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By Tom Phillips

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## Notorious slum becomes open-air gallery

Rio favela transformed by artists and residents• Painted shacks compete with gun and drug culture

**Tom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro Friday February 9, 2007**

### Guardian

The cloakroom is a pokey, bullet-riddled bar. The security consists of motorbike-riding teenagers with assault rifles strung across their chests. But if you make it past the police checkpoints and the concrete barricades, the good news is that entry is free. And so far there has not been an art critic in sight.

The heavy artillery on show might suggest otherwise but this is Rio de Janeiro's newest, most unusual and certainly most dangerous, modern art gallery. It is located at the heart of the Vila Cruzeiro shantytown.

The open air gallery, where crumbling shacks have become giant canvasses, is the brainchild of Jeroen Koolhaas, a Dutch illustrator who works for New Yorker magazine, and Dre Urhahn, an art director from Amsterdam.

"Normally, outsiders would only come here to buy cocaine," said Mr Urhahn, who admits to having found empty cartridges on the scaffolding used for the painting. "The museum is about giving them another reason to visit the community."

Vila Cruzeiro is definitely an odd location for a museum. The favela became notorious in 2002 when a Brazilian journalist was dismembered and incinerated by local traffickers.

These days, teenage gangsters surround the art gallery with military-issue grenades strung from their shorts. Gun battles between police and members of the Red Command drug faction are a regular occurrence. Recently, more than 200 military policemen, backed up by three helicopters, launched an assault on the favela, killing at least six "suspects" and wounding several civilians.

Roberto Carlos Teixeira, a local social worker, estimates that there are at least 120,000 young people in the Complexo da Penha, a labyrinth of shantytowns that includes Vila Cruzeiro.

"I'd be surprised if 50 of these kids had ever visited an art gallery," he said.

The launch of Vila Cruzeiro's own outdoor gallery has brought about some optimism. Working so far mainly to the designs of the two Dutchmen, the residents have been painting huge murals on the exteriors of their homes. "Everyone in the favela approves of it 101%," said Alex Rigueira, 32, the owner of one concrete shack transformed into a vast sky-blue mural by the Favela Painting Project. He pointed to a series of yellow puddles inside the house where his dogs had urinated. "Look, even the dogs have stopped pissing on the wall outside."

Helena Maria Jesus Alves, a 63-year-old evangelical, whose house has also become a giant portrait, said: "Last week we couldn't even leave our house because of the shooting. But I think this will make people value the place much more."

Not everyone is so hopeful. "It's really cool," said one 17-year-old drug trafficker hovering on a nearby street corner with a 45mm Glock revolver tucked into the back of his shorts and a missing right hand due to an accident with a home-made grenade. "But I'm never going to be a painter - it's too late for me to leave this life."

Mr Urhahn said that with the help of budding artists from the favela the "organic museum" would be extended to other shantytowns in Rio. Artists from around the world would be invited to contribute. "By making huge paintings in the favelas we hope to inspire the kids ... to pursue a career in a creative field," said Mr Koolhaas. "Our final goal is to paint a whole hillside favela depicting one single image."