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## Lives Uprooted: Urban Inequality and Olympic Evictions in Rio de Janeiro<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

What is the significance of a home? As we know, a home holds social, cultural and psychological meanings far beyond its functions as a shelter. The architecture of houses are adapted to and reflect local ways of socialising, and may also be constructed in accordance with cultural symbolism (Bourdieu 2003; Robben 1989; Ystanes 2011). Psychologists and psychiatrists emphasise the role our homes and their surrounding environment plays in the formation of human wellbeing and belonging (Fullilove 2004). In literary works, the house is commonly used as a symbol for the self, as seen for example in Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits* (1994). Here, the protagonist Clara's house symbolises both her self (reflected in her reworking of the house while alive) and her body (as the house falls into decay after her death). This profound connection between a person's life and the place they call home reflects social processes we find across the globe, in different configurations. The connection extends beyond the house; it also includes the place where it is located and the relationships and histories embedded in this social landscape; the

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presence and knowledge of neighbours, friends, kin and forefathers (see e.g. Feld and Basso 1996).

As Rio de Janeiro prepared to host the 2016 Olympics, over 22 000 families were evicted from their homes. The official reasons for evicting families are often unclear or misleading, yet at least 4000 of these cases can be directly tied to Rio's Olympic preparations (Comitê Popular da Copa e Olimpíadas do Rio de Janeiro 2015). One of the neighbourhoods targeted for evictions was Vila Autódromo, a self-built community adjacent to the area the city of Rio made available for constructing the Olympic Park. Many of those evicted from Vila Autódromo had such a profound connection to their homes as described above.

As I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Vila Autódromo during the evictions, one of the residents told me; *"We are like a family here. Nobody wants to leave this place"*. Nevertheless, almost all of the around 600 families living in Vila Autódromo had to leave as the Olympics drew closer. Many lost their homes in brutal ways. Some came home one day to find that their houses had been demolished. Others were shaken out of their sleep at dawn as demolition workers accompanied by riot police had arrived to tear down their house. The violent ways this unfolded must be read against the backdrop of Vila Autódromo's status as a low-income neighbourhood in a city marked by complex socio-economic inequalities. Those who experienced this process talk about it as an extremely difficult time in their lives. They characterise it as traumatic and confusing, a period when fear and insomnia darkened their days, and important relationships were lost. Many forms of medical conditions are attributed to this experience, in particular depression and heart disease, but also death. They say the removals have negatively impacted upon important relationships, their quality of life, their economic situation and their sense of security, belonging and dignity.

In the following, I argue that while often applied as part of 'urban renewal' processes in different locations, forced evictions are highly problematic. The discussion is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Vila Autódromo and among former residents, during and after the eviction process. It is inspired by the concept of 'root shock' coined by the psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove (2004). This concept takes the loss of home and its

surrounding environment as a traumatic event with enduring impacts for individuals as well as for communities. I will describe this concept more in detail before proceeding.

### **Root shock**

Given the profound connections we make with our surroundings, moving can be a difficult experience, even when we make the choice to do so ourselves. Human lives unfold within a social geography of houses, streets, parks, forests, fields and other spaces. We are rooted here, as are our relationships, our sense of meaning, identity, security and belonging. What happens when these places are violently lost, for example through forced evictions? The psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove, who has conducted long-term research on urban renewal processes in the USA, argues that we enter in to a state she calls 'root shock' (2004).

Fullilove compares this state of emergency to the shock the body suffers after a life-threatening blow to its internal balance (2004:11). Just like our bodies have a system to preserve their internal balance, individuals have ways of preserving the external balance between themselves and the world. Fullilove describes this system as a way of moving through the environment that helps both our physical survival and to nurture relationships. She uses the analogy of a maze to describe this, and calls the chosen pattern of movement "a way to run the maze of live", or a "mazeway" (2004:11). When the mazeway, or the external system of protection is damaged or destroyed, for example through an earthquake, a hurricane or a terrorist attack, the person will go into root shock.

Just like a burn victim requires immediate replacement of fluids, victims of root shock requires the help of emergency workers who can erect shelter, provide food and otherwise provide safety until the victims have stabilised and are ready to perform these functions again. In other words, the fundamental process that engenders root shock is the disruption of the context in which the individual or the group is immersed. The experience of root shock does not end with emergency treatment, but

stay with the individual for a lifetime – it can even affect generations of people (Fullilove 2004:11–12).

At the level of the individual, root shock is a profound emotional upheaval that destroys the person's pre-existing working model of the world:

Root shock undermines trust, increases anxiety about letting loved ones out of one's sight, destabilizes relationships, destroys social, emotional, and financial resources, and increases the risk for every kind of stress-related disease, from depression to heart attack (Fullilove 2004:14)

At the level of community, root shock ruptures bonds and disperses people in all directions. People who were near end up too far away, and people who were far away, end up too close by. Even when neighbourhoods are rebuilt elsewhere, the restored geography is not enough to repair the many injuries to the mazeway produced by the destruction (Fullilove 2004:14).

This description of root shock as the destruction of a person's entire way of safely moving through the maze of life resonates with the experiences of people from Vila Autódromo. When I initiated my fieldwork there in November 2015, the eviction process was already advanced. Even in the midst of the destruction this entailed, the remaining residents outlined the kind of mazeway Vila Autódromo was for them through their unwavering resistance to leaving and their narratives of the past.

### **The mazeway of Vila Autódromo**

Vila Autódromo was a self-built, low-income neighbourhood in attractive area, surrounded by middle and upper class neighbours. Many would call Vila Autódromo a *favela*, as such neighbourhoods are generally referred to in the Brazilian context. The term *favela* is contested, however, as it is strongly associated with poverty, drug trafficking and other social problems (see e.g. Brasil 2015; Larkins 2015). While activists in Rio often use the term *favela* aiming to promote more positive and complex connotations to these neighbourhoods, many residents in Vila Autódromo resisted or were ambivalent to the term. While sometimes engaging the term *favela*

to refer to their disadvantaged position in Rio de Janeiro's social hierarchy, more often they talked about their neighbourhood as a *comunidade* (community). Sometimes residents likened it to a reservation for indigenous people because it had been named an "area of special social interest" by the State of Rio de Janeiro; an area designated for low-income housing. The legal status of Vila Autódromo was hence different from that of most other self-built neighbourhoods in Rio.

Vila Autódromo was established as a community of fishers in the 1960s, on the shores of the Jacarepaguá Lagoon. Later, a racetrack was built nearby. This attracted construction workers who settled in the community with their families. Eventually, the settlement grew into a neighbourhood that paid homage to the racetrack – *O Autódromo* – in its name.

Residents describe Vila Autódromo as a good place to live. It was considered safe, with no presence of organised crime. People could trust each other; children could be left with neighbours while doing errands, and there was no need to look the doors at night. Furthermore, people lived in close proximity with nature; a great luxury in a big city such as Rio de Janeiro. Here, on the shore of the Jacarepaguá Lagoon, the residents cultivated fruit in their patios and between the houses. Before sewage contamination from nearby condominiums made this impossible, residents also fished and bathed in the lagoon. The community was densely populated, and people lived in close proximity to their neighbours, with all the challenges and joys this involved. Many residents had built their own houses, little by little as they could afford bricks and other building materials. With time, they had been able to construct the houses they wanted, adding more space and additional floors as their families grew.

Like most other self-built neighbourhoods, they had limited access to public services. The residents had to organise much on their own, for example sewage treatment. The roads were never paved, and as a result, there was a lot of dust. The children had to walk under the burning sun on their way to school, so the residents planted trees along the route to provide shade. Despite the challenges arising from the

abandonment of the authorities, life in Vila Autódromo had qualities that imbued many residents with a strong desire to remain.

### **The eviction process: the destruction of the maze**

The eviction of Vila Autódromo was a political idea long in the making by the time the Olympics descended upon Rio de Janeiro. Since the community was established, Rio has expanded. In the areas around the Jacarepaguá Lagoon, closed condominiums and shopping centres have popped up. Here, many of Rio's middle and upper classes have found a retreat from the crime and exorbitant prices of the city's central areas. In this new context, Vila Autódromo was considered an eyesore that hindered progress in the region. Hence, in 1993, the city administration opened a legal process against the community accusing the residents of aesthetic and environmental damage on the Jacarepaguá Lagoon and surrounding areas. The city did not win this case; instead the residents secured their right to remain in the area.

When Rio de Janeiro was awarded the 2016 Olympics in 2009, this represented a watershed moment for Vila Autódromo. As proposed in Rio's bid book, the Olympic Park was to be built on the land next to Vila Autódromo, where the racetrack had once been (Comité de Candidatura Rio 2016 2009). The original, official plan did not involve the removal of Vila Autódromo (Rio 2016.com 2011). The community was to remain and be integrated into a new residential area to be constructed on the Olympic Park area after the Games. However, this plan was abandoned. Rio's city administration used the state of exception that accompany sporting mega-events (Boykoff 2016; Gaffney 2010) to push through evictions in Vila Autódromo.



*Vila Autódromo's location by the shores of the Jacarepaguá Lagoon makes the area attractive for real estate developers. The Olympic Athletes' Village, Ilha Pura, can be seen in the background. Photo: Margit Ystanes*

Initially, residents were encouraged to leave in exchange for replacement flats in public housing projects or monetary compensation of varying sizes. When it became clear that many resisted, the city administration applied methods the residents describe as “psychological terror”. The resistance continued despite this situation, yet little by little the construction area encroached upon Vila Autódromo's land, while a mayoral decree served as a highly contested legal basis for demolishing individual houses. One of the public defenders providing legal assistance to residents in Vila Autódromo described the eviction process as ‘completely illegal’ (interview 15 December 2016).



*As Rio's Olympic Park rose in the background, remaining Vila Autódromo residents lived surrounded by the rubble left behind by demolitions. Photo: Margit Ystanes*

The above picture was taken during a fieldwork in February and March 2016, and at the time, around 40 households remained in the community. They all lived amongst the ruins of demolished houses, in what resembled a war zone. Residents kept comparing it to Gaza and Syria. Where previously there were houses, there were now just remnants of the lives once lived in them; broken bricks and tiles, damaged toys, a shoe pressed into the gravel, a mirror on a wall left standing, a staircase to nowhere. The workers did not clear the area after demolishing a house, thus leaving dents that filled with water when it rained. Here, the mosquitos that carry the zika and dengue viruses bred quickly, causing illness among the residents. There were also constant interruptions in the provision of water and electricity.

The residents describe the demolitions as traumatic. Demolition workers often arrived unannounced at dawn, accompanied by the riot police of the municipal guard to subdue any potential resistance. There were also numerous cases of houses being demolished while the residents were away. They would later arrive home from work,



school, vacations and doctor's appointments to find they no longer had a home. As the city administration executed demolitions at unpredictable times and with the use of force, the experience of terror amongst the residents heightened.

To live under these conditions implied practical challenges and emotional hardships. Uncertainties about the future, the constant pressure to leave the community and the use of force during the demolition of houses, were all part of this. Residents describe this process as a period marked by sleepless nights, fear that their house might be demolished the next morning, the rupture of many relationships, and endless pressure from the city and district administrations to leave the community. *Psychological terror* is how they sum up these experiences. Some people say they became "crazy" and confused from the continuous loss of neighbours and the ever-increasing ruins, not knowing whether people were lying dead below the rubble or were just somewhere else.

Sofia<sup>3</sup>, a woman in her forties described the eviction process in the following way:

*For me, this period was one the most difficult... because I had this really strong sense of fear... you have to have faith that it is possible, if you don't, you will not be able to resist. You see the city administration use a gigantic force, much larger [than you], it's a very unequal struggle. You wake up to find the community surrounded by the riot police of the municipal guard, a squad of uniformed and armed men... and you are a simple citizen, without weapons, without anything. And you have to go and argue with them, struggle, demand your rights. [... The place] gave the impression of a post-war zone, houses in ruins, debris, dark streets because the public illumination was cut, the water was cut. It was like a warzone, a horrible thing.*

In such circumstances, even the spaces in which nothing happens are impregnated with fear and agitation. As Larkins writes of the intervals separating armed confrontations between the police and the drug traffickers in the Rocinha favela, "the

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<sup>3</sup> Sofia is a pseudonym. Research contributors are anonymised in accordance with guidelines for research ethics in social anthropology.

terror of these spaces of waiting, even as the fear they hold is often normalized by residents, must also be taken as part of the experience of violence” (Larkins 2015:11). In equal measure, the psychological terror experienced by residents as the evictions unfolded, was not isolated to the moments of destruction, but imbued their very existence.

After a dramatic period of struggle and resistance, only a few households remain in Vila Autódromo. The original houses of these residents were demolished, and they were gathered in a single street. Hence, today, 20 identical project houses are all that remains of what was once a vibrant and diverse neighbourhood.



*Residents protest before the house of the Residents’ Association was demolished in February 2016: “The Olympics should be for everyone as a social legacy. One cannot construct a city and a nation without listening to everyone’s needs. Housing, health and education”. Photo: Margit Ystanes*

Many of those who left Vila Autódromo were given replacement flats in public housing projects. Officially, such projects are described as elevating poor people to

the standard of the middle class (Rio Prefeitura 2015). These claims aim to legitimise the eviction policy implemented by the city administration ahead of the 2016 Olympics. They also cultivate the idea that even though people are moved against their will, the change represents an improvement, an approximation to middle class lifestyle. However, this is far from reality. The project buildings are often of poor quality, fall quickly into decay, and offers a living environment marked by concrete, asphalt and absence of shade (Rio on Watch 2016).

Furthermore, paramilitary militias limits the residents' political freedom and makes their lives more expensive by charging residents inflated prices for the enforced provision of services such as 'security', gas, cable and basic food baskets (Abdala 2015; Vasconcelos 2015). Housing project apartments also come with a mortgage of 75 000 R\$ that must be paid during 10 years, in addition to a monthly condominium fee. While the city administration promised to shoulder this debt for the forcibly evicted, numerous residents have found that they have been made personally responsible for the debt – and that no documents of ownership have been issued (FOLHAPRESS 2016; Mota 2016). Until the debt is paid, residents are not allowed to let or sell their apartments, and as such, find themselves trapped in housing projects controlled by organised crime.

### **Lives uprooted: living with root shock**

How can the concept of 'root shock' help us think about these processes and their consequences? What we might call the adverse effects of forced evictions are manifold; a large number of social, cultural, economic and psychological difficulties affect people as they work to reassemble their lives in new locations (Fullilove 2004; Pearlman 2010). The long-term outcomes for those evicted from Vila Autódromo remains to be seen. What can be discussed at present is the immediate aftermath of the evictions. There is not space here to discuss all facets of these outcomes, so in the following I will outline in some detail how root shock manifests itself in the life of Amélia, a woman in her 60s who was evicted from Vila Autódromo. This will be

contrasted with the experience of those who were allowed to remain in the community.

Amélia was among those forcibly evicted from Vila Autódromo and relocated to a public housing project. She describes the loss of her community as equally painful as the loss of her child, who had died years earlier. She says, “*Without the people I know around me, I just don’t know how to defend myself*”. The housing project does not provide an environment where she can rebuild her mazeway. Amélia explains that the residents in her housing project are from different favelas all over Rio. She considers both the mixture of people from different places, and the fact that so many are unknown to her, frightening. This reflects a society where trust relationships are ideally established via introduction by friends and family. Establishing trust with complete strangers without such channels can be difficult.

Amélia’s experience also illustrates how, in the absence of a comprehensive welfare state, trust relationships are crucial for getting by. For example, Amélia’s old neighbours provided vital support immediately after she lost absolutely all of her belongings when her house was demolished without previous notice. She came home one day to find her home in ruins. Everything she owned was lost. For several months, until the district administration gave her a new apartment, she stayed with a family in Vila Autódromo who took her in. People from her church donated clothes, and the family she stayed with gave her some furniture when she left. Other friends and relatives also contributed. In her new home, surrounded by strangers, Amélia does not have an appropriate way to build the relationships she needs to “*defend herself*”. She feels scared, isolated and unprotected. When the bus she takes to run errands passes by Vila Autódromo, the loss she has suffered rushes to the front of her consciousness, sometimes making her cry uncontrollably. She emphasises that she does not *know how to live anywhere else* than Vila Autódromo.

Thinking with Fullilove, we could say that Amélia’s mazeway was devastated by the gradual destruction of her community, and eventually her eviction from it. This mazeway remains damaged, as Amélia struggles to settle into her new life, not knowing how to live or feel safe in this new place. This is the case also for others.

Some persons continued to fight for the remaining residents after they themselves were evicted, struggling to preserve the community even though they were no longer allowed to live there. Others still, more than a year and a half after the Olympics, have not given up hope that some day they will be able to return to Vila Autódromo. This emphasises the point that our homes and communities are locations where our sense of identity, belonging and our most important relationships are rooted. It is not something people easily let go of. While they were united in their community, the residents showed a remarkable resilience despite their tribulations. The common resistance made their relationships stronger. *“We used to be good neighbours, but because of the struggle we have also become very good friends”*, one of them told me. However, as they were dispersed by evictions, the relationships this resilience was rooted in became complicated, reconfigured or lost.

The losses suffered by those forcibly evicted are therefore complex and multifaceted. As they work to reassemble their lives in the housing projects, they find that this new geography does not facilitate the reparation of their mazes, their way of moving safely through life. Quite the contrary; numerous new stresses, such as debts and organised crime, are added to the trauma of forced evictions.

For those who managed to remain in Vila Autódromo, the new houses provided by the city administration represent an improvement for some, a deterioration of standards for others. What they all emphasise as more important than the state of the houses, however, is *permanência*, remaining amongst their friends and neighbours, even though their numbers have been dramatically reduced. As they started the work of reassembling their lives in this new social and physical geography, some also found that the struggle itself had produced new strengths and forms of knowledge.

For example, Sofia explained that her participation in the struggle had made her children see her in a new light, and they now respect her more. She also considered the struggle for Vila Autódromo a class struggle, and felt empowered by what the continued permanence of some of the residents signified in this respect. Even though the small project house the city had given her was identical to everyone else's, and she had lived there for a very short while when I interviewed her, it was nevertheless

already imbued with deeply personal meaning for Sofia; it was the fruit of her struggle and testament to her history. The struggle had also left her as well as other residents with a network of supporters – activists, students, journalists, researchers – some of whom continue their engagement in the community through the establishment of a Museum of Removals as well as other forms of political activism.

Hence, for those who remain in Vila Autódromo, even though it is radically reconfigured and reduced, this appears to be a continuing source of resilience. This does not mean they did not suffer negative consequences of the eviction process; this period put unfathomable stress on everyone, regardless of the outcome. Both those who were evicted and those who were able to stay refer to it as traumatic. However, as Amelia's story shows, being isolated from a context of significant relationships and places imbued with meaning and knowledge of how to be in the world, contributes to exacerbate the effects of root shock.

### **Concluding thoughts**

So what does it imply to violently lose one's home? The literary symbolism discussed in the introduction provides some food for thought. In Allende's novel, the protagonist Clara's continuously reworks her house throughout her life, thus emphasising the profound connection between her person, her dwelling and the social world in which it exists. This connection is configured differently across the globe, yet constitutes a fundamental aspect of human lifeworlds. The literary symbol works because we recognise it. When a community is forcibly evicted, this connection is violently disrupted. Symbolically as well as literally, forced evictions are a negation of a person's right to exist where their sense of security and belonging is located. Root shock hence reverberates powerfully in the lives of persons and communities; affecting them psychologically, physically, socially, culturally and economically.

It is significant that Sofia thinks about the struggle for Vila Autódromo as a class struggle; she points us to the numerous violent eviction processes Rio's city government has unleashed upon less privileged sectors under the guise of urban development – historically as well as recently (Barbassa 2015; de Magalhães 2013;

Pearlman 2010; Rolnik 2015). As many pointed out during my fieldwork, it is difficult to imagine that the city would expropriate homes in more upscale neighbourhoods such as Ipanema or Copacabana with the force and violence applied in Vila Autódromo. The residents of Vila Autódromo described the eviction process as a dehumanising experience involving constant attacks on their dignity and their right to influence how their lives unfold. Fullilove (2004) emphasises that this approach to urban development causes disruptions well beyond the community of evicted – the adverse effects resound in the whole society as socio-economic inequality and segregation deepens.

The new, cleared out spaces created by ‘urban renewal’ processes may not provide a vantage point from which to see this very clearly. In recognition of this, the residents resisting eviction in Vila Autódromo fought not just for their own community, but also for a “Rio without removals”. Their struggle was in essence about the right of the less privileged to forge the kinds of connection with their home and the social world it exists in that humans need to thrive. The city of Rio’s use of forced evictions as a vehicle for urban development is problematic because it implies that this right is reserved for the wealthier sections of society, while for the poor, it can be negated at whim.

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