Dreams and Hard Places

Main Settings and Socioeconomic Profile of Quota Students

A University in the City: A Place for Whom?

I visited the UERJ for first time in late August 2007, about three months after starting my fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro. The university had been on strike for some time and activities had been postponed due to the Pan-American Olympic Games held in the nearby Maracanã football stadium. Considering this situation, my first access to the key setting of my research coincided with the beginning of the academic semester; this moment, for many of my informants, represented the beginning of their undergraduate programs.

The UERJ is a concrete twelve-story block built in a modernist/brutalist style (figure 2.1), which struck me on my first visit due to its unpleasant aesthetics. At first glance, it reminded me of a huge hospital or one of the massive blocks of flats that stood in my imagination of the Soviet era. The style, severe and repetitive in its architectural elements, seems to conciliate the functionality typical of transnational modernism with the authoritarian and formally egalitarian ideology of the military period (1964–1985) when the university was built. The structure of the building is composed of six equally high and partially prefabricated buildings, which are linked by footbridge systems. Floors, which usually host a few departments, are also interconnected by a complex interweaving of stairways (a escada) and ramps (a rampa), in addition to the elevator system (figure 2.2).

It took me some time to get used to the building, to orient myself within its labyrinthine interconnections and appreciate the thriving vitality of its academic life, hence balancing my depressing first impressions. The UERJ is in fact a lively microcosm with cafeterias, bookstores, and banks; it also contains many social organizations.
Figure 2.1  The UERJ seen from the footbridges just outside the tube station on Avenida Castelo Branco. This is the side of the building façade opposite to the favela of Mangueira.

Figure 2.2  (a) Several interior shots of the UERJ. Ramps and staircases are visible in (b), the lift system in (c).