

Favelization

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The research outlined in this essay — which informed the making of the book *Favelization*, published as part of the Cooper Hewitt's DesignFile series — reflects my personal discomfort with a contemporary trend I refer to as favelization: the use of references to Brazilian favelas to market luxury products to a primarily non-Brazilian audience.

Favelas are the informal squatter settlements that grow along the hillsides and lowlands of many Brazilian cities. Most of their inhabitants — favelados — are immigrants from the northeast of Brazil, indigenous people or descendants of slaves. Not all urban poor in the country live in favelas, nor are all favelados poor. However, it is possible to make the generalization that most favelados are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Yet despite the negative connotations attached to favelas by Brazilian media and public policy, and the fact that most middle- and upper-class Brazilians avoid these spaces, apparel companies, furniture designers, artists, restaurateurs and filmmakers use references to favelas to brand their products, projects, or spaces as “Brazilian.” Their target audience is almost always non-Brazilian. Often, the luxury objects in question bear little or no resemblance to favelas themselves or to what favelados can afford.

Few of the people referencing favelas in the context of luxury goods are from these settlements, drawing instead from an obvious circulation of stereotypes in the international luxury market. How have favelas become signifiers of Brazilianness and why are they used to market luxury products?

Brazil has long been stereotyped as tropical, fun, musical, beautiful, and lawless; its inhabitants sexual, gregarious, flexible, great at soccer and dark(er)-skinned. Contemporary Brazilian culture producers have, in recent years, added favelas to this list. References to favelas have become increasingly common and popular since the early 1990s, creating an image of these settlements as hallmarks of contemporary Brazilianness, interacting with established stereotypes about the

country. This is a process through which something that has been maligned throughout Brazilian history is transformed into a signifier of attached value, stereotypes, “coolness” and Brazilianness. This is *Favelization*.

The contemporary fascination with favelas is the result of multiple factors. It emerged partly due to social sciences, which have in recent years turned favelas into the world’s most studied low-income communities. While social scientists play an important role in describing the reality of these settlements, film, marketing campaigns and consumer products have fueled the international fascination with favelas we witness today.

The rise of rap culture and the “ghetto fabulous” style during the 1980s and 1990s might be seen as a precursor to favelization. Both trends took the population and social issues of certain urban spaces and turned them into fetishized commodified styles. Similarly, Brazilians and non-Brazilians have gained “access” to favelas through music videos, documentaries, fictional films and even favela tours. This visual access both demystified and re-mystified favelas, turning something that is not exotic into something titillating, mysterious and even mythical.

However, when favelas are mentioned in regard to certain luxury goods, the communities that inhabit these areas are not “seen”. This degree of invisibility leads consumers to believe details are unnecessary, allowing for the treatment of all favelas and their realities as interchangeable. Here, the concept of marginality may have been debunked, deconstructed, dismissed, rediscovered and reconstructed. In design and marketing, favelization marks how artists, designers, filmmakers and entrepreneurs have reconstructed interpretations of marginalized people and spaces for commercialization.

How did a symbol of Brazil’s poverty, much maligned by the Brazilian press and often feared by inhabitants of the formal city, come to signify Brazilianness and its attached values? Is favelization evidence of a deeper cultural shift in which Brazil’s poverty is repositioned as part of its national brand? Or is something else at stake in these endeavors that makes favelization a patronizing and opportunistic way of portraying the reality of a certain segment of the Brazilian population, fetishizing a space and its inhabitants, to brand products as Brazilian?

These questions prompt an assessment of the difference between the meanings attached to favelas in Brazil and those employed by companies and individuals using references to the settlements in the marketing of high-end products. They also challenge the myths of racial democracy and intersocial class cordiality that are common in a mainstream discourse about Brazil. It becomes impossible to talk about the role of favelas in Brazilian society without addressing discrimination based on race, socioeconomic origin and place of residence.

Analyzing Favelization

Favelization will emerge as one of the most important aspects of postmodern Brazilian design and identity. The debate around the term tackles issues of ethics, the potential impact of cultural production and explorations of appropriate responses to the use of references to underprivileged communities in a commercial setting.

Other terms have been used to describe favelization — “favela chic,” “favela factor” and “slumification”, among others. Here, the word favelization is chosen since the suffix “-tion” refers to a process that entails some form of transformation and manipulation.

A series of case studies, outlined below, allowed for an in-depth discussion of written and visual materials pertaining to a given project, alongside a comprehensive theoretical analysis. The subjects of research are divided into producers, consumers and favela residents. There is very limited, if any, overlap between these three categories; this strict division is a characteristic of favelization.

A discussion of favelization requires the inclusion of Brazilians, non-Brazilian natives and individuals whose life experiences challenge traditional notions of nationality. Favelization requires one to think carefully about what is “Brazilian”, as well as who is “foreign” and who is “Brazilian.” It is a powerful example of how cultural trends are the result of active exchanges between nations as well as unequal power dynamics within a country. This essay adopts a supra-national, anti-territorial and anti-national perspective, advocating that favelization challenges conventional territorial demarcations and traditional understandings of national identities.

Favelization in Film

Focusing on the fiction film *City of God* (2002) and the documentary *Waste Land* (2010), this branch of the project's research discusses favelization in the context of music videos, movies and documentaries. These types of cultural production have been most effective in molding, changing or reinforcing perceptions of favelas in Brazil and abroad. The overwhelming number of movies released since 1996 about Rio de Janeiro's slums or the city's history of crime, combined with their far-reaching international dissemination, means that images of favelas have reached a large number of people, most of whom have never entered one. The marketing of luxury items using references to favelas would not be possible were it not for the existence and dissemination of these films. Film also provides a context for the exploration of four recurrent themes in favelization: interpretation, transcendence, aestheticization and domination. These themes are often interplayed in favelization in film, alongside the repetition of familiar tropes related to the Primitive, Otherness, and manufactured exoticism.

Favelization in Fashion

This section of the project's research analyzes the 2009 Campanas + Lacoste project, a collaboration between French clothing brand Lacoste and designers Humberto and Fernando Campana, commonly referred to as the Campanas. In 2006, Lacoste launched a Holiday Collector's Series, a yearly collaboration with designers to create limited editions of polo shirts. The Campanas + Lacoste 2009 project resulted in six types of shirts, the most expensive of which sold for USD\$7,000. The project was thoroughly embedded with references to favelas in all of its marketing materials. As Brazil's most famous contemporary designers, the Campanas often reference Brazilian themes in their work; Brazilianness is an important aspect of the production and marketing of their luxury products outside Brazil. An exploration of advertising and press coverage of the Campanas + Lacoste project illustrates how an international clothing company alongside these designers uses references to favelas to brand a line of luxury products as Brazilian. At play in this case study are theories of commodification, fetishization and the use and creation of a primitive Other in the process of defining national identity. Ultimately, an analysis of this project sheds light on the power relations among unequal economic actors.

Favelization in Design

This research section explores designer Brunno Jahara's *Neorustica* high-end furniture line, in which each object is named after a favela in Rio de Janeiro, alongside designer David Elia's *Stray Bullet* chair and *Pacification* shelves, designed for Design da Gema. Both Jahara and Elia are Brazilian designers in their thirties who, despite the many differences between them, actively employ the tropes associated with favelas to brand high-end furniture as "Brazilian".

Following a number of years studying and living abroad, both Jahara and Elia returned to Brazil in 2009 and 2010, respectively. This analysis argues that both designers replicate a tactic used successfully by their predecessors: blending strategic references to Brazil's poverty with fantasy and desire in the service of commerce. An exploration of the objects, as well as the language used by the designers to increase their appeal among non-Brazilian consumers, allows to then situate the objects within a larger discussion about exoticism, primitivism, the carnivalesque and domestication.

Favelization and national identity

In *Negotiating National Identity*, author Jeffrey Lesser successfully argues how Brazilian identity is constantly being redefined. Furthermore, how Brazilians define national identity is often influenced by how Brazil is perceived by foreigners. In 2012, the exhibition *From the Margin to the Edge: Brazilian Art and Design in the 21st Century* at the Somerset House, in London, showcased contemporary art and design that questioned clichés associated with Brazil. One section in particular challenged the dichotomy between notions of "savage" and "civilized." The curator, Rafael Cardoso, discussed the influence of foreigners' perceptions of Brazilianness, stressing the permeability of Brazilian national identity and the influence of the foreign gaze. While Cardoso references only Europeans in his analysis, North American perceptions of Brazil are an equally important influence on Brazilian self-perception. The permeability of identity means that when a particular aspect of Brazilian society not commonly deemed "desirable" becomes popular outside of Brazil, this external attention often results in a reframing of attitudes within the country. Such is the case with favelas.

Meanwhile, Brazilian culture is appropriated everyday by non-Brazilians who reference its art, architecture, music and poetry. The same appropriation occurs

with favelas. Today, designers, marketing professionals and filmmakers, both Brazilian and foreign, interpret and appropriate a notion of favela, often producing something hybrid, which tackles reality in a superficial way and does not truly depict it. More importantly, the constant cannibalism in appropriations and reappropriations of the signifiers of Brazilian identity kickstart a hybrid process through which Brazilian identity is now created, in which individuals of varied national backgrounds influence what can be considered “Brazilian”.

Future discussions of Favelization

Any discussion of favelization is bound to be controversial, since it challenges myths on Brazilian inter-class cordiality. Such an analysis requires an identification of who controls the interpretation of favelas, dominating and domesticating this interpretation in the form of consumer products. As this research project reveals, what one person might regard as an apolitical reference to favelas in a commercial context could also be seen as an enhancer of a larger trend that exacerbates Brazil’s prevalent political, economic and social asymmetries. The examples discussed reveal an opportunistic portrayal of a certain segment of the Brazilian population by middle- and upper-class Brazilians and non-Brazilians.

The trend of favelization leads to a consideration on the ethics of design. Being often — maybe even always — political, design not only reflects but also affects power relations and human relationships. Design projects that employ favelization reflect and affect existing hierarchies of power as well as interactions between individuals of different social status. Regardless of the designer’s original intention, what they produce becomes political. While some design objects are political by nature, others become political because of how they are used, presented, marketed, and branded. Branding, for example, requires the accentuation of differences, often relying on the processes of dichotomizing, essentializing, and “otherizing”. This is true of both product branding and national branding. Favelization is a form of both; it applies to products and urban spaces that are treated as a national stereotype that can be generalized. Yet what is implicit in favelization is the creation of a problematic “us” and “them.”

Films such as *City of God* and *Waste Land*, the marketing of the Campanas + Lacoste collaboration, Brunno Jahara’s *Neorustica* line, and David Elias’ *Stray*

Bullet chair and *Pacification* shelves are examples of constructions of the favela as the Other. They also evidence two additional consequences of “otherizing”: the commodification of the exotic and the dehumanization of the people identified as Others. By treating all favelas and their inhabitants’ realities as interchangeable, favelization strips away their identity. Many design projects that receive international recognition use stories about people, instead of the products, to increase the perceived value of goods being sold. An understanding of favelization may help us identify and challenge other design trends that exacerbate stereotypes and unequal power relations. Doing so will advance the debate on the ethical dimensions of design.