

# Who's invading whom? The complex battle for Rio de Janeiro's informal settlements on federal land



*Depicting favela residents as environmentally destructive invaders serves to justify evictions and undermine community heritage in the name of creating a “modern” city free of potent signs of poverty and inequality, writes [Jennifer Chisholm](#) (University of Cambridge).*

The [favelas](#), or informal settlements, of Rio de Janeiro have always been one of the city's defining features. The favelas have gone through periods of zero tolerance and mass evictions, but also periods in which the city has sought to incorporate them into the more formal parts of the city.

These days, the city is doing a little bit of both. While some favelas have received [urban upgrading through government programs](#), others have been marked for eviction. The government's favoured rationales for these evictions are that favelas are illegally occupying land and/or that they are destroying the environment. Yet, in [some instances favelas are replaced by luxury condominiums](#), suggesting that evictions are more about social cleansing than preserving the environment.



Residents remind authorities that Horto has been settled for over 200 years ([Joana Diniz](#), Midia Ninja, [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#))

Favelas on private land have the option of invoking adverse possession or “squatter's rights” that would make them eligible for land titles. However, favelas on public land can only get the right to use land, not own it — arguably making them more vulnerable to eviction. Moreover, claims of environmental degradation are especially troublesome for favelas on federally owned land, as these are often protected nature reserves.

In an effort to save their communities, activists from affected favelas have attempted to subvert the narrative of the invasive, destructive favela by divulging a counternarrative of multigenerational communities that exist harmoniously with the environment. From this perspective, the government is the true invader.

Nestled next to the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro, a federal institution, is an informal settlement of families descended from workers of the garden who are currently embattled over the right to stay in their homes. This community, known as [Horto](#) (“garden” in Portuguese) sits on a site that has been occupied since the colonial era, but today it finds itself embroiled in a fight for land and housing rights. A vocal critic of Horto, Sérgio Besserman, president of the federal Research Institute of the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro, objects to housing on land claimed by the Botanical Garden and envisions expanding the Institute's premises after Horto's eviction.

During my fieldwork in the community, residents gave accounts of the era of their grandparents and great-grandparents, when the Botanical Garden gave its workers permission to occupy land and construct their own houses nearby. Most of these workers and their families were only given verbal permission to occupy the land, which at that time the residents considered a dependable commitment.

Sadly, this lack of documentation has complicated the lives of Horto families. Over 215 of these families have been served eviction notices, whereas others have already been evicted and their houses destroyed. Since much of Horto is located on federal land, many families are unable to petition for land titles. Instead, residents and community activists are using every possible recourse to resist removal, from soliciting the support of sympathetic politicians and judges, to simply reinforcing community bonds through social projects like photography workshops and dance socials.

About two and a half hours away in the western part of Rio lies Araçatiba, a sleepy favela surrounded by a mangrove reserve. In the late 1970s, the media conglomerate Globo began filming a children's television programme in the area, forcing the self-built housing further back from the main road and into Araçatiba's current location. Until 2006, the area belonged to the military but it then passed to the federal government, which proceeded to create a register of Araçatiba's buildings in 2012.

In 2014 the favela received eviction notices from the government, which accused them of invading and endangering the mangrove reserve. Shortly after, a demolition unit came to remove houses leading to a fifteen-hour standoff by residents. Two years later in December 2016, the city government notified residents that any dwellings built after 2012 were illegal and that no further construction could take place under threat of demolition, leaving these houses incomplete yet inhabited.



In communities like Horto the question of who's invading whom has become central ([Midia Ninja, CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

Accusations of invasion are especially poignant for informal settlements like Horto and Araçatiba that are located around nature reserves.

As such, Araçatiba's residents' association has recently tried to raise awareness of threats of imminent eviction while also preparing their case against government accusations of invasion and environmental harm. Aside from collecting relevant documents, residents are planning to create an ecological leisure area and an organic garden. These social projects intend to improve community life, but they will also serve as tangible proof of Araçatiba's commitment to environmentalism and a rebuttal of the government's "destructive favela" stance.

Horto residents have also taken great pains to demonstrate their concern for the environment, as they see themselves as natural-born stewards. One resident organises reforestation projects with children to teach them about local flora, while the Residents' Commission of Horto carries out a weekly recycling drive.

But Horto, Araçatiba, and other similar favelas continue to be likened to an invasive, destructive species by those seeking their removal. Where organically developed communities have existed — and been tolerated — for generations but are suddenly subject to eviction, the question arises of who's really invading whom.

There are several possible motivations for depicting favela residents as environmentally destructive invaders. For one, if the public believes that favela residents invaded and are destroying the land on which they live, calls for eviction become more justifiable, even in the minds of favela residents themselves. Accusations of invasion also downplay any sense of heritage that these communities have fostered, refashioning favelas as places without history and therefore worthy of eviction.

Accusations of invasion can be seen as part of larger effort to regain control of these public lands, to “[reterritorialise](#)” them. Aside from a desire to leave no part of Rio outside of government control, reterritorialisation — and the ensuing favela evictions — is also driven by a desire to “modernise” the city and erase all trace of the poverty that signifies a developing country and the inequality that defines Brazil in particular.

Governmental concern for conservation of its natural areas is understandable, but using environmental protection as a means of undermining housing rights is not. Instead of denigrating informal settlements by classifying them as illegal invasions, the state could instead seek a solution that also ensures that the housing rights of these communities are respected.

The city of Rio can afford to evict these families, but they are doing so at a time when the state of Rio de Janeiro is [suffering an economic crisis](#). A more economical and sustainable solution — and one preferred by residents themselves — would be for the city to save itself the cost of evictions by permitting communities to stay and by forging more respectful relationships.

A first step along this more constructive path would be to end the “invader” stigmatisation of the favelas and their residents.

*Notes:*

- The views expressed here are of the authors and do not reflect the position of the Centre or of the LSE
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