

The vertical favela

The Prestes Maia building © Antonio Brasiliano

On 30 March we issued a UA on behalf of 468 families who were facing violent eviction from the derelict clothes factory they were squatting

For over a decade, a 22-storey building on Rua Prestes Maia in central São Paulo stood empty. Ignored by its owner, who ran up R\$5 million (US\$2.35 million) in unpaid back taxes (more than the value of the site itself), the building quickly fell into disrepair. Over the years it filled with rubbish and was infested with rats and fleas. With the decline came prostitutes and drug dealers who used the building as a meeting point.

Then in November 2002, the fortunes of the Prestes Maia building were transformed. Under the aegis of the *Movimento Sem Teto do Centro* (MSTC), Homeless Movement of Central São Paulo, it was occupied and squatted. In a massive clean-up operation, the new residents removed some 300 truckloads of rubbish, and cleaned out parts of the building that were a metre deep in sewage; they improvised plumbing, often using discarded piping, kitchen and bathroom fittings picked up in the street. Makeshift walls divided up the floors, as the residents began decorating their living spaces. In the end, 1,000 low-income families had built a home, in one

of the largest squats in South America – a vertical *favela* in the heart of São Paulo.

Over the last two years, the Prestes Maia has created a vibrant community. Pooling their limited funds, they now run a crèche, a library, a cinema and arts events. In April 2006, they hosted an exhibition as part of a major arts festival – the IX Havana Biennale. Prestes Maia has now become a *cause célèbre*, visited by university professors, journalists and artists.

But the most extraordinary aspect of this story is that this unique experiment has flourished under the constant threat of eviction. The irony is not lost on the Vanda Araújo, who lives on the 14th floor of the Prestes Maia building: “When we came here, the place was filthy; now we’ve cleared it up, they want to throw us out.” Vanda Araújo, who works mending clothes, has to haul her sewing machine up 14 flights of stairs each day. It’s a hard life, but at least at the end of the day “when I come back exhausted, I have a place which shelters me from the wind, the sun and the rain.”

Since April last year the council has been trying to clear the building on behalf of the owner for development. In February 2006 a deadline of 15 April was set for the eviction of the families. Squad cars

would arrive in the small hours of the morning. When residents looked out of their windows, the police would shout abuse and wave their weapons.

These were no idle threats. In what has become an explosive issue in São Paulo, 2005 saw a series of violent evictions. In one notorious instance, São Paulo's riot police used heavy-handed tactics to expel 70 families from a five-storey building in Rua Plínio Ramos. They stormed the building with CS gas, rubber bullets and batons. But worse was to come: "The police came in and started beating the men," said Solange Lira, a lawyer for the State Forum for the Defence of the Rights of Children and Adolescents. "I saw 14-year-old boys emerging from the building covered in bruises." Twenty people were arrested more or less at random, and in the end over 300 people, 110 of whom were children, ended up camping on the street.

On 30 March we issued a UA on behalf of the families of Prestes Maia, showing the Brazilian authorities that the world was watching. We reminded them that under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights they had at least to give adequate notice of eviction, and provide the occupants with adequate alternative accommodation. On 4 April the Supreme Court ruled that the families had rights as residents, and suspended the eviction order indefinitely.

MSTC coordinator Ivaneti de Araujo told Amnesty International, "This means that now we can breathe a little, we still don't know for how long, but the important thing is your support has been very effective here. We don't know how to thank you but in the name of the 468 families of Prestes Maia, I thank you from the bottom of my heart and the important thing is that today we know that we are not alone and this gives us the courage to continue our fight." (Isso significa que vamos poder suspirar mais um pouquinho não sabemos ainda por quanto tempo, mais o importante

também e que o apoio de vocês está dando bastante resultado aqui não sabemos nem como agradecer, mas em nomes das 468 famílias do Prestes Maia, eu agradeço muito de coração e importante para nós hoje sabermos que não estamos sozinhos e isso nos dá coragem de continuar lutando.)

São Paulo, a city whose population exploded in the 1950s and 1960s, when industrial development drew in migrants from around Brazil, is facing a housing crisis. Now, roughly half the population live precariously in shanty towns on the periphery, in tenement blocks or illegally in squats. And these people can consider themselves lucky - according to the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, 10,000 sleep rough on the streets of São Paulo every night. At the same time, it is estimated that there are almost 40,000 abandoned buildings scattered through the city.

In this context, the Prestes Maia building has become a focal point for the struggle - not just for the families occupying the building, but for a growing NGO movement that is trying to pressure the state into action. Many of the families in Prestes Maia do not want to squat illegally, but are left with no option. In the words of Vanda Araújo "if we pay the rent, we go hungry."