

Rio de Janeiro's Bitter 2016 Olympic Evictions

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The official website for the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympic Games proclaims on its banner “*Excellence, Friendship and Respect* are the Olympic Values.”¹ Ironically, up to now, none of these principles have been extended to the many *favela* residents as they were evicted from their homes in record numbers, in preparation for the two-week athletic event to be held in less than 70 days in Rio de Janeiro. According to a 196-page dossier released by the Popular Committee on the World Cup and Olympics, titled the *Rio 2016 Olympics: The Exclusion Games*, roughly 20,000 families have been removed from their homes in various *favelas* throughout Rio de Janeiro from 2009 to November 2015. At least 4,210 of these removals have been directly linked to the Olympic Games.² The reasons provided to justify these forced evictions range from construction of new roads and parking lots to new developments in the Harbor Area, clearing space for luxury condominiums, as well as creating room for the Olympic Park.³ It is clear, however, that the Brazilian government is ready to do whatever is necessary in order to reclaim valuable land parcels before the Olympic Games begin. This effort from the Rio de Janeiro municipal government has affected, perhaps more than any other community, Vila Autódromo, a small non-violent *favela* with a strong sense of community located right next to the Olympic Park.

Origin of *Favelas*

The term *favela* refers to illegally settled areas that emerged throughout Brazil in order to provide low to middle class families with an affordable opportunity to live in outrageously expensive major cities, such as Rio de Janeiro. As Rio de Janeiro began to boom economically, *favelas* originated from an unmet need for housing during periods of high migration rates and increased urbanization. They were established and developed with little to no outside or governmental regulation. As a result, they were fully constructed and organized by individual residents and are continuously evolving based on access to resources, knowledge, and culture. For this reason, from a socio-political perspective, *favelas* historically have been ignored or forsaken by the state and because of this, unaffected by state policies. Prior to the recent government actions against these communities, the *favelas* have existed relatively peacefully, creating their own communities and services, with only a few minor conflicts brought about with the state and local governments. Today, roughly 20 to 25 percent out of the 6 million *cariocas*, or residents of Rio de Janeiro, live in one of the city's 700 *favelas*.⁴

1 "Olympic Games." Rio 2016. Accessed February 26, 2016. <http://www.rio2016.com/en/olympic-games>.

2 "Rio 2016 Olympics: The Exclusion Games." World Cup and Olympics Popular Committee of Rio de Janeiro. November 2015. p. 20 http://www.childrenwin.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/DossieComiteRio2015_ENG_web_ok_low.pdf

3 Ibid. p. 36

4 "Rio Favela Facts." Catalytic Communities. Accessed May 10, 2016.

The municipal government of Rio de Janeiro has also historically been attempting to remove specific favelas and has relocated favela residents as such interests matched the wealthier population. Today, with the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games about to descend upon the city, there has been an increase in urgency to 'beautify' areas in which *favelas* reside. In many cases, this resulted in attempts to completely remove *favela* residents from the surroundings of new housing boom areas to new public housing, in order to make the city look more desirable even when the favela residents had the legal right to land. Cerianne Robertson, a representative from Catalytic Communities (CatComm), a NGO in Rio de Janeiro that works to accurately represent the viewpoint of favela residents, told COHA in an exclusive interview how Vila Autódromo is far from a unique situation in pre-Olympic Rio: "Vila Autódromo is definitely not the only community to fight evictions nor is it the first." She highlighted how other favelas such as Indiana, Babilônia, Vidigal, Vila União de Curicica, Metrô-Mangueira, and Horto, have also been facing intense removal pressure from the city.⁵

Arrival of Mega-Events

In just the past decade, Brazil has hosted a slew of mega-events. Starting in 2007, the country held the XV Pan American Games, then in 2013 the FIFA Confederations Cup – a prelude to the 2014 FIFA World Cup. This summer, the country will be hosting the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games. These mega-events have brought the world's attention to Brazil and especially to Rio de Janeiro. The government of Rio de Janeiro, knowing this, began to remove *favela* residents and demolish their homes in order to make room for new construction projects, make the city look better, and to quash concerns about the city's security and safety. Prior to the 2014 World Cup, a resident who faced and resisted removal from her home in the *favela* Indiana located near the Maracanã stadium stated:

"To me the World Cup and Olympics just bring sadness. Even if Brazil is to win the World Cup, I will not cheer for my country. Why? Because if I support Brazil, if I support the World Cup, I am supporting the destruction of my own home and community."⁶

Now, leading up to the 2016 Games, removal attempts have been relentless. Almost immediately after winning the right to host the Olympics, the city hall and Rio de Janeiro mayor, Eduardo Paes, explored ways to evict the residents of Vila Autódromo and demolish the *favela* due to its inconvenient proximity to the planned Olympic Park. However, this was not Paes' first attempt to remove the community – but hosting the Olympic Games certainly made his claims much stronger in the eyes of the municipal government. The old racetrack that gave Vila Autódromo its name was the first to be demolished to leave room for the brand new Olympic Park. In order to get the *favela* demolished, Mayor Paes went out and said that Vila Autódromo was, "too close for security perimeters for the Olympics" and therefore caused security concerns.⁷ He called for public housing to be built and to relocate residents to the new homes under the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* (My House, My Life) housing initiative. Ironically,

⁵ Robertson, Cerianne. Interview with COHA. Personal Interview. May 25, 2016.

⁶ "AU's Alternative Break Program: Community Organizing in the Favelas in Rio de Janeiro: Empowerment through Education. December 27, 2015- January 12, 2016 and March 7-15, 2015." Interview by author. March 10, 2015.

⁷ Sorensen, M. Warburg. "Mega Events in Rio de Janeiro – The Case of Vila Autódromo: Community Planning as Resistance to Forced Evictions." Roskilde University. February 1, 2013.

https://www.academia.edu/3005429/Mega_Events_in_Rio_de_Janeiro__The_Case_of_Vila_Aut%C3%B3dromo_Community_Planning_as_Resistance_to_Forced_Evictions.

this peaceful community, known for being free of drug trafficking and militia presence, was called out for being a prime security concern, while new buildings moved even closer to the security perimeter.⁸ Such attempts would appear as if Rio de Janeiro's municipal government did not want the *favela* Vila Autódromo, the next-door neighbor of the world's greatest athletes, to affect the impression that visitors would get of the city. David Zirin, author of "Brazil's Dance with the Devil: The World Cup, The Olympics, and the Fight for Democracy," explained that:

"While Mayor Paes was raising security fears (as if the tight-knit Vila Autódromo would become the site of a terror-cell), the real-estate developers were in the process of building high-rise apartment buildings even closer to the security perimeter. Apparently it never occurred to the mayor who he considered a threat and why."⁹

Clearly the supposed "security threat" of having another structure near the planned Olympic Park was not the issue. The issue stemmed from the fact that Vila Autódromo was so close to a soon to be high traffic area in the city. By allowing high-rise apartments to move closer while forcing out the *favela*, the city's bias against the *favela* community became fully apparent.

History of Vila Autódromo

Vila Autódromo has served as a symbol for community-organized movements throughout its history. The community dates back to the 1960s as a neighborhood located along the Jacarepaguá Lake that was originally settled by fishermen and was given its name because of its proximity to the main racetrack in Rio.¹⁰ Like most *favelas*, the original settlers of Vila Autódromo did not have titles on hand, but built homes and developed services such as running water and waste systems nonetheless. Over time, the government of the state of Rio de Janeiro did however move to grant legal ownership to its residents, as well as the residents of other *favelas*, beginning in the 1980s and the 1990s, coinciding with housing boom periods.¹¹ However, this has not kept the city's government from trying to uproot the *favela* for various reasons.

The community first faced eviction threats from the municipal government in 1992, when Rio de Janeiro was the host of the United Nations' "Earth Summit". The municipal government claimed that the community was to be removed because of poor urban aesthetics, pollution, and environmental damage.¹² While city government officials wanted the

6 Martins, Pedro. "Brasil De Fato." Vila Autódromo (RJ): Moradores Pressionam Prefeitura Com Plano Popular. February 24, 2016. <http://brasildefato.com.br/node/34225>.

7 Zirin, Dave. *Brazil's Dance with the Devil: The World Cup, The Olympics, and the Fight for Democracy*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014. p. 186.

10 Ernesto Magalhes, Luiz. "Com Remocoes, Vila Autodromo Encolhe 83% Em Dois Anos." O Globo. October 25, 2015. <http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/com-remocoes-vila-autodromo-encolhe-83-em-dois-anos-17872872>.

Hall, Christa. "Vila Autódromo Wins Olympic Land Battle." RioOnWatch. January 27, 2012. <http://www.rioonwatch.org/?p=2805>.

11 Ernesto Magalhes, Luiz. "Com Remocoes, Vila Autodromo Encolhe 83% Em Dois Anos." O Globo. October 25, 2015. <http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/com-remocoes-vila-autodromo-encolhe-83-em-dois-anos-17872872>.

12 Silva, Gerardo. Olimpíadas, choque de ordem e limpeza social no Rio de Janeiro. Algumas resistências em curso. *Biblio 3W. Revista Bibliográfica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales*, Universidad de Barcelona, Vol. XV, nº 895 (18), November 5, 2010. <http://www.ub.es/geocrit/b3w-895/b3w-895-18.htm>.

community removed, the state government backed the community's claim by upholding the previously granted land titles.¹³ However, with multiple mega-events recently descending upon the country, the state government has decided to look the other way while the city government resumes attempts to clear out Vila Autódromo.

War against Vila Autódromo

After putting decades of hard-work and money to improve their community, many of the residents from Vila Autódromo were far from eager to leave their homes. Vila Autódromo has put up a strong resistance movement against the efforts of the city's government to force them out of their homes, causing Mayor Paes to devise a different strategy. David Zirin explained the situation and how "in response to the unprecedented level of resistance in Vila Autódromo, the Brazilian political authorities engaged in an aggressive effort to simply buy everyone out."¹⁴

This new tactic was able to convince a majority of the 700 or so of the families to either take money to leave, or be relocated under the government's *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* housing initiative.¹⁵ For those who stayed behind and refused to leave their homes, the government started using what the locals call physiological warfare, turning off running water, leaving recently demolished neighboring houses in rubble, and other tactics to scare the residents into taking the increased monetary offers.¹⁶ Sandra Maria de Souza, a resident of Vila Autódromo, previously explained: "Look at it – it's like living in a war zone ... This is part of the policy of the city government to make life unbearable and inhuman, to make people leave."¹⁷ The increased offers combined with the poor state that the community has been left in shows that the government does not truly care about the local citizens, but simply want to acquire the land before the start of the Olympics on August 5.

David vs. Goliath

For the remaining 20 or so families in Vila Autódromo, they have come together in solidarity to fight for their rights and remain and protect the homes they created. They have continued to improve their households as a way to show their resolve to remain in the community for the long-term such as building a new daycare and using the local church as a gathering place to come together. "We'll bring the daycare and the neighborhood association close to the church because the church has become a point of resistance," explained Fernandra Santos who is the architect of the new project.¹⁸ Locals have also used graffiti as a platform to

Silvestre, G; de Oliveira, NG; (2012) The revanchist logic of mega-events: community displacement in Rio de Janeiro's West End. *Visual Studies*, 27 (2) pp. 204-210.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 185.

¹⁵ Moraes, Ricardo. "Vila Autódromo: the favela fighting back against Rio's Olympic development." January 12, 2016. The Conversation. <http://theconversation.com/vila-autodromo-the-favela-fighting-back-against-rios-olympic-development-52393>

¹⁶ Griffin, Jo. "Change beckons for Vila Autódromo, the favela that got in the Rio Olympics' way." *The Guardian*. April 26, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/apr/26/rio-de-janeiro-favela-change-vila-autodromo-favela-olympics>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Salcesen, Sam. "Determined to Remain, Vila Autódromo Prepares to Build Long Awaited Daycare Center". *RioOnWatch*. December 16, 2015. <http://www.rioonwatch.org/?p=25858>.

highlight community resistance, with sayings including: *Não Vamos Sair* (we will not leave), *Nem Todos Tem Preço* (not everyone has a price), and *Rio Sem Remoções* (Rio without removals).¹⁹ International media has also highlighted the activism of local residents and their cause. Many different foreign news sources have reported on the struggle that the residents of Vila Autódromo have encountered, putting pressure on the government to pursue a quick solution that can benefit residents.

On April 13, Sandra Maria de Souza, one of the head protestors and community activists since the ordeal began four years ago, agreed to a deal with the city hall, which called for the urbanization of their community.²⁰ João Helvecio de Carvalho, one of the legal aids defending Vila Autódromo's residents, stated just how important this deal is:

“This is a victory not only for those who remain in Vila Autódromo but all those in the same situation ... With the agreement being made official and the mayor's office assuming responsibility for building the houses, other communities will perceive that where there is resistance, there will be a response.”²¹

Uncertain Future

With the inauguration of the Olympics coming closer by the day, the fate of the handful of remaining families is still undecided. According to Cerianne Robertson,

“After all the national and international media coverage Vila Autódromo has received, including repeated promises from Mayor Paes that those who want to stay can stay, the City would create a huge media mess for itself if it were not to build the new homes in the neighborhood as promised for the remaining 20 Vila Autódromo families. That said, after years of intimidation and feeling deceived by the City, residents remain on alert and wary of more broken promises.”²²

While Mayor Paes agreed to support the deal reached between the two groups, he may be tempted to resume clearing the area so that the Olympic Park can be completed on time. The deal reached on April 13 includes plans for a cultural center, a sports field, and most importantly new houses that are 56 square meters and will be built before the start of the Olympics.²³ Cerianne Robertson reiterated that the changes to Vila Autódromo are going to “erase the favela” by the time the Olympics actually come around - giving the government what they wanted the whole time.²⁴ Aside from the community church, the rest of Vila Autódromo is to be torn down and rebuilt by the government – in some plans there was even attempts to change the name from Vila Autódromo Community to the Vila Autódromo Condominiums.

To ensure that their story is never forgotten, the community opened a new outdoor

17 Talbot, Adam. “Brazilians Vent Rio Olympics Frustration in Graffiti – Photo Essay”. March 16, 2016.

<http://www.americasquarterly.org/content/brazilians-vent-rio-olympics-frustration-graffiti>.

18 Griffin, Jo. “Change beckons for Vila Autódromo, the favela that got in the Rio Olympics’ way.” The Guardian. April 26, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/apr/26/rio-de-janeiro-favela-change-vila-autodromo-favela-olympics>

19 Ibid.

22 Robertson, Cerianne. Interview with COHA. Personal Interview. May 25, 2016.

23 Ibid.

24 Robertson, Cerianne. Interview with COHA. Personal Interview. May 25, 2016.

museum in remembrance of the forced evictions and home demolitions.²⁵ The community is counting on the museum to continue to attract attention, so that once the media moves on, they are not put under renewed pressure to leave. Even though only 20 or so families remain, they are fighting with increased perseverance and strength, ensuring the government cannot cover up what happened to their community of over 700 families in order for a two-week event to take place.²⁶

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²⁵ Vila Autodromo. "Vila Autódromo to Launch Evictions Memory Museum". April 21, 2016. Translated by Cara Pears of RioOnWatch.

²⁶ Ibid.