

Priced out of Rio's booming favelas, Brazil's poor resort to mass squatting

The Tuffi Community occupying derelict factory is one of many forced out in trend accelerated by World Cup and Olympics.

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The narrow, gated entrance to the derelict tile factory on Avenida Itaoca provides few clues to the activity within. But take just a few steps across the threshold and you find yourself in the midst of Rio de Janeiro's newest sanctuary for the poor. Filling every inch of floorspace, alley, roof and yard, more than a thousand refugees from the city's gentrified favelas have been building a community here, plank by plank, nail by nail, for the past two months since the "occupation" of the factory began.

Almost everyone here is from Alemão, a favela complex that has started to move upmarket since it was "pacified" by police in 2010. Rent rises are now pushing out the poor who were struggling on the fringes of the favela.

Unable to make ends meet, the first few hundred families among them moved en masse into the abandoned factory in March, rapidly followed by more than a thousand more.

"We live in total poverty," said Marianne Christina da Silva, the secretary of the residents' association.

"There is no sewage, no drinking water and very few people have electricity."

This is a much repeated story in Rio, a resort city that has long been home both to the super-rich and the migrant poor, who move into slums that are then developed as soon as the land becomes valuable. The trend has been given a shot of adrenalin by the World Cup and Olympics, which are pushing up property prices.

In March, riot police used teargas to clear a nascent community of several thousand people from a factory owned by the Oi telecoms company. The displaced residents have since moved to three other locations and vented their frustration by burning public buses and a police car.

This week, a thousand homeless families in São Paulo reportedly moved into a site just two miles from the opening venue of the World Cup. They were bussed to the site by the Landless Workers' Movement, which says the occupation aims to highlight the failure of government promises to improve social housing.

At Tufi, too, residents contrast the government's cosmetic efforts to make the city presentable for World Cup visitors and its negligence in dealing with long-term housing problems.

"The government wants to have a lovely World Cup and for the city to look nice, yet we still see children sleeping in the street. How nice is that?" said Da Silva, of the residents' association.

There are inevitably tensions in the crowded factory, but the mood is upbeat. Children play happily in the narrow make-shift corridors, the toilets are impressively clean, there is a chapel, and some budding entrepreneurs have opened bars and beauty salons.

"Look, you can see a community being formed in front of your eyes," said Carlos Henrique Oliveira, who guided the Guardian through the building.

Meanwhile, rents and property prices continue to rise, putting more pressure on the poor and adding to the incentives for further occupations of Rio's numerous empty buildings. Having grabbed their small plots, Tifi residents are preparing for a long stay.

The president of the community association, Carlos Alberto, said: "We want help from the government to lead a dignified life, but if there is no help coming, we'll manage here by ourselves."

(580 words)