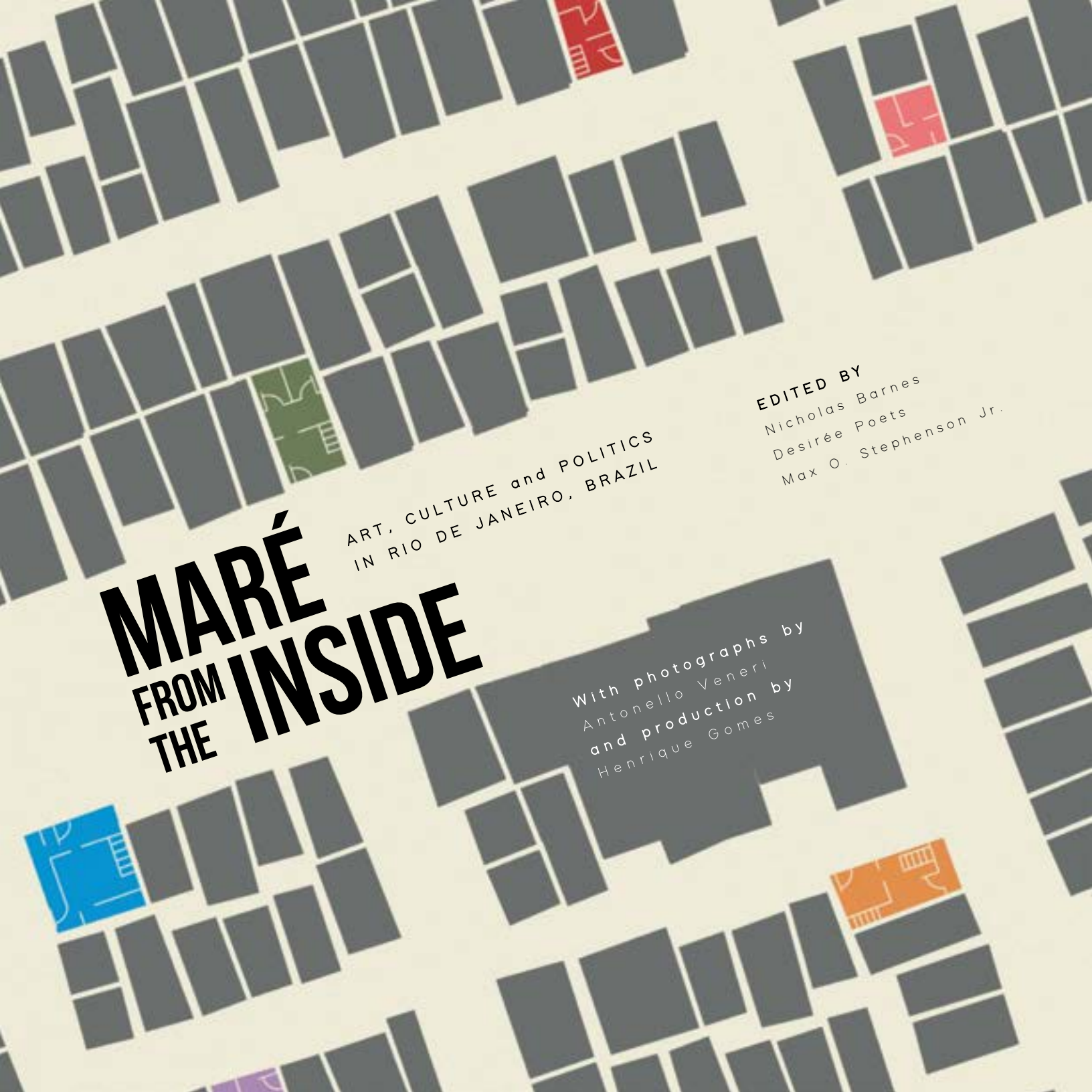

MARÉ FROM THE INSIDE

ART, CULTURE and POLITICS IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

EDITED BY
Nicholas Barnes
Desirée Poets
Max O. Stephenson Jr.

With photographs by
Antonello Veneri
and production by
Henrique Gomes

Complexo da Maré is a group of 16 contiguous favelas and housing projects in the northern zone of Rio de Janeiro. Home to an estimated 140,000 individuals, Maré is Brazil's largest agglomeration of favelas. Often depicted in a negative light, these favelas are in fact vibrant and diverse communities, as revealed in this remarkable book.

Maré from the Inside: Art, Culture and Politics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil is a companion to the exhibition of the same name (Portuguese: *Maré de Dentro*), which was developed by an international team of Brazilian and US academics, activists and artists. The exhibition documents the lives of residents of Complexo da Maré through family portraits, street photographs, documentary films and written works.

Featured in this book is a selection of the exhibition's photographs by Italian photojournalist Antonello Veneri, who worked closely with Maré resident and activist Henrique Gomes over the period from 2013 to 2019, during which Rio was home to the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games. These photographs, simultaneously personal and deeply humane, counter long-standing and powerful stigmatizing narratives, demonstrating instead the diversity and resilience of these communities and exposing the barriers residents confront in their everyday lives.

Providing context to the photographs are essays by the exhibition's creators, curators and collaborators, including Maré resident and scholar Andreza Jorge, who asks what it is about the *Maré de Dentro* exhibition that has made it so compelling for so many people from very different parts of the world. The answer lies in the power of art to make us rethink prevailing social frames and, in turn, embrace fresh political and cultural strategies for integrating previously marginalized communities more fully into political and social life.

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O. Stephenson Jr., Eds.

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For more information regarding the images photographed by Antonello Veneri and produced by Henrique Gomes, contact Antonello Veneri at antonelloveneri@hotmail.com.

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For the Residents of Maré

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FIGURES

All figures except for the historic photographs (11-17) are published under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license. All maps (figs. 7-10) were created using ArcGIS® software by Esri. (For more information about Esri software, please visit www.esri.com.)

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CHAPTER 1
A BRIEF HISTORY OF RIO DE JANEIRO'S FAVELAS AND COMPLEXO DA MARÉ

NICHOLAS BARNES

Rio de Janeiro is Brazil's second largest city (behind only São Paulo) and is located in the Southeast region of the country (see fig. 7). The city contains more than 1,000 favelas (see fig. 8) that are home to more than 20% of the city's 6.7 million inhabitants.[1] Although favelas are often referred to as slums, shantytowns, or squatter settlements, these terms fail to capture the incredible diversity among these communities or the significant development that they have undergone during the last century. This chapter provides important social and historical context for the *Maré from the Inside* exhibit and the rest of the chapters in this volume by tracing the origins, growth, and development of Rio's favelas generally, and the 16 favelas and housing projects that comprise Complexo da Maré, more specifically. It also describes the various ways that Maré's residents have organized and advocated for recognition and rights in the face of an often hostile, negligent, and/or repressive Brazilian state.

Figure 7. Map of Brazil, 2020. (Data from ESRI, Garmin, GEBCO, NOAA NGDC and other contributors.)

Rio de Janeiro: City of Favelas

According to popular myth, Rio de Janeiro's first favela was founded in the 1890s when

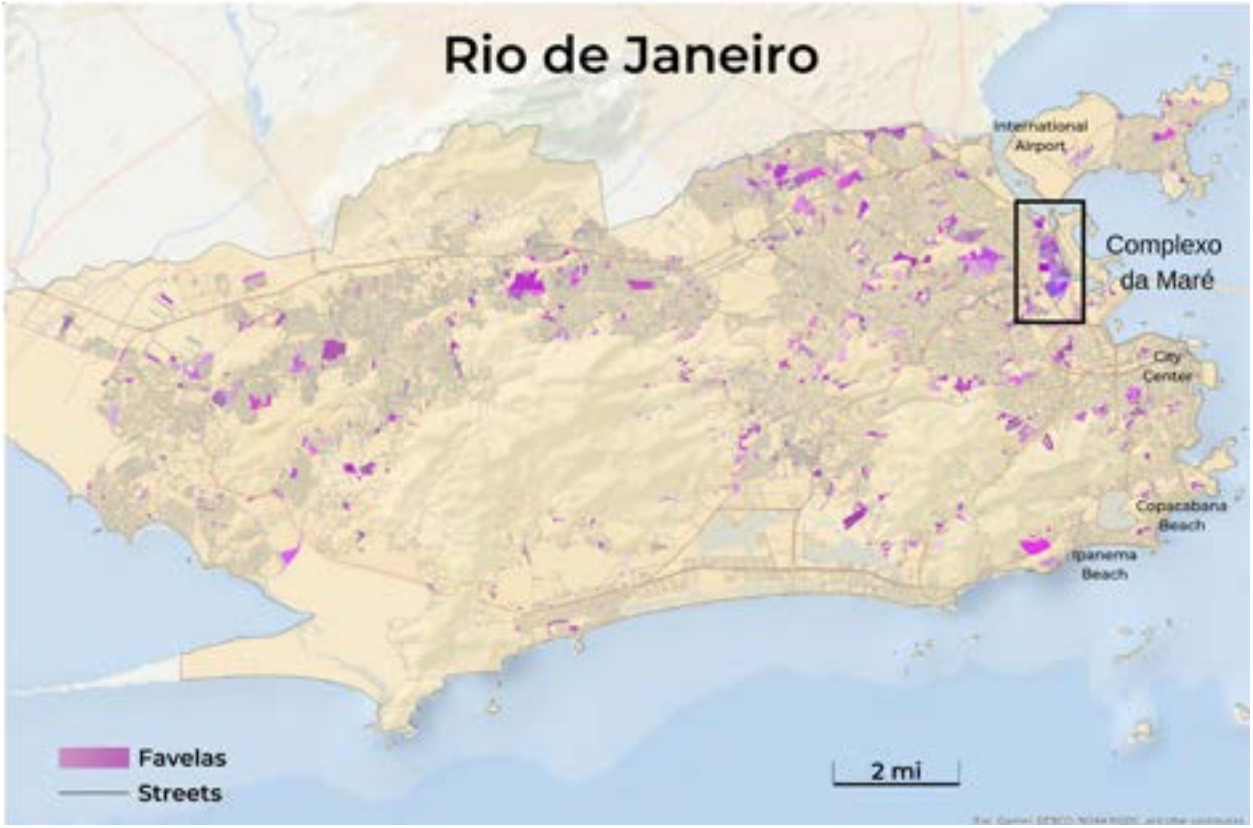

Figure 8. Map of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, 2020. (Data from Instituto Pereira Passos.)

a group of former slaves and ex-soldiers established a community of tents and ramshackle huts on a hill overlooking the city center. They called it *Morro da Favella* (Favella Hill) after a plant that grew in Northeast Brazil where the soldiers had fought in the Canudos War.[2] The actual birth of *Morro*, however, occurred several years earlier following the destruction of *Cabeça do Porco* (Pig's Head), a *cortiço* (tenement) in the center of the city. After authorities razed the massive development, residents gathered what few belongings and building materials they could save and began constructing homes on a nearby hillside.[3] The ex-soldiers joined those first inhabitants at that location several years later.

Emancipated slaves constructed many of Rio's earliest favelas in a similar fashion. Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery and was, by far, the world's largest importer of slaves with an estimated 5 million enslaved Africans arriving to its shores during the roughly 300 years of the Trans-Atlantic trade.[4] Rio de Janeiro alone saw more than 2 million such individuals pass through its port. Following the abolition of slavery in 1888, many of the newly freed migrated to Rio and to São Paulo and Belo Horizonte, two other rapidly industrializing cities of Brazil's Southeast region. As in the nation's rural areas, freedmen and freedwomen had little access to land or suitable housing, so they built their homes on the steep hillsides surrounding the city's port and central district. Difficult terrain though it was, over time, these settlements grew from a smattering of huts and shacks into substantial communities with hundreds of domiciles and thousands of residents. Despite government efforts to eradicate these earliest favelas, they continued to grow.

By the early 20th century, however, it was no longer just freedmen and freedwomen who built these communities. Wealthy land speculators, politicians, lawyers, the middle class, traditional rural poor, foreign immigrants and farmers seeking land to raise crops and livestock, among many others, all engaged in land invasions and squatting to acquire a share of Rio's highly valuable real estate.[5] Whereas the first favelas were constructed on the steep almost uninhabitable hillsides overlooking the city center, many of these newer settlements occupied defunct estates, unused church and state properties, virgin land, and even swamps and tidal plains to the north. The Northern Zone, as it came to be called, quickly outpaced the other areas of the city in terms of favela development due to the rapid industrialization of the region, its piecemeal property laws and zoning restrictions, as well as the construction of rail lines and eventually highways connecting Rio to the surrounding areas.

Today, many of these Northern Zone favelas, like their predecessors in the Center and Southern Zone, have gained some modicum of access to often inadequate utilities and services as a result of persistent community organizing and hard-won political mobilization. Most homes in these older favelas have running water and electricity and many of these neighborhoods also have schools and health centers. Some have paved sidewalks and a few even have recreational spaces. Favela streets are alive with local commerce, motorcycles, and foot traffic. Houses in these communities range from very simple shacks in the poorest areas to beautifully tiled multi-story homes replete with modern appliances.

Figure 9. Map of Rio de Janeiro's zones, 2020. (Data from Instituto Pereira Passos.)

Rio's newest favelas have emerged in the sprawling Western Zone of the city, where land remains relatively plentiful (see fig. 9). Unlike their older counterparts, many of these communities lack even the most basic urban infrastructure and services. And yet, despite the difficulties of living in these neighborhoods and the lengthy daily commutes residents endure to reach working class jobs located elsewhere in the city, favelas continue to grow and to be built in the Western Zone.

Overall, favelas constitute an extraordinarily diverse set of communities. What continues to unite them, however, is the fact that their residents remain targets of prejudice and discrimination. Mainstream Brazilian society largely continues to portray favelas as areas of vice and criminality.[6] As the *Maré from the Inside* exhibit suggests, however, this cultural frame is a fallacy. Favelas are instead sites of dynamic artistic and cultural production and collective mobilization. Favela artists and musicians are vital to broader cultural representations—they are at the heart, for instance, of Brazil's famed Carnival and samba music—mixing African, European, and indigenous religious and cultural expressions.[7] These communities have also developed self-governing responses to address their residents' lack of property rights and infrastructure. Favela-spawned social movements also played an important role in the popular mobilizations that brought an end to the military dictatorship (1964–1985) and launched Brazil's re-democratization. Today, favelas remain economic and cultural engines. They also sustain vital political and social movements while playing a significant role in the city and nation by advocating for the basic human rights of all of Brazil's citizens.

The Origins of Complexo da Maré

A closer examination of the origins and historical development of Complexo da Maré further demonstrates the diversity and resilience of these communities and thereby challenges long lasting pejorative frames for understanding favelas and their residents. At the end of the 1930s, Orosina Vieira and her husband built a tiny shack out of driftwood on a small hill surrounded by swampy lowlands

Figure 10. Map of Complexo da Maré (2020). (Data from *Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré*, ESRI, Garmin, GEBCO, NOAA NGDC and other contributors.)

along Guanabara Bay.[8] The couple, from the neighboring state of Minas Gerais, were Maré's first permanent residents. At that time, the area was completely unsettled except for a colony of fishermen who used it to tie their boats up at night.[9] Slowly, other immigrants followed and by 1940, a small community had taken shape on *Morro do Timbau* (Timbau Hill). This new settlement became Maré's first favela.

In 1946, the national government completed Avenida Brasil, a major highway connecting the center of Rio to surrounding suburbs, and the relative ease of access it provided spurred additional migration to the area. Industries quickly followed and many of Maré's original inhabitants found steady, if often grueling, work in the new factories. Three other communities quickly sprang up in the surrounding area: *Baixa do Sapateiro* (1947), *Parque Maré* (1950) and *Roquete Pinto* (1955). When all of the dry land had been settled, other migrants began to build *palafitas*, or shacks on stilts, further and further out onto the tidal plain of Guanabara Bay (see fig. 10). These were difficult places to live because of their location at or below sea level, without a source of freshwater and due to various water-borne insects and diseases. To address this precarity and to provide much needed electricity and sanitation, these families founded some of the city's first Residents' Associations and Light Commissions.[10]

Parque Rubens Vaz (1954) and *Parque União* (1958), Maré's next two communities, followed a slightly different and more organized pattern of settlement. Margarino Torres, a lawyer and a member of the Communist Party, arrived in Maré in the mid-1950s to protect the fledgling Rubens Vaz favela from threats of removal and he quickly became that community's undisputed leader.[11] He would eventually organize the occupation of an adjacent area, later named Parque União, where a local industrial firm, IRAL, had already filled in some low-lying swampland.[12]

The early 1960s saw the creation of two other communities in Maré. A small group of fishermen settled *Praia de Ramos* (1962) and the municipal government constructed *Centro de Habitação Provisório Nova Holanda* (1962), a provisional housing project. Rio's government initially established Nova Holanda to serve as a stepping-stone to more formal housing for residents who had been violently removed from other favelas in the city. The municipal authority built hundreds of conjoined single- and two-story wood homes, most with dirt floors and no electricity in Nova Holanda (see fig. 11). What was intended to be a "temporary solution," however, turned into a permanent settlement. While each of these neighborhoods retained their distinctive characteristics, residents increasingly moved, shopped, worked, attended school, and developed extended families across

Figure 11. The palafitas of Baixa do Sapateiro, 1969.

Figure 12. Aerial photo of Maré, 1979. Notice the palafitas reaching out into Guanabara Bay in the foreground and the checkerboard streets of Nova Holanda in the background.

their borders. They increasingly identified themselves as part of the overarching community that came to be known as Complexo da Maré.

Life progressively became more difficult in Maré during Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). Continued in-migration led to a swelling population and with very little investment in public infrastructure, the living conditions for many of the Complexo's residents deteriorated. Some 68,000 residents lived in Maré's nine existing communities in 1980, just 40 years after the first area's first inhabitants had arrived.[13] At that time, roughly a quarter of the Complexo's population lived in palafitas, which generally consisted of one room with little or no access to potable water, indoor plumbing or electricity.[14] Residents connected their homes via a series of precariously constructed planks (see fig. 11), which led to many accidents, sometimes proving fatal when small children fell into the water or the mud below.[15]

In 1979, the federal government announced Project Rio, a massive public works initiative, which aimed to fill in huge portions of Guanabara Bay and create 2,300 hectares (5,681 acres) of new land to provide space for housing for an estimated 1.2 million people.[16] At first, the plan called for the eradication of all of the existing communities of Maré. Residents immediately mobilized and created the Committee for the Defense of the Favela of Maré (CODEFAM) to defend their right to stay.[17] After much protest and advocacy, the national administration agreed to allow Maré's existing communities to remain, even as it relocated the families living in the palafitas to a group of newly constructed housing projects just south of Maré: *Vila do João* (1982) (see fig. 12), *Conjunto Esperança* (1982), *Vila do Pinheiro* (1983) and *Conjunto Pinheiro* (1989).[18] These neighborhoods remained part of Maré and would later be joined by several additional housing projects: *Bento Ribeiro Dantas* (1992), *Nova Maré* (1995), and *Salsa e Merengue* (2000) (see fig. 13). All of Maré's communities have continued to grow during the last several decades as new arrivals have undertaken additional construction and claimed available land (see figs. 14, 15, 16). The powerful social movements and mobilizations of the 1970s and 1980s that allowed Maré's various neighborhoods to consolidate have provided

Figure 13. The first houses of Vila do João, 1981.

fertile ground for the development of a diverse and robust organizational environment. Maré is now home to dozens of local NGOs that provide a variety of educational, cultural, and artistic opportunities. Moreover, each of Maré's 16 Residents' Associations continue to offer opportunities for democratic self-governance and to ensure citizen access to much needed social services through the municipal government. Today, Maré is composed of a rich mosaic of ethnic, racial, and religious communities. Indeed, hundreds of religious communities including Evangelical, Catholic, Afro-Brazilian, Asian, and secular traditions can be found in the Complexo. Maré also contains migrants from every one of Brazil's 27 states and from 15 foreign countries as well. It is, and has always been, a melting pot whose existence embodies the progressive and egalitarian ideals at the foundation of Brazilian democracy.

Figures 14, 15, 16. The construction of a new part of Nova Holanda, 1991.