

The Space Between: Analysing Collective Space in Anthony Leeds' Favela Photography

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With an unbuttoned blouse and newspaper in hand, stands in front of a wooden building, which, based on the two crosses present, looks to be a church (figure 1). All of the building walls are constructed with wooden planks, which, based on the irregularities in the roof edge of the building, seem to be repurposed scrap. The only piece of the church that looks truly sturdy is the giant metal cross standing in front of the building.

This is but one of many photographs Anthony Leeds took in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. During his time photographing favelas in 1965 and 1966, he took numerous photographs that showed the cultural richness,

resourcefulness, and communal spirit that was present in these favelas

Anthony Leeds' was an Anthropologist whose Photography often focussed on low-class housing and the strategies the people in these communities used to survive¹. Anthony Leeds chose to capture many subjects and places, giving us a unique insight into life, housing, and culture in these favelas. By analyzing certain themes that all center on how the inhabitants chose to use the non-regulated communal space, this paper aims to illuminate a narrative about the in-between space in this informal settlement that runs throughout Leeds' favela photography.



Figure 1 Wooden Church in the Tuiuti Favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965, Fiocruz Collection)



Figure 2 The Rocinha favela in Rio de Janeiro (Anthony Leeds, 1965–1966, Fiocruz Collection)

This paper is not the first to tackle the subject of favelas. Much has been written about favelas in the last decades, as they have become a subject of interest for academics². Often, this research approaches favelas within the confines of a political, social, or anthropological framework. This is not to say that no spatial or architectural scholars have analyzed favelas, but these studies seem to largely focus on the current-day favelas of the last couple of decades^{13,16}. By using Anthony Leeds' photographic archive as a case study, this paper aims to analyze an earlier stage of favelas, the state they existed in during the 1960s. By analyzing this stage of the favelas from both an anthropological and architectural perspective, this paper aims to provide insight into the historical spatial practices of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro. In doing so, this paper will try to answer how Anthony Leeds' photographs of Rio de Janeiro's favelas between 1965 and 1966 reveal the spatial practices of collective life in these informal urban environments.

In order to analyze Leeds' Photography of the Favelas, the paper first provides an analytical framework for studying Photography. Photography can be analyzed through a multitude of frameworks, all of which offer a distinct lens through which to interpret an image. A framework, when applied to photographic analysis, will always highlight some aspects of reality while omitting others³. Thus, the choice of framework is important; it will dictate how we come to understand narratives running throughout Leeds' Photography in this paper. Before a choice of framework is made, some prominent frameworks in photographic analysis are assessed to determine how well their focus and blind spots align with the purpose of spatially analyzing the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

A possible framework is a formalist photographic analysis framework. This framework, as laid out by John Szarkowski, detaches itself from contextual considerations, focusing instead on the visual and compositional elements of an image⁴. By looking at certain physical characteristics of images, the formalist analysis attempts to understand how the visual nature of an image informs its meaning. This approach is particularly applicable when analyzing the aesthetic and technical dimensions of Photography. However, for the purposes of analyzing Leeds' favela photography, this focus on the technical dimensions of a photograph will be a hindrance when trying to interpret the subjects Leeds' images depict. Its lack of focus on the conceptual elements of a photograph will hinder the reconstruction of a larger narrative present in these images.

A more apt framework for this purpose might be a semiotic framework. In discussing this framework, Roland Barthes differentiates two elements of a photograph: 'Studium' and 'Punctum'. The definitions of these two elements give insight into what this framework highlights. 'Studium' refers to the cultural, historical, and political interpretation of an image. 'Punctum' represents the subjective detail within a photograph, that which provokes a personal reaction in the viewer⁵. This framework thus underscores both the structured and personal layers of photographic interpretation. While this framework lends itself better than the formalist framework to establish a narrative, it is still limited in scope. The particular focus on the perception of the photograph makes this framework relevant when analyzing photographs in relation to subjective interpretation or societal impact. However, when trying to map the spatial characteristics of these favelas, this

focus on interpretation, just as the focus on the technical specifics in the formalist framework, seems to be less relevant.

Expanding beyond both semiotic and formalist interpretations, Susan Sontag presents a contextual framework. This framework is defined by the way it questions the nature of photographic representation itself. Reimagining Plato's cave allegory, she likens Photography to Plato's depiction of shadow projections on a cave wall. In this sense, photographs become fragments of reality. When a photographer takes a picture, they choose to isolate a moment in time. Thus, she questions in what part images reflect reality and in what part they serve as manipulated constructs that influence perception. In this contextual framework, photographs are not just visual records, but they help shape narratives. Within this framework, photographic analysis considers images as a part of a sociopolitical landscape, which informs the framing of what is seen⁶. This framework is better suited for the purposes of establishing grander spatial narratives based on the photographs. This paper aims to construct a plausible narrative based on certain commonalities between these different fragments, being mindful that these are never full depictions of reality.

Within this contextual framework, Photography is at once both an empirical record and a conceptual tool, one which we will use to examine the spatial and cultural dynamics of informal settlements. By analyzing Anthony Leeds' favela images, this study makes use of the medium of Photography to reveal both distinct architectural elements present in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and the cultural narratives that emerge within the collective spaces of these complex, urban environments. In studying a visual medium such as Photography, we can interface with depictions of spatial usage and the accompanying communal activity, offering insights that could be overlooked in textual analysis. However, as is explicitly criticized by Sontag, the medium of Photography is still inherently limited by its framing. The photographer's choice to capture certain elements of reality necessarily removes them from their broader context. As such, this paper will be careful not to draw conclusions based on individual photographs but will combine multiple spatial characteristics with secondary sources to establish its findings.

The role of the Leeds' in this analysis is central to this methodological approach. Leeds' is an American Anthropologist visiting Rio de Janeiro. As such, it is unavoidable that he frames the favela through an external lens. Noting this outsider status is not an attempt to devalue his work, as this outsider perspective might be a lens through which he is able to provide fresh insights into the cultural and spatial realities in the favelas. However, this same perspective also risks imposing

Western sensibilities on local experiences.

Furthermore, in this paper, his photos are further interpreted by me, someone who has no lived experience of favela culture. While this paper aims not to impose Western perspectives onto these images, it is inevitable that the writings of this paper are influenced by Western experience. As such, it is crucial for a reader to remain aware of how the images in this paper are captured, selected, and analyzed, acknowledging the influence of both the photographer's intent when capturing the image and the writer's intent when analyzing them. With this in mind, the paper will continue to provide insights into favela lives, which are substantiated through multiple avenues.

As such, a mere analysis of archival images will not sufficiently give insight into the complexities of spatial use in favelas. To substantiate the claims made in this paper, various secondary sources are discussed. These give further insight into the cultural, physical, and spatial aspects of informal settlements. In combination with the primary source of the aforementioned photographic archive of Anthony Leeds', this paper aims to synthesize new insights and deepen understanding of previous findings in informal settlements.

This paper aims to generate these insights through analyzing collective spaces. When selecting images that give insight into these collective spaces in the favelas, certain recurring spatial characteristics are repeatedly present. The following categories are an attempt to find patterns between these repeated characteristics in the photographs: 'the square,' 'the mural,' and 'the alley.' The chosen pictures from the archive are sorted into these groups based on spatial characteristics that are apparent in the images. By discussing these different groups one at a time, this paper aims to illustrate several distinct insights into how collective space is used and adapted by the inhabitants of the favelas.

Before this paper discusses the photographs, however, first, a brief history of favelas in the time period that the photos were taken is laid out; this will provide context that is useful for the interpretation of the images. Before the 1940s, the favelas were largely ignored by the government⁷ and only began attracting attention in the mid-1940s. At this moment in time, the government believed these settlements created disease, crime, and moral corruption⁸. Thus, the main policy enforced in relation to favelas was that of removal. This attitude started to change in the 1950s when the first policies were introduced to increase the quality of living in the favelas. These policies were put on halt after the military coup of 1964. Under this regime, the investments put into improving the favelas were stopped, and the inhabitants of around 100.000 informal houses were evicted⁹. The photographs of the favelas discussed all stem from the

Figure 3 Street scene with market stall in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



time period shortly following this military coup

In Leeds' images, these informal settlements covering Rio's hillsides are captured (figure 2). The favelas largely consist of Multi-story homes stacked upon one another. While the construction density is high, the morphology of the streets differs strongly from street to street¹⁰. Both narrow and wide alleyways run throughout the favelas, creating a complex urban landscape, one which is difficult to define broadly. However, when these settlements are labeled as 'informal,' as opposed to more structured 'formal' settlements, it is possible to reinforce a problematic dichotomy. When using the term 'informal', it is crucial to understand that this does not imply chaos or lack of order. By invoking this term as the former, this might imply a need to 'bring' order to these settlements, a belief which the Brazilian government has used to justify the eviction of favela residents. As one interviewee notes, 'informal does not necessarily equate with disorder; in fact, it carried its own order'¹¹. By studying Leeds' photographs and dissecting the pictured favelas of the 1960s spatially, this new order is what this paper aims to investigate.

By analyzing the collective spaces in the previously mentioned categories, different aspects of this 'new order' can be uncovered. Through his Photography, Leeds documented both the physicality of the favelas and the lived realities within them. Leeds' was interested in how the lives of the inhabitants were shaped by their surroundings and vice versa. He believed that spatial and personal existence should not be studied separately but as one whole¹².

Thus, both the personal and the spatial are captured by

Leeds', whose photographs often depict both in the same frame. This spatiality is captured both from street level (figure 3) as well as by shots from higher up, featuring broad areas of the favelas (figure 2). In these images taken from a higher vantage point, we see fragments of the public spaces between the buildings. These 'squares' in favelas are one of the recurring spatial elements in Anthony Leeds' photographs. With no markings on the ground and the materiality of the floor in these spaces diverging based on happenstance, it's up to these inhabitants to imagine the functional division of these spaces. Metal frames are buried into the sand to create a stand or storefront (figure 3), cords with flags are strung up between the buildings and the trees to create a festive meeting place (figure 4), a table with accompanying tablecloth is placed outside of a building next to a sign which displays a Brazilian surname, presumably which the establishments is named after (figure 5), a collection of garments on a table built from crates, placed on dirt, which is bordered by a concrete road (figure 6).

All of these images depict a different physical manifestation of how this public space can be adapted for social use. It shows us that without a clear division between space-to-move and space-to-reside, the inhabitants of the favelas were able to give legibility to these communal spaces. Through little interventions like temporary stalls, tables, or cords of flags and by making use of the difference in elevation and material of these squares, these collective spaces get a clear purpose and, where necessary, function division.

While this appropriation of the public space lends fluidity to spaces in informal settlements, there are



Figure 4 Square with community gathering in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)

Figure 5 Street scene of two people dining in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



some less desirable outcomes to this usage. Utilizing this space means encroaching on it. This public space can be encroached onto on the ground floor or on higher elevations. Appropriation on higher elevations, both vertical and horizontal, can lead to decreased light and ventilation in public areas, thus making moving through and residing in them less appealing. Encroachment on the ground floor decreases the amount of traversable space in between the buildings. The physical items that encroach into the public space are often placed closer to the edge of the lanes. While this does not cause any issues in the wider lanes (figure 3), this appropriation has been found to

hinder the flow of traffic throughout informal settlements and even make some parts inaccessible at times¹³.

This negotiation of space in informal settlements resembles the urban phenomena where ‘empty’ or undefined spaces become sites of collective dialogue between inhabitants. As Smith argues, such spaces are ‘contentious places for consensus,’ where the inhabitants are able to challenge official urban orderings with bottom-up initiatives. Thus, they are able to renegotiate the inscribed meanings and uses of this space¹⁴. When applying this concept to an ‘informal’ settlement, like favelas, there is no top-down designation of the space to



Figure 6 Street scene with stand built from crates in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)

Figure 7 Mural depicting a house for sale in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



be challenged. However, in the context of favelas, these transformations of voids into multi-functional, communal spaces through temporary installations, gatherings, or spontaneous commerce demonstrate how residents can inscribe their needs into the spatial fabric through the appropriating of these ‘empty’ spaces. Leeds’ images, in this sense, capture a glimpse of the cultural consensus that gives shape to these spatial adaptations.

By capturing and thus highlighting these spaces, Leeds shows us ways that favela culture can transform ‘empty’ space. These ‘squares’ are not hindered by a lack of top-down spatial planning but, in many cases, aided by the lack of restrictions and function-division present

in these spaces. Not quite a ‘tabula rasa’, these squares possess certain dimensions, elevations, and materiality which the inhabitants can use to adapt the public space to their needs. In doing so, they express their collective ideals for this space. While there are certain risks to the ungoverned nature of the public space, this same nature also lends them fluidity.

Another recurring physical element in Leeds’ archival material on favelas is his photographs depicting murals. In this paper, multiple forms of wall decorating are referred to within this category of ‘mural’; while there are notable differences between these different practices of decorating, the arguments in this paper concern the entire



Figure 8 Mural depicting people holding signs in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



Figure 9 Mural depicting soccer in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



Figure 10 Mural depicting history of a region in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



Figure 11 Drawings displayed in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)

category. Some of these captured ‘murals’ are political in nature (figure 8); some depict a part of Brazilian culture (figure 9, figure 10); others depict colorful art (figure 12) or pictures of drawings attached to a wall (figure 11). All of them give additional insight into the cultural landscape present in the favelas.

Through his numerous photographs of murals, Leeds paints a narrative in which culture is present not only in favelas but also in the settlement’s inhabitants, who are politically engaged and conscious of the value of creative expression in public space. In her paper on graffiti in favelas, Dinardi argues that these murals are not a circumstantial act but a way for the residents of favelas to distinguish themselves from a derogatory stereotype of favelas residents. Through this artistic expression, inhabitants create a culture and legitimize themselves as subjects in the city¹⁵. All of these murals are different visual manifestations of favela culture, a culture that is related yet distinct from the culture present in the formal parts of Rio.

These murals, as such, are not part of a grander,



Figure 12 Mural in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)

government-imposed plan for the use of space but a collective undertaking by favela inhabitants. This use of the built surfaces for personal (figure 7) or political reasons is possible because of the lack of planning and regulation present in these favelas. This informality gives graffiti artists the opportunity to express themselves in the collective space.

It could be argued that the mural is an act of active spatial resistance¹⁶. Halsey and Young argue that graffiti is an act that actively contests control and surveillance of urban space, not merely exists in its absence. They position graffiti as a means by which individuals ‘inscribe their desires’ onto the built environment, thus rewriting the city from the bottom up. It has been argued that through graffiti, spaces can be created for inclusion, connectivity, and expressing collective imagination¹⁷. Within this interpretation, these murals are not merely a form of expression but a physical intervention that tries to assert the inhabitant’s ownership of their surroundings. While there is no governmental order for the favela residents to resist, there is an informal order that shapes the spatial



Figure 13 A clothesline on a roof terrace in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



Figure 14 Bikes stored in an alley in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



Figure 15 Items storage in between buildings in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)

design of these favelas. In this sense, the presence of graffiti becomes a form of continual spatial authorship, the inhabitants co-authors of their environment, even after its construction. Thus, murals function as a tool for its inhabitants to continually lay claim to their surroundings through spatial resistance.

Circling back to the previously mentioned in-between spaces in favelas, these don't all take the form of a square; if secluded enough or adjacent to less-trafficked roads, these spaces can be sorted into a third category: that of the 'alley.' These liminal spaces, as explored in Tavakoli et al.'s study on Middle Eastern historic cities, represent zones between private and public life. Unlike the communal squares, which encourage social gathering, these alleys serve more personal, utilitarian functions: These spaces might serve as storage of possessions (figure 14, 15, 19), places to dry clothes (figure 13, 16, 17), or places to put personal items on display (figure 18). In many ways, they act as extensions of the household in a very similar way to the alleys and semi-private lanes in dense Iranian neighborhoods did¹⁸.

While both squares and alleys emerge through a certain happenstance in informal urban development, these alleys appear indispensable to the lived realities of favela residents. If these remnant spaces were to instead be a space containing more buildings, several functions of the daily lives of favela residents would be hindered. These spaces often accommodate activities for which the home has no room or which are culturally acceptable or even preferred outdoors. Tavakoli's research emphasizes how such in-between spaces improve social connectivity by

acting as diffusive spaces, one which resides somewhere between one's individual identity and the present collective culture.

The willingness of residents to leave personal belongings like bikes or clothes in these publicly accessible spaces suggests a shared culture of spatial trust and mutual respect for the semi-private character of these alleys. This observation is in line with the study's claim that liminal spaces can help create social interactions and a form of localized citizenship. Zimmerman's¹⁹ concept of liminal space as a threshold provides a reason why liminal spaces encourage this type of usage. He emphasizes how these spaces enable both physical and psychological permeability. In their not-yet-defined nature, they allow users the mental fluidity to easily transition between identities. In this light, favela alleys are not only incidental gaps but adaptive thresholds that support personal expression, informal practices, and communal trust, making them an integral part of life in the favelas.

Thus far, we have discussed three categories in which Anthony Leeds' photographs were sorted. In combination with secondary sources, a narrative present within these photos was synthesized. However, it is relevant to note that during his academic career, Anthony Leeds himself wrote about urbanity. As such, the narrative present in these photographs can be substantiated both with different writings about spatiality and informality and also by using Leeds' writing on the subject.

In his 1979 paper *Forms of Urban Integration*, Anthony Leeds argues that the development of urban



Figure 16 Clotheslines in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)

Figure 17 Clothes being dried on a roof in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)



life is driven not only by top-down planning but is in large parts shaped by grassroots, adaptive practices. Leeds' concept of 'social urbanization' encompasses the organic processes through which residents shape and redefine their environment, even in the absence of state-enforced planning²⁰. This insight is in line with how Leeds' Photography is thus far framed in this paper. It uncovers a narrative present in his photos of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, wherein inhabitants transform their surroundings, assigning a multitude of essential functions to the available spaces.

Rather than relying on a pre-existing order, favela inhabitants repeatedly renegotiate their surroundings through local interventions, both by making use of

the open spaces and by repurposing different built structures. Anthony Leeds' framework redefines these adaptive spatial practices as deliberate acts whereby the inhabitants of the favelas are constantly renegotiating their surroundings according to their cultural, social, and economic needs. .

In a sense, Anthony Leeds' Photography of Rio de Janeiro's favelas between 1965 and 1966 reveals how this spatial improvisation cultivates resilience. The analysis of three types of communal space: squares, murals, and alleys illuminate how collective space is adapted in favelas. Unplanned space can become a stage for community life (squares), a canvas for political, artistic, and cultural expression and transformation (murals),



Figure 18 A shrine in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)

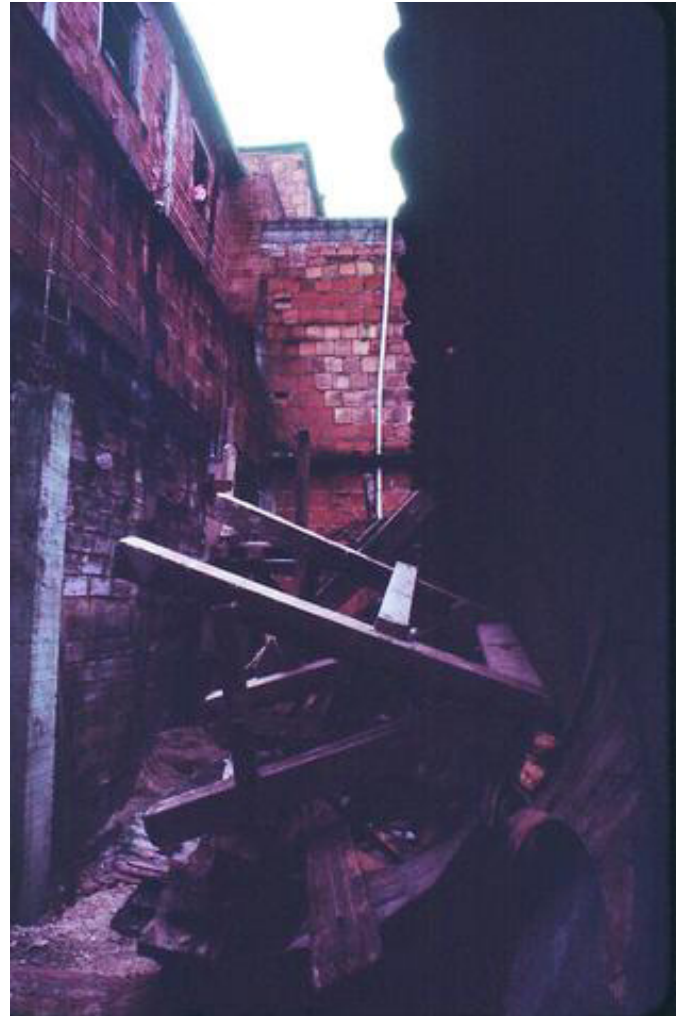


Figure 19 Wooden items stored in a narrow space in a Rio de Janeiro favela (Anthony Leeds, 1965-1966, Fiocruz Collection)

and a liminal space that serves as a threshold between private and public spaces (alleys). Leeds' Photography thus frames informality, as a condition present in favelas, as being able to cultivate a usage distinct from that of planned space. This usage is not restricted by the rigidity of urban rules; rather, this lack of formal planning enables fluidity, allowing residents to imprint meaning on their environment and alter its function according to their needs. Yet this same ever-changing nature of space can also create issues for its residents, as seen in the encroachment risks that come with the appropriation of collective space. This tension, created by the ungoverned nature of these spaces, invites further study, which might explore how inhabitants of contemporary favelas deal with spatial agency.

When examining his Photography within the framework of the concept of 'social urbanization' present in his writing, Leeds' perspective casts these informal settlements not as vestiges of planning failure but as active sites of 'social urbanization.' They are framed as spaces where nontraditional strategies can create spaces

that are both functional and closely tied to local identity.

Ultimately, the larger narrative that runs throughout Leeds' favela photography between 1965 and 1966 is one that frames communal spaces in these informal settlements as dynamic, adaptable spaces that contain a constant dialogue between culture and architecture, aiding their inhabitants in their pursuit of reshaping their surroundings in accordance with their needs.

Abstract

Anthony Leeds' photographic documentation of Rio de Janeiro's favelas (1965–1966) highlights different aspects of spatial informality by capturing how residents adapt communal spaces to cultivate cultural and social resilience. This paper employs a contextual framework to analyze Leeds' images as constructions of narrative, focusing on three spatial typologies: squares (hubs of community life), murals (sites of political and artistic expression), and alleys (liminal thresholds between private and public realms). Through these categories, the

analysis reveals how unplanned spaces enable fluidity, allowing inhabitants to reshape their environment through temporary physical appropriation while also acknowledging tensions like encroachment risks. The paper frames favelas as dynamic landscapes where architecture and culture intertwine. These informal settlements, as such, are not voids of disorder but spaces of inventive adaptation. The study invites further research into how contemporary informal settlements negotiate spatial agency.

Keywords: Favela; Informal settlement; Communal space; Liminal space; Photography; Anthony Leeds

Notes

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