

WHAT'S THE EXCHANGE RATE?

PERSONNAL IMPRESSIONS BACK FROM BRAZIL

CHRISTINA BATTEATE

Christina Batteate is a senior in the BSCR program, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. In 2007 she was the recipient of the Berrier Memorial and the McDougall Urban Design scholarships. She is professionally motivated by international development and by working with low-income communities. She has been a constant contributor to FOCUS.



Figure 1
Photo from the bottom of Morro do Timbau showing the risk of stacked self-help housing amidst the make-shift electricity cables. (photo by U. Schifferdecker)



In this paper, CRP senior, Christina Batteate writes about her participation in the international exchange program with the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro during the summer and fall quarters of 2007. Her experience included a class project for recycling old industrial buildings next to a squatter-settlement into new housing, and an internship with the United Nations Human Settlements Program in their regional office for Latin America.

The value of world travel and international student exchange goes so much farther than what one might expect. I've found that many people are intimidated by the prospect of world travel. Not knowing how to finance the trip or how to learn the language are common deterrents. What most don't know is that all colleges offer some kind of financial aid, and higher amounts of aid are available to students studying abroad. Furthermore, a simple course or private tutor can have anyone speaking a new language within a couple of months. With a little planning and an adventurous spirit, world travel is possible. A quote I saw recently, which I think applies well here, went something like this, "The things that scare us the most are often the most worth doing." I'd like to take the opportunity to share how my study abroad experience in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil proved to be the most valuable investment of my life. The dollar to experience exchange heavily favors the student.

SCHOOL

Cal Poly's City and Regional Planning (CRP) Department does a direct exchange with the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) meaning that most classes taken qualify towards the CRP major. To supplement my Community Design Lab at Cal Poly, I took *Projeto Urbano Alternativa* (Alternative Urban Design Project) in Brazil. While the course requirements were roughly the same, the context within which our planning and design were conducted was so radically different from anything I'd ever encountered in the United States. Adaptability became my number one tool. Although it took a few weeks of classes before I felt totally comfortable with the language, I was, thankfully, not the only exchange student. There were students from Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal all doing exchange through the UFRJ College of Architecture and Urbanism. Having such a diverse group of students also gave me insight into how planning is conducted in different parts of the world. Our professor, a Chilean by birth, had been working in Brazilian *favelas* (or slums) for about the last fifteen years and had a wealth of practical experience to offer us.

Our planning community for the semester was Morro de Timbau, a neighborhood in one of Rio de Janeiro's larger *favelas*, Maré. Because *favelas* are informal, or constructed by the inhabitants, there is no municipal information about them. There are no street maps. Without census data, population counts within the neighborhood of Morro de Timbau range from 4,000 to 6,000 inhabitants. Morro de Timbau is just one neighborhood of seventeen that make up the whole *favela* of Maré. Maré has an estimated 113,000 to 132,000 inhabitants.

Since the community was basically built one block at a time with no help from the City, there are no maps of the intricate network of streets and alleys that make up the *favela*. Acute lack of physical and demographic community information made a site analysis quite different than what I was accustomed to in the U.S. In Figure 2 the highlighted area shows the urban fabric of the *favela* in contrast to a formalized city structure. The *favela* exhibits high density living with no logical transportation infrastructure and inexistence of formal public space. The formal neighborhood at the bottom right of the photo exhibits the qualities of a planned neighborhood with a grid street network and an evenly distributed building density. It was hard for me and my foreign classmates to imagine so many people, living in such high density, with virtually no public space, vegetation or city services.

As our groups' site analysis progressed, we encountered even more obstacles to planning. The neighborhood of Morro de Timbau was the oldest in the favela of Maré. In its roughly forty years of existence, it had maxed out its spatial limitations. Inhabitants were living in five-story self-built structures, hanging precariously over nearly vertical slopes, and the neighborhood was rapidly sprawling into nearby abandoned industrial sites. Houses were going up at an alarming rate of about one per week, often filling an entire industrial site in a matter of months.

The need for intervention was apparent, but the means of intervening were not as straightforward. Within the communities of Rio's *favelas* is an endemic distrust of government. This distrust, combined with low levels of literacy and education, make for a very complicated planning scenario. The most useful connection we had in the community was the president of the *favelas'* version of a home owners association. The distinction being that, in *favelas*, nobody owns the land or their homes; they are squatters. Often, intervention is viewed as a threat that will result in citizen relocation and demolition of their homes and businesses. Our intentions were not such, but, unfortunately, these planning realities kept our class at a steady arms length away from real intervention.



Figure 2

The highlighted area shows the organic fabric of Favela da Mare and Morro do Timbau, in contrast with the surrounding formal city. On the left, the main highway access to the city, and on the right the island where the university campus is located. The more regular grid on the right side of the picture are housing projects built in the late 1980s to relocate families from squatter houses which had been built on stilts along the bayfront.



Figure 3

An example of the inadequacy of some of the self-built houses coupled with the difficulty to implement garbage collection. (photo U. Schifferdecker)

Though many aspects of the community were in poor physical condition, our team knew that to draw up an elaborate plan would be fruitless without the collaboration and support of the community. We also knew that bringing the community along to understand the process alone would take time. So, our team developed the following as our project goal: “Sustainability of the community through the realization of citizen rights, social inclusion, integration with the formal city, autonomy and self-management.” Our main instruments of achieving this goal were to create micro-credit schemes for residents of Morro de Timbau, to hold workshops with city planners and architects to open up the design process, and to create a participatory budget, like the one pioneered by the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil.

We envisioned creating a hub in the community where the activities listed above would take place. A family or group of families could get together and ask for a micro-loan to open a new business or build a group of houses. Workshops with planners and architects would help ensure the new structures were built to address the safety and health concerns associated with self-built structures. Eventually, with the trust built and education gained from the workshops, community members would be able to make meaningful dedications for the participatory budget. A participatory budget could be thought of as a piece of a pie, whereby the community obtains a certain portion of the city’s budget. Instead of conventional budgeting in which the city decides where to invest money, the community members vote annually on where they believe the funds would be best put to use. Micro-lending and participatory budgeting have been very successful in slum-upgrading and community development projects across the world.

The images in Figures 6 and 7 represent possible examples of how community members might use their loans to develop an industrial site. The first image is an example of a housing scheme that three families might consider building. The second is an example of a live/work unit. Buildings should happen as much as the participatory budget could leverage. The area we’d like to see become parks and gardens is currently abandoned space along a very polluted canal.

Despite the greater challenges in planning in a *favela* rather than in a community in the U. S., I still found myself using many of the same techniques I had learned at Cal Poly. The basic skill set of analysis, design and implementation can be adapted to fit in any community, in any scenario, anywhere in the world. In multiple planning projects, the final products will never be the same, but the processes will be strikingly similar.

WORK

Three days a week, I spent at my internship with United Nations Human Settlements Program-Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN-HABITAT/ROLAC). I would have been wholly unprepared for the tasks asked of me had I not “learned by doing” how to be professional and work as a team at Cal Poly. Everything I was assigned to do was new to me. I had to be very succinct in forming questions to my peers and polite and respectful to my colleagues to be able to draw as much expertise from them as possible. By the end

Figure 4

On the foreground, some of the abandoned industrial buildings invaded by squatters (the new brick walls with no roof can be seen). On the background, Morro do Timbau.



of my time there, I found other colleagues asking me for help on assignments. That was definitely a crowning moment.

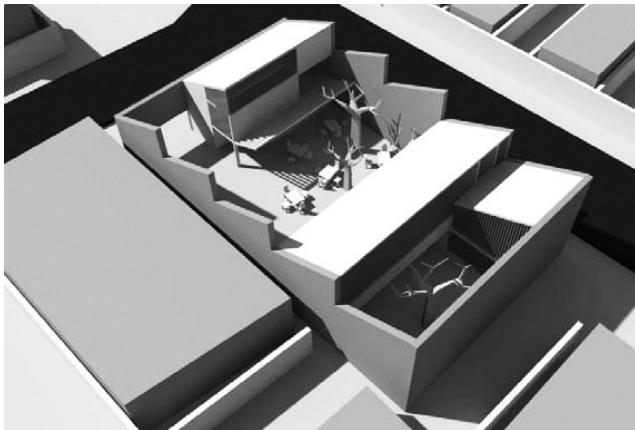
It was quite amazing to see how many projects across Central and South America were managed from just one office. Our office was in Rio de Janeiro, yet a colleague of mine was compiling urban indicators from across Latin America. I was tasked with organizing a conference in Peru and inviting the major players in the Latin American housing economy. On any given day, one or two of our bosses would be out of the country.

This is not to say that we didn't conduct local projects, though. We had a number of ongoing projects with local municipalities in Brazil. Two interns were using the UN-HABITAT platform to conduct local projects on corporate social responsibility and community capacity building. The variety of work conducted under the UN-HABITAT umbrella was truly incredible.

For the last two months of my internship, I worked exclusively on a housing finance project in Central America. Our job, along with our partners, a U.S. based non-profit and Merrill Lynch, was to design and implement a project to finance and build two-million dollars worth of housing in Central America. Once again, I felt as if I'd been thrown into the boiling pot. I had never done anything like this in my life. The professionalism I learned at Cal Poly taught me to buckle down and ride it out without a complaint. After a lot of learning, working and formatting feedback, I was able to produce a project document that has now landed me a job with our partner, the U.S. based non-profit. At the expense of sounding over-gratuitous, I can't emphasize enough the value of the "learn by doing" philosophy at



Figure 5
The map shows the location of the abandoned industrial structures utilized in our project (in grey).



Figures 6 & 7
The map shows the location of the abandoned industrial structures utilized in our project (in grey). The renderings show possible ways that community members might use their loads to adapt the buildings into residential (6) and live-work (7) units.



Figure 8

Interns at the door to the UN-HABITAT office in Rio de Janeiro. From left to right: Christina Batteate, Marion Nicard des Rieux, Sailah Saaristo, and Hubert Morch. (photo H. Morch)

Cal Poly. It prepared me so much for the challenges of real life by building character strong enough to make it through any challenge I will encounter in the work world.

PLAY

All my weekdays were filled with university or my internship, but I still had plenty of free-time on weekends and holidays. If I didn't feel like traveling out of town, I could always hit up the Rio beaches, tropical trails, local museums, or samba clubs. My most memorable travelling experiences were weekend trips out of state to Ouro Preto and Trancoso. Ouro Preto is a historic colonial town, set upon steeper hills than San Francisco, with a calm pace to life. Trancoso was the perfect beach getaway, replete with freshly squeezed tropical fruit juices and some of the best seafood I've ever had. The most meaningful cultural experiences were definitely

learning to dance the samba and hold down conversations in Portuguese. Each region of Brazil is so vastly different that I continued exploring and learning new things, even when I wasn't technically in class. The things one learns, the work done, the places known, the people met, and the personal growth that occurs while studying abroad make it one of the most valuable investments I think anyone can make in life. So, leave your fears behind and cash in those dollars for an exchange experience that will boost career and confidence—and last a lifetime.



Figures 9 & 10

The author in the colonial town of Ouro Preto, and a view of one of the town's many churches in its beautiful setting. (photos C. Batteate and V. del Rio, respectively)

