Examples of squats in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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In Brazil, a country characterized by intense social inequality, it is common that the poor are responsible for their own housing. Thus, there are several cases of occupation of land and public and private buildings. Various non-governmental organizations working in favor of the motion of townhouse, both in national character as regional or local, being responsible for different squats. Here we present the case of two squats organized by the National Movement for Housing Struggle (Movimento Nacional de Luta pela Moradia - MNLM)* in Rio de Janeiro.

Squat Mariana Crioula**, in Gamboa, Rio de Janeiro

After four years of organization and struggle for institutional funding for housing, in December 2011, about 80 families squatted a property within the Secretariat of Asset of the Union in the district of Gamboa, in the port area of the city - area that suffers process of "revitalization" from a urban operation that is completely changing the location. The property consists of an old shed with two floors and a younger shed.
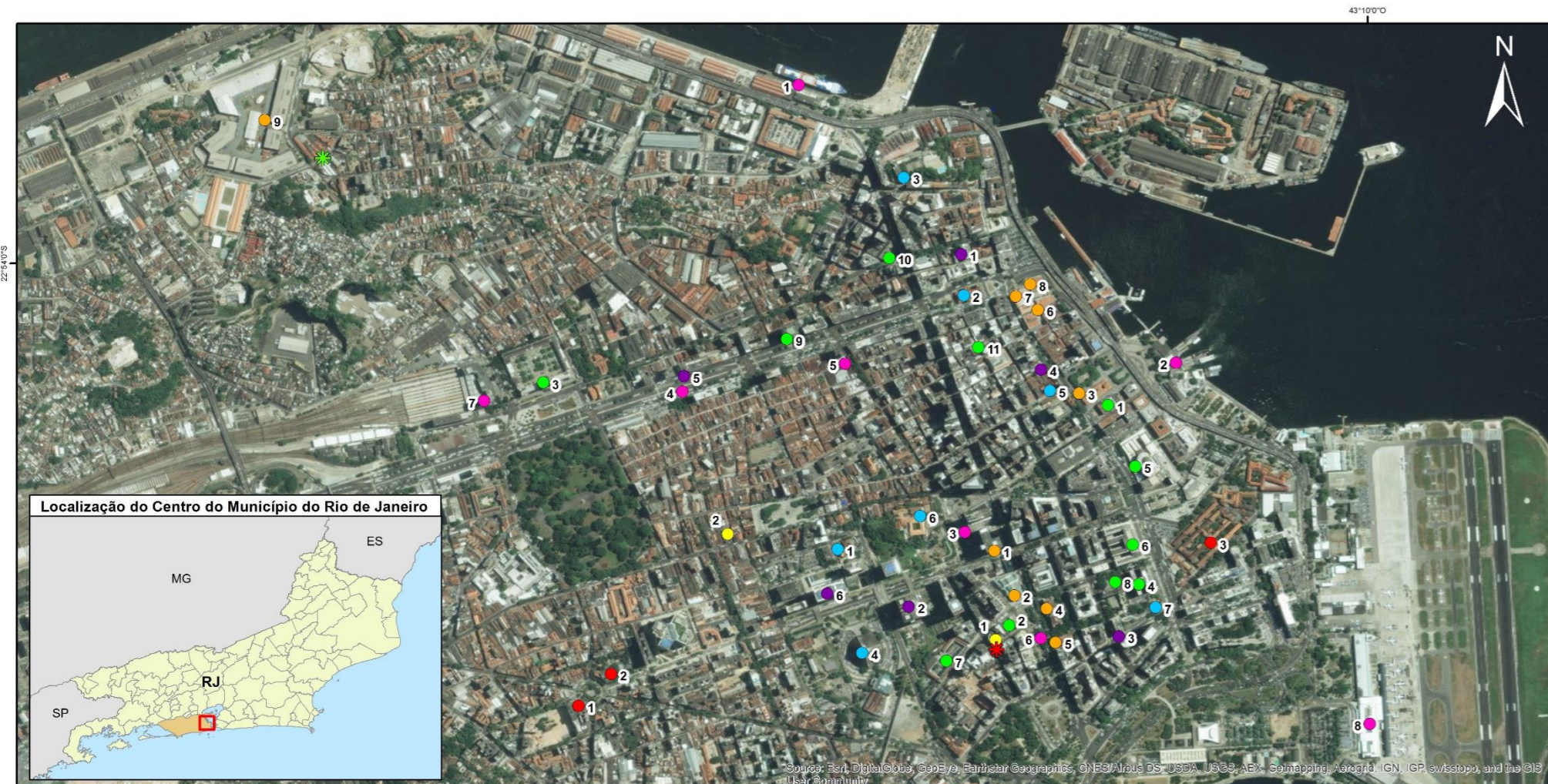

Picture 1 – Squat Mariana Crioula.

In 2014, funding was approved via Programa Minha Casa Minha Vida Entidades (PMCMV-E)*** for restoration of the old shed and of a new building construction. Thus, the space will have two blocks, with five floors and 48 residential units and the old shed will have three floors and 12 apartments. In addition, the project includes common areas: Espaço Criarte, restaurant, auditorium / accommodation, cloakroom, common area and two rooms for activities of the cooperative.

Currently, only eight families are living there, awaiting the start of construction that will allow up to 60 families live there.

It is important to emphasize that both squats (Mariana Creole and Manoel Congo) are self-managed and all decisions are made by families who live there, since the type of floor that will be used to what activities will be developed in the cooperative.

Picture 4 – Map of Rio de Janeiro's downtown.
Translation: Ocupação Manoel Congo – Squat Manoel Congo; Ocupação Mariana Crioula – Squat Mariana Critoula, Ocupações Despejadas – squats evicted.
Red: public health care buildings; Green: governmental representations; Orange: historical/cultural buildings; Pink: public transports; Purple: big companies; Blue: religious buildings.

Squat Manoel Congo, in Cinelandia, Rio de Janeiro

The history of Manoel Congo squat starts in October of 2007, when some families squat for a week the building of the former Cine Victory until they are evicted and then occupy a building at the State Department of Finance, which also were quickly expelled. These attempts can be understood more as symbolic acts, in order to draw attention to the case of households in housing insecurity. On the 28th day of the same month the families decide to squat a building of National Institute of Social Security (INSS) that was abandoned and empty for 11 years. Since then the group of families - in conjunction with the National Movement to Fight for Housing of Rio de Janeiro (MNLM-RJ) - starts the fight by institutional permanence in the building, and several attempts to evict the squatters.

Pictures 2 and 3 – Manoel Congo's frontage.

In the months following the squatters, the MNLM-RJ enters with the request for acquisition and rehabilitation of the property, postulated by the Institute of Land and Cartography of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ITERJ) also on behalf of other two squats (show where Chiquinha Gonzaga and Matadouro). The proposals were approved by State Fund for Housing of Social Interest (FEHIS RJ) and the National Housing Fund of Social Interest (FNHIS). Despite the approval, many problems occurred and only in November of 2010 there was the purchase of the building by the Government the State of Rio de Janeiro – with features of FNHIS -, since the law does not allow the public properties are donated and then to be given the Grant of a Real Right of use to the squatters. Currently in progress the rehabilitation work of building.

At the same time negotiating the FNHIS, Manoel Congo managed to Program funding Petrobras Citizenship for an income-generation project and work. Through this Program part of the squatters began a cooperative, with the aim of generating jobs and income to those involved; thus appears the Cultural Center Mariana Crioula, that account with restaurant and samba club. The creation of the cooperative was the way found to access other features that are not provided by housing, i.e., as a way to combat the socioeconomic exclusion experienced by residents and ensure the true right to the city - which is not limited to the villa. The squat also has a space for the formation and interaction of children and adolescents, the Space Criarte Mariana Crioula.

It is important to emphasize that, unlike the common sense that the squatters just want to take advantage of a building ready, were several structural problems found, such as obstruction of sewage and water, in addition to electrical problems. Solutions to the problems were given by a Brigade of Support made by the squatters.

Strategic location

Traditionally, popular housing projects of the State are located in peripheral areas and/or without infrastructure, hindering the social reproduction of the inhabitants, in addition to the decline in their real income. In this sense, the choice of the building of the INSS in full center of the city can be seen as a form of protest to the policies employed by the State. Besides the factor of denial, the location in the center is essential to the squatters, because there have access to a variety of equipment, whether commercial, cultural, educational, health, mobility.

For almost two decades it was in force Decree 322/76 prohibiting residential use in the Central area. This decree will be suspended in 1994, when one sees the need to "inhabit the center" and thus start up housing projects - like the New Alternatives Program (PNA) - aiming to promote the "revitalization" of the Centre.

We should emphasize, however, that this decree does not detract from the fact that during these two decades numerous buildings were occupied by poor families, giving life to the Center. Many have character tenement, being very precarious and large degradation. Although they occur within the category of deprivation based squatting, these occupations are differentiated from here studied for not possess a political character of dispute.