

## CHAPTER 4

### *People Power in Rio's Favelas*

A little hill rising above the old docks of Rio de Janeiro has given its name to the world's best-known urban problem. It was here, on the Morro da Favela, that the city's first shantytown appeared seventy years ago. Today Rio has 600 favelas, home to between 1.5 and 3 million people.

Every year, 300,000 people arrive in Rio, many of them fleeing drought and hunger in northeastern Brazil. They have little hope of finding affordable housing, so they build wherever they can find a space. Shacks scramble up the sides of Rio's precipitous hills and huddle over its marshy swamps. There are even homes wedged into the triangles where overpasses meet the ground.

The city's more comfortable inhabitants—known by the favela dwellers as “the people of the asphalt” because their streets are paved—fear and avoid the favelas. Rio is one of the world's most violent cities, with a murder rate three times New York's.<sup>1</sup> Its drug barons, based in the shantytowns, boast a business volume equal to that of McDonald's in Brazil—US\$2.5 million a week.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of children hustle and mug on the city streets, escaping pursuit in the labyrinthine alleys of the favelas. Many die violently—some, it is believed, at the hands of the police.

Violence and crime are not the whole story of the favelas, however. These jumbles of brick, board, and tin are the site of one of the great human development stories of our time, dating back forty years to the founding of the first community associations. Many of the older hillside communities now look more

like Mediterranean villages than slums, with brick houses, piped water, paved streets, electricity, sewerage, and rubbish collection. Their inhabitants owe these amenities not to the authorities but to their own resourcefulness—and to community leaders who refused to be bullied, bribed, or ignored.

In 1992, I spent two weeks visiting favelas in Rio de Janeiro with Luiz Pereira. In the 1960s, Pereira led a council of favelas representing 50,000 people. He was one of thousands of *favelados* who were rehoused in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to a conjunction of international aid, government support, and grassroots initiative. Now retired, he devotes his energies to supporting his embattled successors in the favelas. This chapter tells the story of how Pereira and his contemporaries took charge of their own destiny and of how one community is following in their footsteps today.

Three factors converged in the early 1960s to improve the prospects of Rio's 1.25 million favela dwellers: finance, political will, and an upsurge of initiative in the communities themselves.

First, money became available. In 1961, concerned about Castro's ambitions outside Cuba, President John Kennedy led the United States and twenty-two Latin American countries in setting up the Alliance for Progress to counter communism by promoting democracy and development. The alliance was particularly keen to do what it could to avert revolution in Brazil, which was threatened by deep divisions between Left and Right, spiraling inflation, and repeated political crises. It offered support to Carlos Lacerda, a forceful right-winger who had become state governor for Rio de Janeiro and its hinterland in 1961.

Lacerda provided the second factor in the equation: government commitment to tackling Rio's housing problems. For this, he was able to draw on alliance funds. He made it known that his door would always be open for favela leaders—but they had to be elected by their communities. As a result, communities all over the city began to organize themselves into residents' associations.

Many of the first rehousing schemes were unpopular and unsuccessful, and the motives behind them were, of course,

mixed. Some favelas occupied prime sites in the center of the city, which property developers were eager to buy. Communities were split up, and people were moved miles away from their jobs—sometimes to inadequate “temporary” housing that became permanent. Such settlements as Vila Kennedy, now a thriving satellite town outside Rio, were fiercely resented. The favelas themselves were deeply divided by political infighting and corruption. Absorbed in settling old scores and in feathering their own nests, their leaders were unable to present a united case to the authorities.

It was here that a third factor came into play—a spiritual revival among the *favelados*. That led to the growth of trust, integrity, and self-help initiatives. It came from an unexpected source: the docks of Rio, which a decade before had been paralyzed by unofficial strikes, gangs, union rivalries, and corruption.<sup>3</sup> Two leaders of rival unions made it their common cause to unite the port. They had been inspired by the ideas of Moral Re-Armament (MRA), an international network of people who saw spiritual change in individuals as an essential component of successful social change.

Over a period of years, the union leaders’ campaign had a remarkable impact on their colleagues. Theft, corruption, and personal vendettas began to decline. Several couples returned to the church and got married, accompanied by their children. In 1957, the port held its first genuinely free union elections. By 1960, the new, united union had over 4,000 members—compared with the official union’s 700 members in 1955—and there had not been a strike since 1954. If personal choices could have such dramatic results in their situation, the dockers asked, what about Rio’s other major problem area—the favelas?

Among those who had been impressed by the dockers’ experiences was industrialist Antônio Guedes Muniz, a close associate of Lacerda’s. He and his wife invited some of the dockers to their home to meet José de Almeida Neto, an activist who lived in a local favela.<sup>4</sup>

De Almeida was astonished to be invited to a bourgeois home and even more astonished by the people he met there, among

them an industrialist who had built up a successful business without giving or taking bribes. The dockers showed him a feature film they had made about their experiences. "I suddenly saw that we *favelados* were not just 1 million problems but 2 million hands, ready to solve these problems," he said later. He offered to arrange for the dockers to visit the favelas with their film.

De Almeida worked in a government printing press and used his contacts to lobby on behalf of the favelas. He became Lacerda's representative in the favelas and applied the principles he had learned through the dockers and their associates in his efforts to foster self-help in the communities. According to one source, 110 community associations were founded as a result.<sup>5</sup>

My guide to the favelas, Luiz Pereira, was one of those most dramatically affected by de Almeida's campaign. A tile fitter, he had come to Rio in 1952 with his wife, Edir, and five children. They came from Fortaleza in drought-stricken northeastern Brazil, hoping like so many others for a better life in the big city. At first, they lived in a shack across the bay from Rio, and Pereira had to leave at four each morning to catch the bus and ferry to work. Because the family had no clock, he once arrived at the ferry at 1 A.M., having mistaken the last bus of the night for the first of the morning. It was a relief to move into Rio, to the favela of Morro de São João.

Their shack had no running water or electricity, and Luiz had to build a fence to prevent the children from falling down the steep hill on which it was built. Edir took in washing, toiling up the hill in the hot sun with her tin of water. "People used to tell me to leave my husband and go home to Fortaleza," she says. "There are always people to tell you that you could have an easier life if you just let go of your principles."

"One day a man from the government said that we should not have to pay rent for our shacks," remembers Pereira. "So everyone stopped paying. It led to a storm for our people, because the landowners wanted us out." A wave of evictions hit the favelas. As the communities organized themselves informally for

defense, Pereira found himself taking leadership of Morro de São João.

He speaks with feeling of the day the police came with tear gas and bayonets and tore down a third of the shacks on the hill. "Every family took someone in," says Pereira. "In our home you had to step over all the people sleeping on the floor. After that, many people didn't believe in the authorities anymore, or in a God who would allow over 200 people to lose their homes."

The evictions shocked the government into declaring a state of emergency, during which no houses could be demolished. With great daring, Pereira seized the respite to take his case to Lacerda and was rewarded with the promise of a visit from a state representative the next week. When Pereira set about formulating the community's demands, he had to be persuaded to add water and sanitation to the list. "I thought that would be asking for too much," he says.

The government representative urged the community to set up a legal association and to keep him abreast of their needs. Pereira was elected president by acclamation and went on to become president of a council of local favelas representing nearly 50,000 people. With his colleagues, he put up furious opposition to government plans to rehouse favela dwellers outside of town, up to a two-hour bus ride from their places of work.

Meanwhile, Edir was getting fed up. "Luiz got more and more accustomed to living in the favela and became very popular. He went to all the dances, but he refused to take me. I got very bitter." She had good reason to complain, acknowledges Luiz. "I didn't allow her to speak; I didn't let my children take part in anything; the directors in our community association had to do what I said. Wherever I spoke I was applauded, and the more I was applauded the more foolishnesses I said. I began to believe that everything I did was right."

As Pereira's influence grew, so did his feeling that the harder he worked, the poorer he became. His bitterness against those he considered responsible—the rich, the government, and the North Americans—increased. He was horrified when de Almeida and his MRA friends, some of them from overseas, climbed up

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*Luiz and Edir Pereira: "it was we ourselves with the help of the state government"*

to the favela. "I told him he was a sell-out, and that if he hadn't been there we'd have literally kicked the foreigners off the hill," says Pereira.

In spite of Pereira's attempts to discourage them, the MRA campaigners went on visiting him over a period of eighteen months. Eventually he began to see their point. "Some of the things they said made me think. I saw that bitterness and revolt would not build what I wanted in the community and in Brazil. A series of changes began in my life." He began to set aside time each morning to think and "listen to [his] inner voice." He made up with Edir and the family, adopted a more democratic approach in the association, and became reconciled with an enemy who had twice tried to kill him. "It's very important to have your head cleaned out, so you can think of fresh things," he explains.

As Pereira became less autocratic, others in the community began to get involved. Over the next months, the association—

reinforced by a newly founded women's wing—built stairs and ramps up the hill to replace the slippery mud paths, installed tanks and pumps for water distribution, and concreted in the huge boulders that threatened to roll down and crush their huts. "There was no lawyer getting this for us, it was we ourselves with the help of the state government," Pereira says proudly. When the people of the asphalt set up a three-member committee to beautify the neighborhood, Pereira had the chutzpah to put himself up for election and won a place on the committee.

With the threat of eviction still hanging over their heads, Pereira and his colleagues drew up a plan for building new apartments not far from Morro de São João. When they failed to get this plan implemented through a housing association, Pereira had the bright idea of telephoning the minister of the interior. "To my amazement, I got straight through to him and he asked me to come and see him," he says.

After lengthy negotiations, the apartments were built, and the community moved in 1970. When the Pereiras walked into their new home, Edir was so overcome by the sight of the bathroom and kitchen, with running water, that she cried.

Another favela leader who adopted a new style of leadership was Euclides da Silva, president of the community of Parada de Lucas.<sup>6</sup> He held the electricity concession for 526 homes in his favela and was making a tidy profit by buying power for four cruzeiros a kilowatt and selling it for eleven. His rival, Amfilófilo, held the concession for another part of the favela, and the two men had made frequent attempts on each other's lives. The community was deeply divided.

When the dockers came to show their film at Parada de Lucas, da Silva stayed to talk with them. "They told us about the difference it had made in their lives when they began to live by absolute standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love," he recalled later. "They struck me as being effective and fearless. They came to see me many times. Finally I took an honest look at my own life. I thought of my wife, of Amfilófilo, whom I had tried to kill, and how I was cheating the people over electricity. I had a

struggle within myself, a fight between my greed and ambition and what God wanted from me. I knew I had to clean up my life—and I knew where I had to start. It wasn't easy.”

Da Silva had a “heart-to-heart talk” with his wife, to whom he had been frequently and openly unfaithful, and they rebuilt their marriage. After several aborted attempts, he approached Amfilófilo, and the two men reached an understanding. He told his customers that he had been overcharging them and resigned his position as president, only to be reelected. People in the favela began to trust him—and one another.

Da Silva was elected president of a federation of 60,000 *favelados* and took part in the dockers' campaign to show their film in each of the city's 186 favelas. Busloads of favela leaders drove up to the MRA center at Petropolis, an hour and a half from Rio, to recharge their batteries and discuss their problems away from the turmoil of the city, in an atmosphere where they were encouraged to examine their own motives and values.

The relationships built there made it possible for a group of favela presidents to take a united proposal on rehousing to Lacerda and the state authorities. According to da Silva, speaking in 1967, this led to new homes or better conditions for 500,000 people, funded by an Alliance for Progress grant and the state budget. More than 5,000 homes were rebuilt by their inhabitants on the sites where the shacks used to be, using materials provided by the state.

In the 1950s, da Silva had been involved in one of the less successful rehousing projects arranged by the Catholic Church's Cruzada São Sebastião. Over 700 people had been rehoused in apartments, but the community had disintegrated into crime and lawlessness. Da Silva believed that the chaos of his own private life had contributed to the project's failure and that his new honesty was part of the later scheme's success.<sup>7</sup>

Lacerda's government set up a Company for Popular Housing to spearhead its rehousing campaign. Its first president, Sandra Cavalcânti (later a member of the federal legislature) made a point of consulting a general committee of favela leaders, which included da Silva and de Almeida, before making any decisions.



“We wanted to be sure that our projects answered the most urgent needs,” she explained. “The change in the attitude of the favela leaders made this collaboration very fruitful. We were able to prepare people for their new surroundings.”<sup>8</sup>

After a military government seized power in Brazil in 1964, it implemented the rehousing policies pioneered in Rio on a national basis. It set up a National Housing Bank, financed by a workers’ insurance scheme, and by 1976, it had built over 600,000 units of low-income housing. The bank reckoned that the stimulus its work had given to the building industry indirectly produced another 2.5 million homes. By the early 1970s, the building industry was creating 500,000 new jobs a year. The whole development was one of the key factors in Brazil’s economic miracle.<sup>9</sup>

The achievements of the National Housing Bank were impressive, but the poorest inhabitants of the favelas were unable to afford even the lowest rates of repayment. And in the long term, as in the rest of the developing world, the ambitious housing schemes of the 1960s proved too pricey to sustain. Although the population of Rio’s favelas fell for a while, today, Morro de São João is covered with shacks once again, and Rio’s favelas keep on growing.

Luiz Pereira looks back to the 1960s with something approaching nostalgia. “We did not like Carlos Lacerda,” he says, “but when he started to build thousands of houses we changed our minds. Today there are no removals, but there is no building either.”

More than ever, today’s favela communities are having to rely on their own resources. The growth of the drug mafia has made favela politics even more dangerous than they were in Pereira’s day. “There is a ghost of fear,” said one of those I met. “If you speak out, you may be dead tomorrow.” In these circumstances, the wise do what they can for their communities and keep out of the drug barons’ hair—“each monkey on his own branch,” as one community leader put it dryly. The fear is so pervasive that I was asked not to attribute these quotations.

In spite of this, all over Rio, the spirit of self-help lives on. At its heart are people of integrity, many of whom derive their strength from their faith and from the support of veterans like Pereira. The efforts of the community association of Nova Holanda are just one example.

When Lacerda's government cleared the favelas from south Rio's fashionable beach area in 1960, the poorest inhabitants were billeted in duplex huts in a marshy area called the Maré until they could afford to move on to proper housing. For most of them, that day never came. Thirty years later, some 240,000 people live in Nova Holanda and the other eleven communities of the Maré.

For the people transplanted in 1960, the twelve-mile move was traumatic. José Carlos de Souza was nineteen. He had a job near the favela where he grew up and had been training with a local football team. "My whole life was organized around that part of the city," he says. "With the move, our community exploded. Everyone was sent to different places. Only the strongest survived." For the next fifteen years, he had a serious alcohol problem. "I was hypertense, depressed, and isolated, desperately afraid of dying. Even in a crowded football stadium, I was alone."

Eleven years ago, a month after his marriage, José Carlos found the willpower to stop drinking. "I had kept saying I would stop, but I had to discover the need to," he says. "I had to see myself in the mirror—only God could show me my reality. A few days after I stopped drinking, I found I could look people in the eyes for the first time." He became involved in community affairs and admits that, because he is so busy, his family has seen only a 70 percent improvement in him.

His colleague in Nova Holanda's community association, Ana Inés Sousa, left Paraíba in northeastern Brazil in 1970 when she was eight. "My father had a business and a little restaurant, but when drought hit the area, people had no money to spend. My father sold everything, went to Rio, and, when he had raised enough money to buy a small shack in Nova Holanda, he sent for us." She remembers her mother frantically trying to wash

all six children each time the bus stopped on the forty-eight-hour journey.

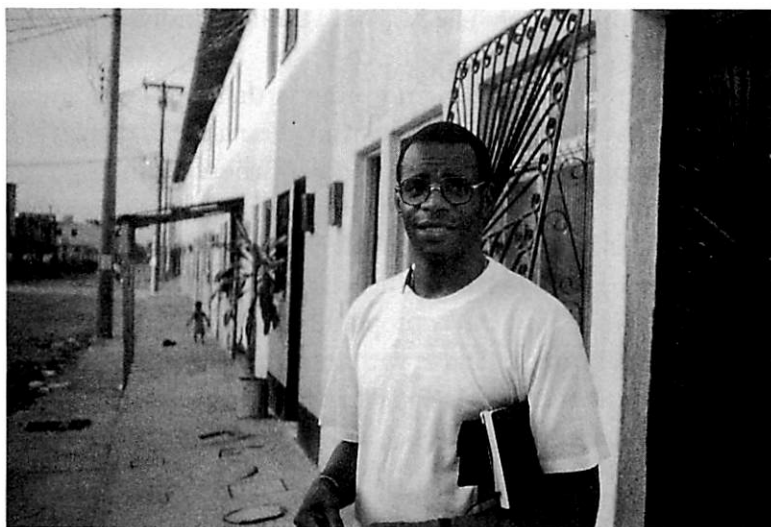
For an eight-year-old used to a relatively comfortable life, Nova Holanda was a shock. "Everything was cramped," she remembers. "Near our home there was an open drain and one or two pigs. The smell was terrible. There was nothing: no social services, no water, no drainage, a lot of disease, crime, and violence." These conditions led her to become a nurse. When we met, she was lecturing in public health at Rio's Federal University. She could have afforded to move out of the favela, "but I can't even imagine how I would live in another place," she says.

Her family, devout Catholics, became involved in community work, running a church youth group that tried to keep children off the streets. "We succeeded in rehabilitating some of the youngsters who used to go to the tourist beaches and steal, but others were intimidated by their gangs or even killed."

Twelve years ago, Nova Holanda was a collection of duplex huts and wooden shacks, many of them on stilts over the marsh. Toddlers would fall into the water and drown. The community had an association, but its officers were government appointees who, says José Carlos, "regarded the state as their father." In 1984, the community held its first direct elections for the association. Ana Inés's sister, Eliana, was elected. "From then on the election process itself played a role of motivation and mobilization of the people," says José Carlos. In 1991, he took over the presidency from Ana Inés, who had succeeded Eliana in 1987.

At its first assembly in 1984, the community set its priorities: sanitation, water, paving, lighting, house repairs, a leisure area, a day nursery, a nonconventional school, and rubbish collection. The city authorities, used to presiding over an acquiescent community, suddenly found themselves bombarded with demands. Today, many of them have been achieved, although "much more was done by the community than by the government," asserts Ana Inés.

The association's flagship is its building cooperative and brickworks, shared with five neighboring associations. In 1988, the federal government asked the community to nominate families



M. Lean

*José Carlos de Souza of Nova Holanda: "the priorities were defined by the people"*

to receive 10,000-cruzeiro "reconstruction tickets" (worth about US\$50 at the time)—not even enough to pay for a new door, according to Ana Inés.

"We called the community together and proposed that the tickets be pooled to form the initial capital of the co-op, with fewer families benefiting, so each could buy more," says José Carlos. "Everyone agreed—but then the problem was choosing the sixty families." The criteria were proximity to the co-op, willingness to work together, and some degree of building expertise. In the first year, seventy-three houses were built.

The co-op survived on this money until August 1989, buying materials in bulk and reselling them. Then, with the help of a grant from the Caixa Economica Federal, it set up its own brickworks. The brickworks and the building projects provide much-needed jobs for local people.

When I visited Nova Holanda one afternoon early in 1992, everybody seemed to be building. "That's Nova Holanda today," said Ana Inés proudly. Some 400 houses had been built since 1988, forty-six of them with government financing, co-op bricks,

and community labor. The rest were built by individuals who bought their materials from the co-op.

The next concern is to find projects that will keep young people off the streets and give them an alternative to drugs. The association provides day care for toddlers whose mothers go out to work and arranges sports and other activities for older children and teenagers. It plans to set up a bakery to provide vocational training but is having difficulty finding the funds, in spite of sending out many project proposals. Any outside help comes from personal contacts made with foreign visitors.

The key to the association's success has been community involvement, according to José Carlos. "The priorities here were defined by the people—and because of this, they were motivated. If you feel you know best, people either feel offended or as if you are giving them a Christmas present. Other places have not advanced in the same way because the leaders didn't reach the people."

Another strength has been the continuity and integrity of Nova Holanda's leadership, who receive no pay. "Honesty, unity, and participation are key to running a cooperative," says Ana Inés. "It won't work if people pocket the money." Although at the time of my visit she was no longer president, the association took up most of her spare time. "I work all day and then come home to a meeting until 11 P.M. People don't worry if it's early in the morning or late at night; if they have a blocked drain or their lights don't work or they need a nurse, they come to me. You can hang your private life on a nail. But if nobody had that kind of love for the community, few advances would happen."

The shanties and slums of the South are the world's fastest growing communities. They show amazing resourcefulness in the face of crushing odds. Today, most new housing in developing countries is built by its inhabitants—for a fifth of the cost of equivalent public housing.<sup>10</sup> Some enlightened city governments have backed these initiatives, but such schemes are rare, and an estimated 70 to 95 percent of new urban housing in the South is still unauthorized.<sup>11</sup>

As the experiences of Pereira, da Silva, José Carlos, and Ana Inés demonstrate, spiritual conviction can be a powerful element in the struggle for better conditions. Forty-three-year-old Danilo Ferreira de Souza, who has presided over the transformation of the favela of Morro dos Cabritos, puts it this way: "I was born and brought up here. I have carried many cans of water. I have cut trees for fuel, killed birds for food, picked up leftovers in the street market. I have seen people die of hepatitis, meningitis, and TB or be killed by bandits or police. We are not different from everyone else; we are the same people. I couldn't understand why there was so much discrimination." He adds, "I have a childish dream that the world can change. I know now that this may not be true, but the dream stays with me."

All over Rio and the South, shanty dwellers go on working as if this dream could come true. The hope for the world's cities lies in governments taking them seriously.

## Notes

I visited Rio de Janeiro in February 1992 to research an article on the favelas for *For a Change* (August/September 1992). Unless otherwise stated, this chapter is based on my interviews and encounters then and at international conferences since. I am grateful to all those who received me in their communities; to Luis and Evelyn Puig, Laurie and Elsa Vogel, Erwin Zimmerman, Daniel Puig, Ademar Broutelles, and David Howell for translating and for their insights; and to Luiz Pereira for introducing me to his colleagues.

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2. *Jornal do Brasil*, February 16, 1992.
3. Gabriel Marcel, *Fresh Hope for the World* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1960).
4. *Build on Solid Ground* (slide and tape production, Associação Brasileira para o Rearmamento Moral, 1975).
5. *New World News*, July 12, 1975.
6. Euclides da Silva died in 1979. His story is drawn from his own accounts in *Build on Solid Ground*, in the *MRA Information Service* of February 25, 1967, and in *O Caminho Certo*, published as a special supplement to *Diário de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, in 1965.
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