

Book Review: Rights of Way to Brasília Teimosa: The Politics of Squatter Settlement by Charles J. Fortin

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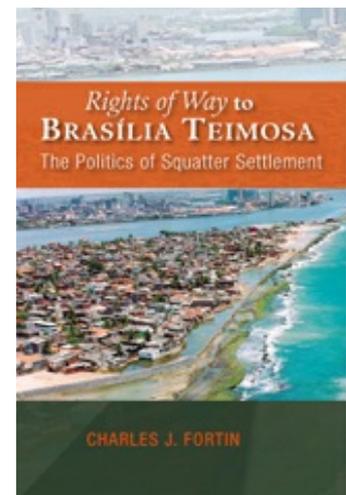
The site of Recife's Brasília Teimosa favela emerged as a flash point of economic and political interests in the 1930s and the scene of subsequent strife into the 1980s. This book aims to unearth events surfacing through periods of revolution, dictatorship, populism, Cuban Communism, the 1964 military coup d'état and crackdown to the amplified reverberation of civil society voices and engagement decades later. Paulo Rui Anciaes finds that the book helps us to understand the type of context that feeds the resentment against the state that explodes once in a while, as we have seen in the wave of protests that have recently swept Brazilian cities.

Rights of Way to Brasília Teimosa: The Politics of Squatter Settlement. Charles J. Fortin. Sussex Academic Press. 2014.

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Now that the FIFA World Cup has started, it will be easy to forget the news of the few past months about police incursions into informal settlements (favelas) in some of the Brazilian cities that organize the event. And in Recife, the capital of the north-eastern state of Pernambuco, all eyes will be on the football stadium hosting the matches and not on the favelas that house 23% of the city's population, the 4th largest percentage in the country.



Charles J. Fortin's book, *Rights of Way to Brasília Teimosa* is the story of one of these favelas. The first part of the name is an allusion to Brazil's capital city, but why stubborn? Because the residents have occupied the area and managed to remain there for over 50 years during a period of fast urban growth, escaping the fate of other similar areas where the population was evicted and the houses demolished to make way to upscale housing.

Brasília Teimosa is located in a peculiar part of the Recife: a peninsula surrounded by the Capibaribe-Tejipió River and the Atlantic Ocean, with easy access to downtown Recife and to the beaches in the south. The site was created by dredging the estuary and forming a landfill in 1934, and it was occupied by squatters on 15 February 1958, while the city was celebrating the first day of Carnival. The author tells the story of this

community based on 33 interviews with key protagonists and “scouring huge dusty tomes and transcribing, monk-like, browned crinkly faded newspaper articles from the 1950s to 1980s”.



The Brasília Teimosa peninsula. Credit: [Raul Lopes](#)

The fate of the community has been always tied to the conflicting interests of many parties. Over the years, politicians and agencies at all levels have balanced their needs to please economic interests and to manage their relationships with low-income communities. In 1934 the Brazilian President awarded land tenure rights to the State of Pernambuco, represented by the Recife Port Authority, to create an airport. In 1953 the same person granted the same rights to the Fisherman’s Federation to use the site for a fishing base. In the meanwhile, the Recife Municipal Government started collecting property taxes from squatters to increase revenue, but without formally recognizing the neighbourhood, which did not even figure in the city’s official maps. Technicians working in the urbanization process were often told to change their plans during political campaigns.

Threats to the community always came under the guise of urban development plans, which proposed the transformation of the area into a middle class neighbourhood or a tourist complex. In these plans, the squatters were asked to moved somewhere else or encouraged to “produce handicrafts and souvenirs and perform traditional dances” for tourists. Other times, the community was betrayed for political gain. Chapters 13-14 tells how between 1980 and 1983 residents received title documents to the land which then turned out to be invalid. They had been awarded as a “political currency” to help a local politician to be designated by his party as state governor candidate.

But this is also a story of struggle and resilience. The Residents Council drafted its own local development plan and created theatre plays and cartoon newspapers to raise consciousness within the community. The Council also promoted actions such as boycotting buses that did not enter the neighbourhood, and used nonviolent resistance to stop machinery working in the expansion of a yacht club. But there was also internal tension within the community, especially between the residents in a fishermen's colony, who had settled before 1958, and the new arrivals, mostly migrants coming from the impoverished areas of the interior. When plans for legalization started to appear, there were also conflicts between property owners and renters. And the brothel at the entrance of the neighbourhood was always at the margins of the community movements.



Families play in the water off Brasília Teimosa. Credit: [Rildo Moura](#) CC BY-ND 2.0

The foreword by Janice Perlman, another expert on urban poverty in Brazil, warns the readers about the book's "lack of analysis". Indeed, the author does not follow the rule of "tell the readers what you're going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you told them". The story of Brasília Teimosa is presented without any introductions and conclusions, to each chapter and to the whole book. These would have helped the author to underline the lessons learnt from the research. It is also difficult for the reader to keep track of the more than 100 protagonists and the long succession of events, which are sometimes repeated and not told in chronological order. So the timeline, lists of acronyms and index turn out to be particularly useful. Some readers may also be put off by the long transcriptions of the interviews, one of which is not even real, but an account of an imaginary meeting with a politician.

The work is based on the author's PhD thesis, written in 1987, and that is where the story ends, leaving readers wanting to know what happened in the last 25 years. This does not mean that the book should be regarded simply as an historical document. The subject is timely as ever, as pressures from the market keep on forcing residents of favelas to move out of valuable land all over the country. The book also helps us to

understand the type of context that causes discontentment among underprivileged groups and, as mentioned in the book's foreword, feeds the resentment against the Government that explodes once in a while, as we saw in the wave of protest that swept Brazilian cities last year.

Paulo Rui Anciaes is a researcher at the Centre for Transport Studies, University College London. He completed his PhD. at the Department of Geography and Environment of the London School of Economics. Paulo blogs about [Community severance](#) and [Alternative Environmentalism](#) and contributes to the [UCL Street Mobility project](#) blog.