

Brazil's Most Notorious Prostitution House Becomes a Museum

Contributed by Elma Lia Nascimento
Friday, 01 February 2008

Brazil's most famous temple to lust and prostitution may soon become a fond memory for some and a glad-it's-gone for many others. Rio de Janeiro governor, Sérgio Cabral, has expropriated and declared state property the building and land that house the Help night-club, in Rio.

The place's address is 4 Djalma Ulrich street, corner of Atlântica avenue, in the heart of Copacabana, in the south side of Rio. Help, which is located in a 17,200 square feet lot, has been, for about two decades now, a sanctuary for prostitutes and her clients, most of them Brazilian and foreign tourists.

The governor's decree bearing number 41,151 was published this Tuesday, January 29, by Rio de Janeiro state's Daily Gazette. Cabral's intention is to use the place for Rio's Museum of Image and Sound (MIS), which is now housed downtown.

The state government's press office says the idea is to transform the location in an ample house of culture and leisure considerably broadening the MIS's reach and scope. The museum has a big collection of movies, radio clips and samba and bossa nova material.

Curiously Help isn't known as "boate" as Brazilians call a night-club or any other racier name like chicken ranch but as a family-oriented "discoteca."

Help was born in 1984 as a disco for the affluent Cariocas (Rio residents). Before that decade had ended, however, the place became Rio's largest prostitution playground. In a time when the old discothèques are being called lounges, Discoteca or Disco Help kept the innocent aura of decades past.

Besides Help, there are two restaurants doing business in the same location to be expropriated: Terraço Atlântico and Sobre as Ondas (Over the Waves).

Commenting on the end of Help, a Copacabana resident rejoiced: "That is a big victory for Copacabana, an important step to fight prostitution in the neighborhood, because this night-club has got only whores and gringos. The Museum of Image and Sound will be much welcome, despite the fact that the initial idea of setting up a Soccer Museum would make more sense because the MIS already has its place downtown and in the Lapa district. They might as well include the Havana Club bar in this cleaning-up project since this is another spot that caters to prostitutes and johns."

"With the end of Help the tendency is for the night bosses to strengthen their control," said anthropologist Thaddeus

Blanchette in an interview to daily Folha de S. Paulo. "There might be a professionalization in a bad way."

Blanchette is co-author of the study: "Our Lady of Help: Sex, Tourism and Transnational Displacement in Copacabana." The scientist believes that over 1,000 ladies of the night sell their wares at Help during summer time, which is right now.

They all work as free-lancers paying a small fee to get in: 22 Brazilian reais (US\$ 12.4) before midnight and 32 reais (US\$ 18) after that. The same price everybody else, man or woman, has to pay to enter the night-club.

The ladies may recoup the investment 20 times over with a john alone for a short session lasting less than one hour. Prices may vary quite a bit, however, starting a low US\$ 25. The place stays open until 5:30 am every day.

Hip hop and techno are the main musical food offered. There's plenty of alcohol, with a beer going for about US\$ 4 and a small bottle of champagne for around US\$ 12. Vodka and whiskey are also available setting you down about US\$ 10 a shot.

The expropriation of the Help building might take some time. The state will only take control of the place a couple of months after a judicial process in which the owners of the real estate will have their say on how much they will accept as compensation for the place.

All those leasing space in the building seemed surprised at the government's decision, despite the years-long pressure from the neighborhood against the whorehouse front.

Adriana Rattes, Rio's secretary of culture, is hopeful that as early as March she will be able to start planning for the new space and new museum, which she believes will count on the help of the private sector.