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Urban agriculture and the transformation of public spaces: The case of Manguinhos, Rio de Janeiro

Urbanisation often brings devastating environmental consequences which, in the case of favelas, combine with harsh material living conditions to undermine the wellbeing of their residents. In this post, [Lea Rekow](#) reports on how a favela-based community garden is circumventing these environmental and material challenges and, in doing so, improving the quality of urban spaces and fostering community participation.

Manguinhos forms part of the massive favela landscape that makes up the north zone of Rio de Janeiro. [Approximately 50,000 people live in this cluster of informal communities](#) located just six kilometres from the city centre. The area has suffered from decades of urbanisation and the dumping of city waste. It is hemmed in by a series of polluted rivers, highways, train lines, and an oil refinery. Live high-voltage transmission lines cut through the middle of it. [Numerous environmental risks afflict the residents](#), many of whom survive on less than a minimum income, [with unemployment levels in some neighbourhoods reaching as high as 50%](#).

But in the last year, a new community garden has begun to redefine a particularly impoverished part of the favela. The project, implemented at a cost of approximately R\$500,000 (€165,000), is led by the [Municipal Department for the Environment's Hortas Cariocas programme](#). This is an ambitious undertaking that began by removing 700 truckloads of garbage from a kilometer-long site under the transmission lines. An additional layer of contaminated soil was then scraped off the surface and the ground covered with gravel. More than 300 raised garden beds were built and filled with fresh topsoil. Water tanks were installed and linked to the Municipal water supply. Residents were vetted by the Manguinhos Residents Association, and interviewed by Hortas Cariocas as potential gardeners. Dozens of people from the community were subsequently hired, and seeds, tools and training in organic horticulture were provided to begin the task of cultivating the garden.



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Not even a year later, the garden is thriving and has taken on a life of its own. Though the overall project remains under the supervision of *Hortas Cariocas*, the space is separated into three distinct sections, each demarcated by a football field, and each developing in its own way.

The largest section is cultivated by the 24 residents employed by *Hortas Cariocas*. Each beneficiary is expected to work full-time in exchange for receiving a stipend R\$360 a month (€120) and taking home as much produce as they and their family can eat. The gardeners cultivate approximately 160 garden beds that produce chicory, kale, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, green onions, lettuce, okra, beets, spinach, and a range of herbs. Excess produce is sold locally and donated to more at-risk members of the community. The city intends to cease providing stipends within the next 18 months, at which time it hopes the garden will be self-sustaining.



In a smaller section, the **Green My Favela** (GMF) project has been allocated 48 garden beds to develop with retired and underemployed volunteers and youth. GMF's section is also cultivated and managed by eight resident gardeners. The more experienced gardeners train the less experienced, and all help with the daily maintenance of the space. Children frequent the garden and participate in various activities. GMF provides seeds, tools,

facilitates improvements to infrastructure, implements aesthetic enhancements, and provides additional volunteer to augment the efforts of the residents. This section of the garden produces a variety of organic edibles that feed approximately 60-100 people.

Part of the middle section has been compromised by a build-up of trash that is intensified by inadequate garbage collection, the collapse of a fence, and the demolition of some of the beds, but plans are now in place to build walls on either side of the city dumpsters that have encroached on the space in order to mitigate the trash and protect the garden from further damage. Another issue with this section of the garden is flooding, which is critical in Manguinhos. The river, heavily polluted with sewerage and other contaminants, overflows into this area during heavy rains. Most beds in this section, however, are also thriving and producing a variety of organic vegetables at high capacity.

Despite these serious challenges, Manguinhos has profoundly changed the face of this community. The project has increased biodiversity, created jobs, increased access to fresh, nutritional food and created desirable public space. The garden is open to the public at all times and is a lively social space visited by many. For an undertaking less than a year old, Manguinhos is testament to the will and hard work of its residents, and to the possibilities for integrating public policy in ways that encourage networked localism, promote community relations, and showcase the benefits of organic urban agriculture. It also provides a progressive platform for multi-tier collaboration, collective ownership, and self-management. Whatever other struggles it continues to face, Manguinhos can now boast it is home to **the largest urban food garden in all of South America**.

All photos courtesy of *Lea Rekow*.

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Lea Rekow is founding director of [Green My Favela](#), an urban gardening project based in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Her doctorate from Griffith University focused on transdisciplinary practices for reclaiming degraded land in areas of social exclusion.

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