




Creative

A Narrative of Resistance: A Brief History of the Dandara Community, Brazil

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Received: 7 July 2017; Accepted: 18 August 2017; Published: 5 September 2017

Abstract: This paper presents a brief report on the history of the Dandara Occupation; in the city of Belo Horizonte; Brazil. Through a general panorama of the strategies and resistance of the residents and movements involved; this paper shows the importance of the occupied territory in the struggle for the right to housing in the city. Through the narratives of the residents; references and photographic remnants of the initial years of the occupation; a temporal line is developed to the present day; that reveals the challenges and opportunities for the people of Dandara in the making of their community.

Keywords: Dandara; Occupation; Belo Horizonte

1. Introduction

The city of Belo Horizonte, capital of the Minas Gerais State in the Southeast Region of Brazil, is one of the few planned cities in the country. However, since its creation, its hinterlands have become characterized by poverty in the peripheral neighborhoods. The form in which Belo Horizonte was built forced the working-class population to stay out of the planned circle. Therefore, the creation of Belo Horizonte in its conception presented the idea of housing in the formal city as a privilege (see for example, [Fernandes \(2017\)](#)).

The original structure of the city, along with many other social and economic processes, is evident in the current, high inequalities that are reproduced within it. A study of the João Pinheiro Foundation (FJP) points out that Minas Gerais has the second largest housing deficit in the country: in 2014, Minas Gerais lacked 529,000 housing units. In the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (RMBH), neither the private sector nor the government housing programs (the largest of these being “Programa Minha Casa, Minha Vida”, PMCMV—My House, My Life, Program) were able to solve this problem. Instead, the housing deficit in RMBH increases year on year.

The housing deficit is a social issue where lack of access to a house is a consequence of market logic. Real estate market supply is so expensive and its access so bureaucratic that it becomes unfeasible for a large proportion of the poorest layers of the society to obtain a home through the formal channels. More than that, since housing is treated by the market as a financial asset, there are many properties that are left unoccupied as a form of housing speculation.

This situation in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte has led to a severe increase in the Urban Occupations, reflecting the need for a fight for the “Right to the City” in Belo Horizonte (see [Ferrari de Lima et al. 2014](#)). Occupation in this context emerges as a reaction to the deficit itself and to the spatial inequalities that have characterized urban centers in general, and particularly in Belo Horizonte. However, there is another relevant element that explains why so many families have

been occupying empty land that does not conform to the “social function of the property”: the “cruz do aluguel” (rent cross), as it is called by various social movements. It refers to the fact that many poor families simply cannot pay the rent due to the extremely low wage levels among the working-class and the high cost of life in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte.

The Dandara Community was created within such a social framework. Dandara dreamed, and dreamed aloud, of promoting a new way of dwelling; a conception beyond the established market of the exploitation of peripheral subjects in large centers. With deep debates about the right to housing, and severe criticism of the housing deficit in this city that belongs to the few, Dandara was constituted through struggle.

2. Dandara’s History in Photos and Memory

The Dandara community is located in the Pampulha region (a zone of high real estate value), in Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais, Brazil). In the early hours of 9 April, 2009, a group of 150 homeless families occupied a territory—like a “sea of canvas tents”—on a piece of land that was not conforming to its social function. Since then, along with the social movements *Brigadas Populares* (BPs), *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (CPT), and *Movimento dos Sem Terra* (MST), 150 families started to build their own houses—the Dandara Community was born.

Once the territory was occupied, the *Brigadas Populares* (a political organization and social movement) took on the process of organization and resistance with the residents, seeking to promote the maintenance and self-construction of housing on the land. In the first few days news of the occupation gained national attention. The media coverage further increased the number of families that joined the occupation process. In three days the occupation increased from 150 to 1086 families. “It was nice because it happened like this, it was a surprise that we had to work with really quick! Within five days, it had already reached 1200 families.” This is how Frei Gilvander, an important figure in the history of the occupation, remembers the beginnings of Dandara.



Source: Copyright © 2011 Cyro Almeida¹. Photo description: Only entry if invited.

¹ All the photos in this paper belongs to the book “Dandara” (Almeida 2014). The author kindly has authorized its reproduction in this work.

In the following days, due to this phenomenon, there were intensifying calls for resistance and security to stay on the land. Dwellers, members of social movements, and support networks all started to organize daily assemblies, where the dwellers defined questions that addressed such themes as the logic of the self-managed space, its organization and structure, as well as strategies beyond the 'occupied' territory.

From the articulation of the CPT, a support network was born. At the beginning, this was composed of religious affiliates of the Catholic church, and later it expanded to public lawyers, social architects, and political scientists, among several other professionals. An important agent of these networks was groups from universities, where undergraduate and graduate students also became involved in the daily challenges of the expanding occupation.



Source: Copyright © 2011 Cyro Almeida. Photo description: Popular assembly in one of the first years of the occupation.

“(...) And we started to join some reunions in there (...) and all the organizational process under [the] canvas and fighting the police (...)” (Sãozinha, member of Rede de Educação Cidadã; Web of Citizen Education—RECID *apud*). (Ribeiro 2017, p. 93)

The media attention during the early years of the occupation also played a leading role in the establishment of the community. Through blogs, articles in newspapers, photographic exhibitions, documentaries, concerts, and events in the territory, the occupation managed to expand this support network, commanding international visibility. Campaigns on social media made the dilemmas of the occupation accessible to people from all over the world who could contribute to the community's permanence in the territory. All these processes of articulation, from different groups, in addition to the various forces on the ground allowed the occupation to be realized and to remain in the territory until the present day. Little by little, the canvas constructions gave way to huts made of wood, which, nowadays, are almost all in the form of stone houses, still unplastered, but full of dreams about the reforms and constructions yet to be made.



Source: Copyright © 2011 Cyro Almeida. Photo description: Dweller of the community in a canvas tent at the beginning of the occupation.

Dandara, the name chosen to baptize the community, was that of a black woman and a warrior, the life-mate of the leader of the slave resistance in Brazil, Zumbi dos Palmares, and an important reference point in the fight against the slavery of the Portuguese American period.² Dandara was an important warrior and strategist, and when her freedom was threatened, she chose suicide rather than returning to a life of slavery.

“Her fight is preserved in Brazilian history, and her warrior personality is, to this day, an example for other women. Inspired by this model, many reveal, even unconsciously, that “the fight is in the blood”, like the warriors of the occupation in Belo Horizonte. Faithful companions, more than wives and mothers, they carry out the work inside their houses, they plant, and they fight—even more than some men—for the ideal of freedom glimpsed from behind the eyes of Dandara”. ([Andrade and Lelis 2010](#), p. 38, loose translation)

A symbol of the fight for freedom of black people, the choice of this politically charged name also embodies the empowerment of women in the occupation and in the fight for habitation. Many times, while their husbands were out working, the women maintained the political presence of the community. They are considered the “front line”, even in confrontations against the police.

² Zumbi was born in 1655 and died in 1695. Slavery in Brazil began in 1532 and ended in 1888. The Palmares settlement grew from 1605 to 1694, and was eventually defeated and its inhabitants were dispersed across the country.



Source: Copyright © 2011 Cyro Almeida. Photo description: Wagna, one of the female leadership members of the community, stands in front of her house door.

“In here it’s like that, everything you plant, grows! If I plant in this piece of cement, it grows a sprout of cabbage!” (Mr. Orlando, resident of the occupation and militant of the Brigadas Populares (Popular Brigades) *apud*). ([Ribeiro 2017](#), p. 58)



Source: Copyright © 2011 Cyro Almeida. Photo description: see below.

The man in this last photograph is named Orlando Soares Lopes, also known as Mr. Orlando. The resident and leader of the occupation stands in his lot. In this space, the dweller—who has a lifetime of experience in urban agriculture—wills to build his urban garden, or what he also likes to call his “future tomb”.

3. Dandara’s Legacy

The Dandara occupation process is extremely relevant to the struggles for urban and agrarian reform in the Brazilian left. First, an attempt to overcome a rural vs. urban dichotomy is presented through the conception of the occupation. Thus emerges the Dandara occupation, a territory located in the urban perimeter that proposes to energize this land, making it fertile and productive for those families that occupy it. Dandara embodies the combination of two agendas, three social movements, and the ideal of overcoming the difficulties encountered in occupations and peripheries (also known in Brazil as “favelas”) of the metropolitan area of Belo Horizonte. The union of social movements does not only look toward a new conception of housing, but an open unity of the leftist movements acting together to promote a space of internal translation between themselves and the residents of the occupation. The takeover of an important sector of the city is the result of overcoming differences and learning from each other’s experiences.

Being one of the first planned occupations in the city, Dandara is an example of the dream of producing food and services on one’s own land in order to make it autonomous. Social movements, whether for agrarian or urban reform, unite around an occupation project that unifies their struggles: the “rururban” (rural and urban) proposal. This is an expression of the fluidity that exists between rural and urban counterparts (in the plural, thus expressing their multiplicity). Rural and urban areas are not alone; there is a co-dependency between the two that is quotidian. Dandara makes it possible to deepen this convergence of agendas of movements coming from different spaces, both rural and urban. There is no sense in division which would prevent a unified housing project that is a support-base for so many families living in conditions of poverty. This effort generates a pertinent reflection on society and especially on the State, which has hitherto regarded rural and urban movements as absolutely distinct issues. This distinction is maintained despite the deep history of migration in this country, the resulting interconnections, and inter-dependencies inherent in these ways of life. Still, the juridical, municipal, state, and federal bureaucracies choose to dissociate the demands of one from the other. The *rururban* project, therefore, is more than a unifying agenda of the movements, it also bring into view the debate of field and city.

The planned *rururban* project, that is Dandara, was predetermined from the experience lived by the locals, which allowed for ambitious plans to be transformed into achievable realities possible in that moment. This model of occupation, comprising two ways of life, has initiated its own trajectory. Increasingly in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, there are occupations that denominate rururban areas and fight to remain in the territory under the understanding of their unique standing as *rururban* occupations. The dynamics of this model become autonomous even in this aspect. The concept itself is redefined not only by residents, but also by other movements that incorporate this term in their struggle for access to housing. While it is possible to map the definition of the planned rururban project from the movements of the Belo Horizonte occupation, the directions it takes remain unique and fluid.

Another important aspect that emerged from the analysis of this work is the fundamental role of the support networks in the consolidation and permanence of the occupation. The collective work carried out by its supporters continues to produce a current that strengthens the inhabitants and militants, and which—perhaps as the main point of their involvement—produces an immeasurable exchange of knowledge and experiences.

The empathy that these spaces promote constructs a society based on equity and social justice, but without romanticisation. An experience such as this, of occupying, accompanied by future professionals, as in the case of those involved from universities, can promote (trans)formation in these

individuals. Whether it affects their ultimate choice of profession or career, their understanding of this world will never be the same. The same logic pervades all the groups that are involved. Furthermore, the strength that these spaces bring to the families that find themselves in situations like those presented in this paper, beyond any bonds of empathy, give power to their construction and political participation. There is a process of emancipation and autonomy in the act of occupying, and the support networks contribute considerably to the strengthening and maintenance of this process.

4. Final Remarks: Dandara's Current Challenges

From day to day, the Dandara Community keeps growing: houses are built, enhanced, and improved. Gradually, more than 2000 families have conquered the housing struggle that they dreamed and fought for. Today, after eight years of occupation, Dandara is a neighborhood, albeit an informal one, with all the characteristics and limitations of the neo-liberal city that we so often encounter day after day. However, Dandara has something that sets it apart from other neighborhoods in its region. Dandara has a history; one pervaded by struggle and effort. All these characteristics present themselves at some point as an occupation becomes a community before the eyes of the State and even its residents. With transformations resulting from the internal dynamics and ongoing family flows the characteristics of a traditional city enter these territories, and perceptions of it change.

The perspective of the future of the occupation may be one of the most complex aspects to be considered. The intrusion of the neoliberal model of the city warns of an arduous struggle to come. As the capital seeks to demonstrate its power, it establishes itself even in places of occupation, resistance, and construction.

Is the logic of the traditional cities' system unavoidable? This question has no ready answers. In some aspects, the communities break from some features of the traditional city, but in others they do not. As time goes by, the occupied spaces become more embedded in the formal city. They become neighborhoods and start to access public services—although often precariously—and from there the struggle becomes only a memory. At the same time, walls are increasing and the cost of people's daily life and housing prices are rising due to the planned streets and the large houses – even those not yet finished. In addition to the increasing housing costs, residents start to pay more tributes and taxes for each new service implemented in the community.

The *rururban* project, originally planned by social movements, could be a way out of this new /old reality in occupied territories. The production of goods inside these spaces could provide autonomy and allow maintenance of the territory, not only financially, but also through the union and formative processes of similar occupation projects. However, the demand for housing is urgent and, due to the increasing number of families that need places to live, the occupation of urban lands, like the Dandara case, are more and more prone to family booms occupying the territory.

The reality of these urban occupations is complex in their processes, and defies generalizations about their formation. Beyond this discussion of the difficulties of the structure and maintenance of the work of occupying land, the formative process led by social movements and support networks is the main form of resistance to the current model of society. Only a formation that sets us free from the moorings of the traditional system can drive the beginning of a new model of city and of society.

The occupation is undergoing urbanization. The State has already begun to formalize the territory and incorporate it into the city. This fact has many implications for the occupation that is gradually starting to become a neighborhood. However, the impact that Dandara has had is still reflected in other struggles for continued habitation in occupied territories. Dandara represents a milestone in the struggle for housing in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, and Brazil.

Author Contributions: Beatriz Ribeiro wrote the text based on her dissertation (*Sobre o rururbano: a Ocupação Dandara e os Desafios da Luta por Moradia para além do Rural e do Urbano*, 2017.); Fernando Oelze reviewed, supplemented and translated the text. Orlando Soares Lopes chose the photos and narrated the moments that each one of them represent, as well as complementing the text. This work is the fruit of the field years of the masters research that gave base for this article; of the years of militancy of Fernando Oelze in the territory; and of the years that Orlando Soares Lopes lives in the Dandara Community.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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