always legal houses that so many people make their homes.
We look to use..
We look to the use of Community Technology Centers, or CTCs, and social media
As alternative methods of community organization in the face of dangerous conditions and government absence.
In Paraisopolis, social media helps to fabricate not only social networks but also networks of resistance.
These networks are primarily made up of politically active residents who want to improve their community.
They harness grassroots power for everything from public health campaigns to infrastructure access.
The aim of this episode is to better understand informal housing through an examination of placemaking efforts.

Before we move on let us define placemaking.
What does that mean? By placemaking, we mean the co-creation of "place," that is, the aspects of space that transcend the material dimension; this is a product of social, political, economic, and cultural processes, but it is also deeply personal; it's how a community shapes their space.

Victoria

Early April, I spoke with my dear friend Dai.
And we met through a mutual friend in Brazil. She is a current resident of Paraisopolis, a favela in Sao Paulo.
Her story is very interesting. She was born and raised in the community of Paraisopolis. Her parents moved to Sao Paulo from Bahia in search of a better life and more stable jobs.
To get a closer look into the community of Paraisopolis, Dai told us a bit about what life is like in there.
She helps us understand how technology and community organization facilitate placemaking and shape people's experiences of informal housing.

Riley

But first, let's lay out some quick background.

So what is a favela? How did favelas arise in Brazil, and São Paulo specifically? How did poor communities become illegal in the eyes of the government and elite?

So the term favela has in many cases become a generalization of squatter villages, slums, and shantytowns. It is used, often too broadly, in reference to instances of substandard housing, economic and political insecurity, and poor living conditions. But the sort of generalized squalor meant by

the term favela undermines the complex reality of these city areas. The use of this term o,often also undermines the vibrancy and strength of the resident communities. In the context of Brazil, favela residents take great pride in their neighborhoods, as they have primarily built them themselves. Yet, they are subject to a legacy of stigmatization—deemed as criminal or degenerate—by the umbrella use of the term favela. Etymologically, the term favela comes from the prevalence of the favela plant in one of Rio’s first settlements. It was named “Morro da Favela,” meaning “favela hill” After this settlement, similar “informal” settlements became known as favelas. —and I say informal to question such a normative or essentializing descriptor— The term favela is not inherently negative but is harmful when it is used pejoratively or incorrectly. In fact, residents of favelas use the term proudly as recognition of their history within the city.

So throughout this episode, we will be using the term favela in specific reference to this history, rather than as a generalization. In our language, we aim to acknowledge the history and complex experiences of these residents.

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| Victoria | To make sense of this complex history and to get a more personal perspective, I spoke with my friend Dai who is here with me today. And in our conversation, she tells me about what her life growing up in Paraisopolis is, and more about the community, and her family and all her future plans |
| Jaqueline | When did your family arrive in Paraisopolis? |
| Victoria
(as Daiane) | So my family went to Paraisopolis from Bahia, which is Northeast Brazil They moved to Sao Paulo to look for a better like and jobs there. I’m not I’m not sure exactly on the date but I was born and raised there. |
| Jaqueline | What sort of connections exist between community members? |
| Victoria
(as Daiane) | I feel like the community is very connected and friendly. And many of my friends I met when I was younger and they are still my friends. Most of them are my neighbors |
| Jaqueline | Who are the leaders in your community? |
| Victoria
(as Daiane) | I actually don’t know a lot of people, but there is this one group which is called G10 Favelas and they have an Instagram and a website and my dad helps them a lot but I don’t really know a lot of people. |
| Jaqueline | Is the community active with politics? |

**Victoria
(as Daiane)**

I would say that most governments only go there when it's time for election and they keep saying they are going to help the community and do tons of things but they never do. Even if they went they never go back and they never do what they said that they would.
Umm I'm not very happy about it because I just wish my community could have better help and...
But the government actually doesn't help.

Jaqueline

Have you seen any efforts in your community? And what do you think they would benefit from?

**Victoria
(as Daiane)**

So I feel like my community just like the Instagram I said before, G10 Favelas, they are very good at trying to help people to do ah...

Jaqueline

What is your use of social media like? Are you familiar with any social media-based campaigns in your community?

**Victoria
(as Daiane)**

So like I mentioned before. There is this group which is called G10 and they have their own social media platform which is on Instagram. They also have a web..website.
And what they do, they try to get donations to those in the community who can not afford things like clothes, and food and everything else. And they also create classes which is pretty cool and only the members of the community can learn. And they learn like how to sew, like to type how to co...cook and things like that.

Jaqueline

Have you seen any efforts in your community? And what do you think they would benefit from?

**Victoria
(as Daiane)**

So, I see that because I grew up in the schools inside the community. I think they could benefit a lot from either government and other groups. Um, I studied in these communities since I was young and they lack a lot in notebooks, and chairs, and desk, and even the lunches. Like we don't actually have good lunches for the kids. So, I just wish that other communities and other members of the community could actually help and the government a lot. Because it is one of the things that kinda upsets me about it um and that I plan on moving out from here when I can.

Safia

Dai is from Paraisopolis—which roughly means “paradise city.” And the story of Paraisopolis is quite similar to that of many favelas. And even before the term favela existed as we know today, “undesirable citizens” were pushed to the periphery of the city. And so favelas arose as “informal” settlements, became present throughout Brazil.

—Now bear with me here—the history of Paraisópolis is kind long and complex.

So, in São Paulo specifically, civil construction and domestic services in the area generated a demand for low-wage workers. And this naturally led to an influx of migrant workers from Northeast Brazil. So around 1920s, these workers settled on vacant farmland that would later become Paraisópolis at the edges of the city. And this land was roughly fifteen kilometers from the city center. This happened primarily because of the stigmatization of migrants, but also because of the cost of housing was far more expensive in city center.

And um, while this land was vacant, wealthy Brazilians claimed title. In fact, this settlement wasn't a problem until the development in 1950 of Morumbi.

Morumbi is an affluent neighborhood situated within the same hills. So this development in turn brought capital and infrastructure projects to this area. So now those who owned property there, seeing that these projects would increase their land value, started to pay attention to what's happening to the vacant lots. —But now as you know these um plots were occupied by informal settlements. The midcentury is when these poor migrant communities became illegal or illegitimate in the eyes of the government and the middle and upper class Brazilians. This also marked the beginning of the government's active neglect and deprivation of the favelas. The favelas, although positioned within a stone's throw of mansions, were denied government provisions, including access to basic infrastructure. And this denial umm reinforced the logic that these areas were informal or illegal, (build up with preceding and slight pause) and therefore criminal.

Riley

In the 1970s and 80s, the favelas grew exponentially. Projects of modernization aimed to shape São Paulo into a global city. But these projects also meant the destruction of supposedly unsightly or degenerate parts of the city. This included the destruction of the cortiços —tenement housing within the city center—and a wave of new development. As the city was shaped to align with a new global reputation, much of the working class were priced out. These working-class citizens, increasingly unable to live in the city center, found themselves living in the favelas. While the favela was known externally as this space of substandard housing and poor living conditions, it was a real and logical solution for many. Favelas, unlike traditional housing stock in São Paulo, provided workers with low-cost housing near their jobs and city life.

Today, Paraisópolis has grown tremendously since its initial settlements. It has gone from having a population of 43,000 in 2010 to roughly over 100,000 people living in it now, according to the most recent census data.

Most streets are now paved. And the community is densely packed with community-built brick homes and thriving local businesses. There are nearly 1,000 inhabitants per hectare.

But by far the most striking aspect of Paraisopolis is its community members. Only a quarter of the population has sanitation, many streets remain unpaved, and most homes are illegally connected to São Paulo's electricity grid. Yet—their commitment to improve their neighborhood without public aid and recognition is unshakable. Decades of organizing and deploying collective effort has brought Paraisopolis modern urban accouterments. WIFI, sewage systems, and other urban infrastructures are increasingly in place. Paraisopolis has only evolved over decades. These impressive community led developments underscore the permanence of its roots, despite its labeling as “temporary” or “informal”.

In 2021, Paraisopolis celebrated its 100th year. And Rodrigues, a Paraisopolis community leader, was teary-eyed as he cut the anniversary cake. Despite absent government recognition and aid, the community has become stronger in the face of these challenges. Rodrigues even said “for 100 years, we’ve taken these challenges and transformed them into opportunities. We’ll do it for another 100 years, if necessary.”

Time has only strengthened the communities that live there, fostering a sense of solidarity that has motivated considerable political action and organization. Through this organization, residents have begun to undo a legacy of deprivation. They have not only stepped in where the government has been absent but have also pressured the government into certain provisions.

And we’ll dive much deeper into the question of community organizing in a bit.

But still, there are many issues that plague favelas and their residents—access to traditional urban infrastructure is still limited. Heavy violence, instability, and incredible poverty remain issues. This difficult reality has only been intensified by deindustrialization and cuts to social spending. These processes has deeply impacted many favela residents, leaving them poorer and in a more precarious position than they have ever. And—this new insecurity has led to a rise in illicit activity—meaning an increase in gang and police violence.

Ellis

At a surface level, Paraisopolis and its residents, still lacking essential infrastructure, are deprived, strictly confined by their marginalization. While a certain extent of this perceived social immobility holds true, there are many ways in which residents are able to combat their exclusion—a large one being through grassroots, community organization. And despite

gaps in traditional infrastructures, this organization is primarily facilitated digitally. In fact, the internet and social media have become ways for residents to organize political action away from the violence of the streets or the power dynamics of gangs and the police. The introduction of technology was and is incredibly meaningful to Paraisópolis. It has become critical to placemaking and to the formation of strong community networks despite the dangers and instability of favela life, such as gang violence. In many ways, the internet and its physical presence in favelas serves as an extension of the home: WiFi cafes and social media platforms exist as places to meet, converse, and distribute knowledge. Situating this within a larger narrative of housing justice, we can learn to consider these centers of technology as the intersection between housing and diverse social practices.

Let's quickly trace the history of the internet and its journey to the favela.

In 1988, the internet launched in Brazil, largely inaccessible to most. By 1995, the Brazilian Internet was gaining steam. But, it depended strongly on efforts led by the Federal Government's Ministry of Communications, including a state-owned internet provider, Telebras. By 1998, this all changed as the Telebras became private. With this change came the proliferation of private companies. This competition, along with government-imposed requirements, brought improvements in cost, quality, and availability of the internet. The 2000 to 2010s were marked by unequal access and disparate internet quality. However, at this time we also start to see legislation to improve access. By 2007, cybercafes became widespread—ranked as the most common place to go for the internet. Around this time is also when the first LAN houses started to pop up. In 2008, the government introduced a program to provide broadband in schools. By 2009, repeated service failures began to reveal the true lack of sufficient internet infrastructure in Brazil. This prompted a major infrastructure expansion and rejuvenation. In the following year, broadband internet access became available in 88% of Brazilian cities. This has only increased—as of 2017, 64.7% of Brazilians had internet access. Some other important legislation to note is the 2014 Marco Civil da internet, a sort of civil rights for the internet that aimed to protect and guarantee access to the internet. Other notable legislation is the Connected Citizen-computers for all program of 2005 which created credit lines to allow low income families to purchase computers with small installments rather than simply distributing computers to populations.

Before we dive in, I also want to define some terms:

Community Technology Centers are community centers that provide public internet access. They range from libraries to cyber cafés. LAN houses which are Local Area Networks, or LAN houses, are essentially

rooms with computers for community use and access. Their original use was for hosting multi-player games. These centers are vital to the community. They alleviate a significant amount of the digital exclusion facing poor communities. As a scholar writes “social practices as care in community technology centers” they contribute to the wellbeing of the favela residents, promote human agency and alleviate social oppression.

Though not often researched as an academic subject, there have been several ethnographic studies regarding internet and social media usage in different Brazilian favelas. These have shown the varied experiences that people of all ages have in regards to socializing in extended networks, engaging in activism, and distributing resources.

A 16 year old resident in the study Digital Favela, shared: “Nowadays you have to have a Facebook. No one asks you what is your phone number anymore, everyone wants to know if you have a Facebook. When night comes, everybody goes to the square where the conversation rolls loose... we chit chat ‘till the break of dawn. But the conversations there already begin in the middle you know? The whole conversation starts on Facebook, and continues at the Square”

Another, 49 years old, shares: “I have to work all day, and I have no one to leave my children with. I worry, but what can I do? I’d rather have them spending the whole day at the LAN house than on the street. In there they can play whatever they want, but at least there is no risk of getting involved with crime.”

Internet access is vital to the formation of community networks: for both social and personal bonds, as well as political action. Individual internet usership doesn’t only help dismantle the traditional victim narrative of these residents; having internet access also gives favela residents tangible power. Looking at the recent pandemic, social media was a critical tool for residents of the favela. With public health campaigns, residents were able to step in where the government was absent. They facilitated mutual aid networks, established procedures, and even aided in PPE distribution.

Another study by David Nember of social media usage in the favelas of Vitoria, Brazil chronicles a protest movement in June 2013, launched at first on Facebook in two groups “Utilidade Pública” and “Não É por vinte centavos” which it means “It is not just 20 cents” against an 8% increase in the public transportation fee. Hundreds of thousands of favela residents protested, and social media was critical in their empowerment, and reaching a wider social network.

Technology is also used to legitimize the favela and the identity of the favela resident. The use of Wikimapia, which is essentially Wikipedia for maps, became a means of community empowerment. This is because these

community made maps were recognized at the scale of the internet. And more, even something as simple as the featuring of Paraisopolis on google maps was a radical demonstration of the scope of the favela. The map's recognition of the neighborhood had and continues to have a profound impact on the perceptions of its "illegitimacy" and "informality".

The formation of Community Technology Centers and LAN houses alongside increasing mobile phone usage are important components of life in the favela—just as technology is in your neighborhood and mine. At a basic level, access to the internet dramatically increases the social mobility and agency of these residents. Education, future employment and political action heavily depend on internet access. In this age, the internet is, like sewage or running water, part of essential infrastructure. It represents a modern way of self-governance... within marginalized favela communities.

Through engaging in social practices, knowledge exchange, and infrastructure-based activism, favela residents empower themselves and their residential communities.

Riley

So, why does this process of "placemaking" matter? Why have we taken the time to tell you about it?

To help me answer this question, I want to bring up this quote from David Harvey's *The Right to the City*:

"The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."

To understand urban placemaking is to understand the right to the city. Placemaking is the shaping of the spaces we occupy. It is a collaborative process, often occurring at a community level. Through community participation and interaction with the city, placemaking shapes urban space to reflect the values of the people who live there.

So when we look at Paraisopolis, placemaking is essential to the favela's right to the city. Especially as an "illegal" or "informal" community. Now. Why is this important? Well, it helps us understand the human experience of living in marginalized, precarious, or "illegal" housing. Paraisopolis has transformed the reality of its exclusion into the very source of its strength. Relegated to the margins of society, residents have reclaimed their spaces and transformed them into sources of community resilience and power. Being forced to the margins has forced residents to find creative and

alternative solutions to their problems. The creative use of technology, social media, wifi for community organization has allowed residents to safely shape the city and improve their urban experience.

The efforts of these residents help us understand the human experience of living in precarious, illegal housing. To be specific, it shifts our focus from seeing people living in poor communities as victims to seeing their agency. And, more broadly, it shifts the axis of how we analyze urban history and the history of housing justice.

Not to mention—The permanence of this community contradicts typical assumptions about “informal” housing. So what actually determines shelter? What validates it?

If its legitimacy is defined by habitability or dignity, it is far from accurate to deem Paraisopolis informal or illegitimate. It seems instead that existing institutions and systems that view alternatives negatively are the same sources of prejudice against these communities. Because these communities operate within and take advantage of the same margins they were relegated to, they undermine their exclusion. These community-led, insurgent efforts weaken the authority/surety of the traditional government provision. Instead, they create new modes of provision/urban participation. A new right to the city that defies the prescribed narratives of urban poverty and experience