

# Rocinha: from “Bairro operário” to Favela

Rocinha: de “Bairro operário” para favela

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**Resenha:** COSTA, Mariana Barbosa Carvalho. **A Rocinha em construção:** a história social de uma favela na primeira metade do século XX. Casa Editorial: Rio de Janeiro, 2022. 273 p., mapas, fotografias.

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**T**OWARDS THE END of this thorough and enlightening history of the growth of Rocinha through the 1950s, the author cites a 1958 letter to the editor of the *Imprensa Popular*, submitted by a Rocinha resident named Ana Montenegro. Montenegro noted that, although the Constitution nominally granted an inviolable right to domestic property, police recognized no such right within the favela: “*Que é da campanha, que é da fechadura, que é do direito, na prática, para impedir que, de madrugada, a porta seja aberta, violentamente? Existem bandidos, na Rocinha? Procurem os chamados bandidos, mas não pisem com as botas da força a liberdade daquela gente*”. (p. 226).

In 1958, Montenegro already presented persuasive analysis of the gap between constitutional theory and everyday practice in Rocinha. Nearly seven decades later, her words continue to ring out in clear denunciation of the enduring violations of the rights of favela citizens. This outstanding book reveals the evolution of the favela as a “city apart,” a marginal space denied the protections and investments of the formal city, while illuminating the ways in which Rocinha’s residents understood that process and struggled to negotiate as well as possible, given the circumstances.

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It is difficult to overstate Rocinha's importance to what may be termed "favela studies". Rocinha is often cited as Rio de Janeiro's largest favela (an imprecise but not necessarily inaccurate designation), and has been guaranteed prominence partly by its proximity to wealthy neighbors in Gávea on one side and São Conrado on the other, and partly by its visibility on slopes overlooking Atlantic beaches. Rocinha has been extensively studied, but no prior scholar has undertaken the kind of research and analysis offered by Barbosa.

Prior histories of Rocinha tend to begin in the 1920s, with the subdivision of lots by the Castro Guidão Company, the eventual bankruptcy of that company, and the ensuing struggles over the rights of early residents. Barbosa opens decades earlier, demonstrating that the territory that would eventually become known as Rocinha was already in the process of transition from agrarian to urban in the late nineteenth century. As factories emerged nearby, workers settled the hillsides that would eventually become known as Rocinha. By the 1920s, the nucleus of housing was understood as a "*bairro operário*", populated by residents of nearby factories.

As Barbosa demonstrates, those residents had a rich associational life, forming football clubs, music societies and spiritual groups, as well as an early neighborhood association. Barbosa argues that all of these associations had political, as well as social and cultural, relevance — a growing understanding of rights emerged from the diversity of the associational network. The football clubs were as relevant to this understanding as the more overtly political neighborhood association.

Barbosa continues this balance of careful archival work with clear analysis throughout the book, showing how the "*bairro operário*" of the 1920s transformed into the "favela" of the 1950s and beyond. As the book's title suggests, Barbosa sees that as a process of construction, not merely in the architectural sense, but in the legal and cultural sense. In a series of key judicial decisions and policy initiatives, Rocinha was constructed as a "city apart," distinct from the adjacent formal city. This set Rocinha on a path towards differential development, and greater vulnerability.

Two key moments in that process were the passage of the 1937 *Código de Obras do Distrito Federal*, regulating urban construction, and the 1944 initiative to expropriate and evict Rocinha residents. The 1937 *Código de Obras* nominally prohibited "*conglomerados de dois ou mais casebres*", and granted the Municipal Government the power to demolish and evict residents of such housing. The 1937 Code shaped subsequent initiatives to provide a small supply of worker housing through the construction of *Parques Proletários*, while consigning housing built by workers themselves to irregularity and vulnerability. It was ineffectual in containing the growth of improvised housing constructed by the residents who lived there, but decisive in denying those residents legal protections or regular services.

The Municipal Government sought to implement this understanding in 1944, decreeing expropriation. As one resident eloquently objected, "*De que nos valerá a*

*indenização que for paga pelas propriedades com suas benfeitorias se com o seu valor não encontraremos outras pelas (sic) mesmos preços? De nada. Apenas porá em nossos bolsos uma importância que a vida cada vez mais cara consumirá rapidamente em aluguéis exorbitantes... A beleza para o turista pode ser conciliada com a miséria que nos aguarda”.* (p. 173). Barbosa demonstrates that this attempted expropriation was part of a larger municipal initiative to push residents of informal housing out of increasingly valuable real estate, making way for new development oriented at wealthier occupants.

In one of the most revealing chapters of the book, Barbosa carefully investigates the way local residents cultivated and mobilized key allies to stave off this threat of eviction. These included local politician Amoacy Niemeyer, friar Osmar Dickr of the Our Lady of Boa Viagem parish in Rocinha, and esteemed medical doctor Mauricéia Filho. In strategies that would be repeated in subsequent mobilization against removal in nearby favelas in later decades, this cultivation of well-connected allies largely enabled residents to avoid displacement.

Barbosa argues that the collective mobilization of 1943-44 was also decisive in consolidating a sense of embattled citizenship and community cohesion: “...os moradores da Rocinha forjavam uma memória coletiva de ocupação do território através de diversos elementos que atribuíam sentido à sua história e experiências compartilhadas. O episódio se constituiu assim num momento importante do longo processo de construção dos sentidos que identificavam aqueles sujeitos, em sua maioria trabalhadores de baixa renda, como parte de uma mesma localidade”. (p. 195).

While they were largely successful in avoiding expropriation, the Municipal Government deliberately missed an opportunity to confer property title on existing residents. Barbosa’s analysis of this complex conflict draws on painstaking archival research, attentive to the voices and perspectives of Rocinha’s residents.

Throughout the book, Barbosa draws effectively on well-chosen photographs and maps, using these to elucidate and extend the larger argument. Analyzing the nucleus of housing visible in a Luciano Ferrez photograph of Dois Irmãos Hill and Gávea Beach in 1933, for example, Barbosa writes, “*Distante da imagem de vazío projetada pelos moradores que só chegaram ali no final da década de 1920 e durante a década de 1930, percebe-se assim que a própria possibilidade de efetivação do loteamento pioneiro da Companhia Castro Guidão era parte da ocupação anterior por trabalhadores de baixa renda na região — em processo que... era alimentado desde o início pela agência e protagonismo desses...*”. (p. 81).

Barbosa’s analysis of photographs of the “*trabalhador rural* Tibúrcio José Soares” in 1911, and the “*operário* Angelo Giannini” in 1936 effectively illustrates the continuities and changes in the area between those years, from a period when humble residents were barefoot, poorly-clothed rural workers, to one where they were more typically workers in civil construction, with greater access to wage labor and the accoutrements of the urban labor force.

Barbosa's analysis of a 1946 photograph of the directorate of the Santa-Cruz Football Club in the association's headquarters notes, "*A associação reunia assim...homens e mulheres de diversas origens étnicas, como descendentes de imigrantes europeus e indivíduos pardos e negros.... Fundado em uma localidade de formação ainda recente, o clube era a expressão da diversidade da força de trabalho instalada ali nos anos anteriores, o que explicava a própria força que alcançou*". (p. 97). More than illustrations, these images are key sources of evidence.

One of the major achievements of the book is to draw heavily and creatively on Lygia Segala's unpublished but pathbreaking 1991 MA thesis, *Varal de Lembranças*. Barbosa recognizes the enormous value of Segala's extraordinary interviews with Rocinha residents, reflecting on the long history of their community, and her extensive quotation of these in her work. Barbosa, draws on these voices to enrich and inform her own archival work. At the same time, Barbosa respectfully puts these memories in context, demonstrating that even when interlocutors failed to recognize the extent and variety of the local settlement before the 1920s, for example, they revealed the perspectives of favela residents, speaking eloquently of their hard-won achievements.

This strategy is decisive in Barbosa's elucidation of the 1943 collective action by Rocinha residents against the Castro Guidão Company. They brought suit on the basis that the Company had failed to finalize sale of lots, despite the fact that many purchasers had paid off their lots in monthly payments over the course of twenty years. Barbosa's analysis of this crucial juncture is equally attentive the perspective of residents, local politicians, journalists and city officials.

Barbosa also draws effectively on the broader scholarship on Rocinha, on the favelas of Rio de Janeiro more generally, and on the social history of the city. Her analysis of social and cultural associations and their importance to a growing understanding of rights shows the influence of Leonard Affonso de Pereira Miranda's work on dancing societies and football clubs in other parts of the city. And she draws on Adrián Gorelik's work on Buenos Aires to suggest that "*espaço cidadão deve ser pensada a partir de uma perspectiva que leve em conta as diferentes dimensões de construção e transformação das cidades e seus territórios, permitindo assim que as imagens unívocas e naturalizadas do espaço urbano sejam problematizadas*". (p. 19-20). These examples deeply inform Barbosa's nuanced treatment of the perspective of Rocinha's residents on the changes in their community in the first half of the twentieth century. This enables Barbosa to go beyond prior work, offering a more multivocal and layered account of Rocinha's growth and evolution. This makes a major contribution towards understanding not only Rocinha and other large favelas, but Rio de Janeiro in all its complexity.

Barbosa traces seventy years of history, always attentive to conflict, nuance and multiple perspectives. The result is a rich book, and one that remains clear and persuasive

throughout. The result is a book that conveys a deep sense of the construction of Rocinha from the late nineteenth century through the 1950s. This is a major contribution not only to the study of favelas, but to the historiography of urban Brazil.

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