

## **Charles J. Fortin. *Rights of Way to Brasília Teimosa. The Politics of Squatter Settlement.* Sussex Academic Press, 2014.**

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*Rights of Way to Brasília Teimosa* examines, in great detail, the story of Brasília Teimosa, a famed *favela* in Recife. The first part of the name is a mocking allusion to Brasília, a city noted for its the planning policy and urban design, which stands in stark contrast to the unorganized *favela* where dwellers are living with the constant threat of eviction. The second part of the name Teimosa (stubborn) refers to the residents and their struggle to remain in the area. The residents have managed to occupy the area and to remain there for more than half a century, during a period of rapid urban growth, avoiding both demolition and removal. Brasília Teimosa is the oldest urban occupation in Recife and *Rights of Way* places its residents' struggle to stay there in a historical frame of urban development in Recife. To date the neighbourhood is still known as a place that never sleeps and never gives up.

The author's interest in the specific area sprang from his drive to figure out how poor people had come to occupy valuable land in the city. Brasília Teimosa has a prime location, with easy access to downtown Recife and the beaches to the south. Due to its location the peninsula of Brasília Teimosa exemplifies a modern urban development anomaly. In order to unravel how this paradoxical spot in the city came about Fortin undertook a comprehensive study of Brasília Teimosa. Through interviews and archival research this book describes how the area emerged and how the residents have persisted in staying there. As part of his research Fortin spent six months in Pernambuco's State

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Archives, and since photocopying was prohibited he “resorted to scouring huge dusty tomes and transcribing, monk-like, browned crinkly faded newspaper articles from the 1950s to 1980s” (p 34). As a result of Fortin’s thorough archival research the book offers a comprehensive overview of historical events. The book describes how Brasília Teimosa was directly affected by shifting regimes and transitional policies during periods of revolution, dictatorship, populism and the 1964 military coup. Since the book is of a historical nature from beginning to end, it provides the reader with an impressive amount of background knowledge on how Brasília Teimosa came about and how the area, and the problems the citizens face, has evolved over time.

The site did not exist before the 1930s, at the time the future Brasília Teimosa was only a landfill. When the area began to be occupied in the 1930s mainly fishermen settled there. In 1958 when Recife was celebrating Carnival, the festival provided a distraction that facilitated a rapid invasion by more newcomers (p 54). With time the area grew to be one of the most densely populated areas in Recife. Being situated in the South Zone of Recife, between the neighbourhood of Pina and the Recife Port, Brasília Teimosa has been a site for political battle ever since it came into being. Via the case of Brasília Teimosa Fortin demonstrates, in the book, how the residents of the area discovered and exploited a space for political maneuverers in order to secure their permanence on public land. For instance, Fortin describes how the Residents Council used theatre to dramatize community problems and circulated comics to create awareness, in addition to frequent meetings they held in order to engage the local community (p 134). The strong local community has played an important part in the destiny of the area. The residents have struggled to stay in Brasília Teimosa despite several removal actions and plans of turning the area into a hotel and tourism spot. The book provides a detailed description of the different means residents used in order to

resist developments and remain in the area. Fortin examines how larger issues on state and a national level affected the conditions of this area and thus he paints a stunning picture of how macro politics can play a role in small places. In this case an area of only 65,4 hectares populated by more than 19.000 people<sup>2</sup>. Thereby the book provides the reader with an in-depth explanation of the history of the oldest and most densely populated occupied area of Recife.

Despite the extensive and beautifully covered explanation of the history of the area the book lacks analysis – as also mentioned by Janice Perlman in the foreword. Although the book touches upon extremely interesting historical periods such as the revolution, dictatorship and the military coup, these themes are not dealt with in depth. In my view this is a severe shortage off the book. Further analysis of these events could have added a certain quality to the book.

Another critical point is the long transcriptions of interviews without contextualisation, which may put off readers. These long passages could have been braided more eloquently into the rest of the book, and the transcripts could have been carefully selected and edited in order to avoid exceptionally long passages of transcription (sometimes up to 8 pages of transcription without comments, breaks or analysis). Another issue, which makes it a bit difficult to keep track of the narrative, is that many chapters are left without introduction or conclusions. Occasionally the same events are told via interview transcriptions and again by the author, but instead of analysing the events, it becomes repetition rather than an actual analysis. The book introduces many people, and a host of different actors – here the list of acronyms, as well as the list of interviewees (30 in total), come in handy. The lists help the reader to keep track of the wide array of informants.

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2 According to a survey from 2000 done by IBGE.

I must mention that the book is based on Fortin's PhD thesis from 1987. One may wonder why *Rights of Way* has been published almost 30 years after Fortin did his fieldwork in Recife without either updates or at least an afterword or comment by the author himself. The many themes the book touches upon are important issues that are still at the core of debates about who has "the right to the city". As the story ends in 1987 it does leave the reader wanting to know what happened in the last decades? In 2004 a large urban intervention was carried out in Brasília Teimosa and currently the area is being modified. *Rights of Way* is a story about the struggle and the power of people's protest movements and how the residents are ultimately betrayed by the state. The theme about the power of resistance and the struggle for social justice is a problem that resonates in the current Brazilian society. A few comments by the author on how the recent urban intervention has affected the residents of Brasília Teimosa would have made the book much more up-to-date and relevant. In my view this would have and been fruitful for the readers of the book.