A Narrative of Resistance: The Dandara Community, Brazil

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the history of the Dandara Occupation, in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. By exploring the strategies and resistance of the residents and movements involved, this paper shows the importance of the occupied territory in the struggle for the right to housing in the city. Through the narratives of the residents, references, and photographic remnants of the initial years of the occupation, a temporal line is developed that reveals the challenges and opportunities for the people of Dandara in the development of their community.

**Keywords:** Dandara; Occupation; Belo Horizonte; Resistance

# Introduction

The city of Belo Horizonte, capital of the Minas Gerais State in the Southeast Region of Brazil, is one of the few planned cities in the country. However, since its creation, its peripheral neighborhoods have been characterized by poverty. The form in which Belo Horizonte was built forced the working-class population to stay out of the planned circle. Therefore, the creation of Belo Horizonte embodied the concept that housing in the formal city is a privilege (e.g., Fernandes 2017).

The original structure of the city, along with many other social and economic processes, reveals the high inequalities within it. A study by the João Pinheiro Foundation (FJP) shows that Minas Gerais has the second-largest housing deficit in the country: in 2014, Minas Gerais lacked 529,000 housing units. Neither the private sector nor the government housing programs (the largest of these being “Programa Minha Casa, Minha Vida,” PMCMV—My House, My Life, Program) were able to solve this problem in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (MRBH). Instead, the housing deficit in MRBH increases year-on-year.

The housing deficit is a social issue where lack of access to housing is a consequence of market logic. The real estate market is expensive, bureaucratic, and inaccessible to a significant proportion of the community, who are unable to obtain a home through formal channels. Moreover, since housing is regarded as a financial asset, many properties are left unoccupied as a form of speculation.

This situation in the MRBH has led to a severe increase in the urban occupations, reflecting the need for a fight for the “Right to the City” in Belo Horizonte (Ferrari de Lima et al. 2014). Occupation in this context emerges as a reaction to the deficit itself and to the spatial inequalities that have characterized urban centers, particularly, Belo Horizonte. The “cruz do aluguel”—rent cross—also explains why so many families have occupied empty land that does not conform to the “social function of the property.” Many poor families simply cannot pay rent due to the extremely low wage levels among the working-class and the high cost of living in the MRBH.

The Dandara Community was created within such a social framework. Dandara dreamed and articulated a new way of dwelling, a conception beyond the established model of exploiting peripheral subjects in large centers. Dandara was constituted through struggle, intensifying debates about the right to housing, and prompting criticism of the housing deficit in this city that belongs to the few.

# Dandara’s History in Photographs and Memory

The Dandara community is located in the Pampulha region (a zone of high real estate value), in Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais, Brazil). In the early hours of April 9, 2009, a group of 150 homeless families occupied—like a “sea of canvas tents”— a piece of land that did not conform to its social function. Assisted by the social movements *Brigadas Populares* (BPs), *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (CPT), and *Movimento dos Sem Terra* (MST), those 150 families started to build their own houses, giving rise to the Dandara Community.

Once the territory was occupied, the *Brigadas Populares* (a political organization and social movement) assisted the residents with the process of organization and resistance. It sought to promote the maintenance and construction of housing on the land. In the first few days, news of the occupation gained national attention. The media coverage further increased the number of families that joined the occupation process. In three days, the occupation increased from 150 to 1086 families. Frei Gilvander, an important figure in the history of the occupation, remembers the beginnings of Dandara: “It was nice because it happened like this, it was a surprise that we had to work so quickly! Within five days, it had already reached 1200 families.”

In the following days, due to this phenomenon, there were intensified calls for resistance and securing access to the land. Dwellers, members of social movements, and support networks all started to organize daily assemblies. Here, the dwellers defined questions that addressed such themes as the logic of the self-managed space, its organization, and structure, as well as strategies beyond the “occupied” territory.

From the articulation of the CPT, a support network was born. In the beginning, this was composed of religious affiliates of the Catholic church, but later it expanded to include public lawyers, social architects, and political scientists, along with other professionals. Important agents of these networks were groups from universities, including undergraduate and graduate students who also became involved in the daily challenges of the expanding occupation.

“( . . . ) And we started to join some reunions in there ( . . . ) and all the organizational process under [the] canvas and fighting the police ( . . . )” (Sãozinha, member of Rede de Educação Cidadã (Web of Citizen Education)—RECID *apud*. (Ribeiro 2017, p. 93))

The media attention during the early years of the occupation also played an important role in the establishment of the community. Through blogs, articles in newspapers, photographic exhibitions, documentaries, concerts, and events in the area, the occupation managed to expand this support network, achieving international visibility. Campaigns on social media made the dilemmas of the occupation visible to a global audience, who could advocate for the community’s permanent residence in the territory. All these processes of articulation, from different groups, in addition to the various forces on the ground, allowed the occupation to be created and sustained. Gradually, the canvas constructions gave way to huts made of wood, which has now mostly been replaced with stone; though still un-plastered, they represent the dreams of the reforms and constructions yet to take place.

Dandara, the name chosen to baptize the community, was that of a black woman and a warrior, the life-mate of the leader of the slave resistance in Brazil, Zumbi dos Palmares, and an important reference point in the fight against slavery in the Portuguese American period.Dandara was an important warrior and strategist. When her freedom was threatened, she chose to commit suicide rather than returning to a life of slavery.

“Her fight is preserved in Brazilian history, and her warrior personality is, to this day, an example for other women. Inspired by this model, many reveal, even unconsciously, that “the fight is in the blood”, like the warriors of the occupation in Belo Horizonte. Faithful companions, more than wives and mothers, they carry out the work inside their houses, they plant, and they fight—even more than some men—for the ideal of freedom glimpsed from behind the eyes of Dandara.” (Andrade and Lelis 2010, p. 38, loose translation)

The choice of this politically charged name—a symbol of the fight for freedom of black people—also embodies the empowerment of women in the occupation and the fight for habitation. Many times, while their husbands were out working, the women maintained the political presence of the community. They are considered the “front line” warriors, even in confrontations with the police.

Soares Lopes—pictured here standing in his lot —is a resident and leader of the occupation. In this space, the dweller—who has a lifetime of experience in urban agriculture—is determined to build his urban garden, or what he also likes to call his “future tomb.”

# Dandara’s Legacy: Rururban Projects

The Dandara occupation process is relevant to the struggles for urban and agrarian reforms of the Brazilian left. First, an attempt to overcome a rural vs. urban dichotomy is presented through the conception of the occupation. The Dandara occupation is in the urban perimeter, where a transformation of the land is proposed, to make it fertile and productive for the occupants. Dandara embodies the combination of two agendas, three social movements, and the ideal of overcoming difficulties encountered in occupations and peripheries (also known in Brazil as “favelas”) of the metropolitan area of Belo Horizonte. The union of social movements looks toward a new conception of housing, as well as an open unity of the leftist movements acting together to promote a space of internal translation between themselves and the residents of the occupation. The takeover of an important sector of the city is the result of overcoming differences and learning from one another’s experiences.

Being one of the first planned occupations in the city, Dandara is an example of the dream of self-sufficiency achieved through producing food and providing services on one’s own land. Social movements, whether for agrarian or urban reform, have united around an occupation project that lends their struggles a collective voice: the “rururban” (rural and urban) proposal. This is an expression of the fluidity that exists between rural and urban counterparts (in the plural, thus expressing their multiplicity). Rural and urban areas are not alone; there is a co-dependency between the two that is quotidian. Dandara makes it possible to deepen this convergence of agendas and movements, coming from different spaces, both rural and urban. There is no sense of division that would be an obstacle to this unified housing project that is a support-base for so many families living in poverty. This effort persuades a pertinent reflection on society and especially on the state, which has hitherto regarded rural and urban movements as distinct issues. This is maintained despite the deep history of migration in this country—the resulting interconnections, and inter-dependencies inherent in these ways of life. Still, the juridical, municipal, state, and federal bureaucracies choose to dissociate the demands of one from the other. The *rururban* project, therefore, is more than a unifying agenda of the movements; it also focuses on the rural–urban debate.

The planned *rururban* project, that is Dandara, was predetermined from the experience of the locals, which allowed for ambitious plans to be transformed into realities achievable in that moment. This model of occupation, comprising two ways of life, has initiated its own trajectory. Increasingly in the MRBH, some occupations dominate rururban areas and fight to remain in the territory with their unique standing as *rururban* occupations. The dynamics of this model become autonomous even in this aspect. The concept itself is redefined not only by residents, but also by other movements that incorporate this term in their struggle for access to housing. While it is possible to map the definition of the planned rururban project from the movements of the Belo Horizonte occupation, the directions it takes remain unique and flexible.

Another important aspect that emerged from the analysis of this work is the fundamental role of the support networks in the consolidation and permanence of the occupation. The collective work carried out by its supporters continues to strengthen the inhabitants and militants, and which—perhaps as the main purpose of their involvement—produces an immeasurable exchange of knowledge and experiences.

The empathy promoted by these spaces constructs a society based on equity and social justice, but without romanticization. An act of occupying, with the involvement of future professionals, such as university students, can promote (trans)formation in these individuals. Whether it affects their ultimate choice of profession or career, their understanding of this world will be transformed. The same logic applies to all the groups that are involved. Furthermore, the strength that these spaces bring to the families that find themselves in situations described here, gives power to their construction and political participation. There is a process of emancipation and autonomy in the act of occupation, and the support networks contribute considerably to the strengthening and maintenance of this process.

# Final Remarks: Dandara’s Current Challenges

The Dandara Community keeps growing every day: houses are built, enhanced, and improved. Gradually, more than 2000 families have overcome the housing struggle and acquired homes that they dreamed and fought for. Today, after eight years of occupation, Dandara is a neighborhood, albeit an informal one, with all the characteristics and limitations of the neo-liberal city that we encounter daily. However, Dandara is unique among neighborhoods in the region. It has a history, pervaded by struggle and effort. These characteristics become evident as an occupation becomes a community before the eyes of the state and residents. With transformations resulting from the internal dynamics and ongoing family flows, the settlements develop characteristics of a traditional city, and perceptions change.

The future of the occupation may be one of the most complex aspects to be considered. The intrusion of the neo-liberal model of the city warns of an arduous struggle to come. As the capital seeks to demonstrate its power, it establishes itself even in places of occupation, resistance, and construction.

Is the logic of the traditional city’s system unavoidable? This question has no ready answers. In some respects, the communities break from some features of the traditional city, but in others, they do not. With time, the occupied spaces become more embedded in the formal city. They become neighborhoods and start to gain access to public services—although often precariously—and from there the struggle becomes only a memory. At the same time, walls increase and the cost of living and housing prices rise as a result of street planning and larger houses—even those unfinished. In addition to the increasing housing costs, residents start to pay more tributes and taxes for each new service in the community.

The *rururban* project, originally planned by social movements, could be a way to transform the new/old dichotomy in occupied territories. The production of goods inside these spaces could provide autonomy and allow maintenance of the territory, not only financially, but also through the union and formative processes of similar occupation projects. However, the demand for housing is urgent and, due to the increasing number of families that need places to live, the occupation of urban lands, similar to Dandara, is increasingly prone to family booms occupying the territory.

The reality of these urban occupations is complex and defies generalizations about their formation. Beyond this discussion of the difficulties involved with the structure and maintenance of the work of occupying land, the formative process led by social movements and support networks is the main form of resistance to the current model of society. Only a formation that sets us free from the moorings of the traditional system can drive a new model of cities and societies.

The occupation is now undergoing urbanization. The state has already begun to formalize the territory and incorporate it into the city. This fact has many implications for the occupation that is gradually starting to become a neighborhood. Nevertheless, Dandara’s impact is still reflected in other struggles for continued habitation in occupied territories. Dandara represents a milestone in the struggle for housing in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, and Brazil.