

Rio de Janeiro: A City of Exception?

By Einar Braathen¹



Of course Rio de Janeiro is exceptional. Exceptional for its citizens - the 'cariocas' - and visitors alike: the beaches, spectacular mountains (the Sugar Loaf, Christ the Redeemer), football, samba and carnival. However, there are also dark clouds such as an extremely high social inequality and, probably as a result of the inequality, alarmingly high levels of crime and violence. Surrounded by these mixed blessings, in what direction does Rio de Janeiro go?

In this letter I connect with one of the themes addressed by the Chance2Sustain project, namely mega-events and mega-projects (see Varrel and Kennedy, 2011), and explain why I think the coming mega sports-events in Rio de Janeiro will be among the most contested ones in the history.

Rio de Janeiro's successful bids for the Pan-American Games 2007, the FIFA World Cup 2014², and the Summer Olympic Games 2016 have been attributed to a fundamental shift in the municipal leadership's strategy during the 1990s. In 1993 the mayor invited the business community to join the municipality in elaborating a strategic plan for the city. A key urban planner from Barcelona, Dr. Jordi Borja, was the main consultant. Inspired by the Olympic Games 1992 (in Barcelona) the mayor emphasized the big potential of large projects and mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, in branding Rio de Janeiro as a destination for tourists and foreign investors and transforming Rio de Janeiro into a

'global city'. In 1996 the city sent its first bid to host the Olympic Games. The close cooperation between the municipality and private sector leaders to enhance an entrepreneurial city has been depicted, by David Harvey and others, as an international trend of transformation of urban governance. International sport events organized by *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) bring in multi-national corporate sponsors, for whom exclusive rights to the sport venues and other public spaces are demanded.



Cable car over Complexo do Alemão

Issues raised in Rio de Janeiro

The organization and execution of a mega sports-event require a complex logistics arrangement and broad political coalition. Huge urban development projects that imply in increasing public funding often face strong opposition. Therefore leaving a positive legacy is one of the recent concerns of the "Olympic system" as a way of legitimizing itself. However, building such a legacy involves facing an essential contradiction still to be discussed: how can one meet the demands of the city and its inhabitants while mega sports-

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- 2 Although other cities will also host matches during the FIFA World Cup in 2014, the city of Rio de Janeiro plays a major role since the final match will take place in the renowned Maracanã stadium.

events are increasingly aligned with large private interests and candidate cities themselves tend to be managed in terms of urban entrepreneurship? The sports geographer Gilmar Mascarenhas (2012) is one of many members of the academic and civil society in Rio de Janeiro raising these questions.

What we have observed is that certain contradictions and trends have been leading to a process whereby mega sports-events and so-called “emerging economies” grow closer. This is because such countries combine three crucial elements: availability of resources; an ambition to strengthen their image as an emerging power worldwide; and relative weakness of institutions which protect the environment and human rights. Even so, in order to abide by the “package” of interventions that mega-events require, they need to create extraordinary decision-making frameworks to enable candidature and the execution of projects.

Carlos Vainer, another well-known scholar in urban development in Rio, claims that this process has led to a ‘city of exception’, a new form of urban regime (Vainer, 2011). He holds that in cities such as Rio de Janeiro, the contract has become more important than the law, and bargaining power has got more weight than the application of the majority’s decisions. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s theories of the state of exception, Vainer claims that “the law legalizes the disrespect for the law”. The state can unleash a legal civil war against whole categories of citizens, denying them their basic rights. The city government can do the same by making ad hoc decisions rather than developing binding plans (such as ‘master plans’), and by delegating special authorisation to private actors in urban development and service delivery. This can be observed in the municipal preparations for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics.



Rocinha (Rio de Janeiro).

Bringing in the current political context

However, I have two main objections against this view. First, it does not take into account the recent changes in government policies at federal, state and municipal levels aiming at fulfilling basic socio-economic rights of the citizens. Pro-poor and social reform-oriented programmes initiated by the federal presidents Lula da Silva and Dilma Rouseff have found strong partnerships locally, in Rio de Janeiro

particularly since 2008-2009, when a centre-left coalition including Lula’s Workers’ Party (PT) took power. For the first time in Brazil’s history the federal government has invested heavily in large-scale programs for slum upgrading, social housing, and improved infra-structures in the cities. The main references are the Programme for Accelerated Growth (PAC) and the ‘Minha Casa Minha Vida’ (My House My Life) programme. The municipality of Rio de Janeiro has cooperated with these federal initiatives and has unleashed the ‘Morar Carioca’ programme. It aims at upgrading all the *favelas* of the city by 2020, a lasting ‘legacy’ from the sports mega-events of 2014 and 2016. Of the entire population of Rio de Janeiro, 22 percent lives in *favelas*, according to the 2010 national census. ‘Morar Carioca’ is arguably one of the most ambitious plans of its kind in contemporary Brazil.

Another objection is that the ‘city of exception’ theory plays down the existing legal and institutional frameworks at the national level aiming at securing the citizens’ rights. There is a myriad of mechanisms to institutionalize citizens’ participation in public decision-making. One of them is the City Statute of 2001. It is a follow-up of the progressive 1988 Constitution and the result of social movements’ mobilization of social movements for urban reform. The City Statute recognizes the principle of the ‘right to the city’ – the right to adequate housing, access to affordable public transport, public and green spaces for all. Every city must develop a master plan (*Plano Diretor*) in a participatory and transparent way to ensure that the use and management of urban land observe these rights. Although Rio de Janeiro’s 2010 master plan has not satisfied the civil society actors who tried to be involved in the process, there are strong coordination bodies within the city’s civil society. The most important one is the People’s Committee for the World Cup and the Olympics (*Comité Popular da Copa e das Olimpíadas*), which is a continuation of a network established in 2005 to monitor the preparations for the Pan-American Games. The People’s Committee links established NGOs and social movements with *favela* communities that are threatened by evictions because of public works linked to the mega sports-events. These civic networks bode for an ‘insurgent citizenship’ (Miraftab and Wills, 2005) that uses any available space of citizen participation in the formation of inclusive citizenship and just cities. It is worth noting that most leadership positions in the *favelas* are held by women. This is a consequence of their increasingly prominent role in public and political life, in addition to their greater bond with families and, therefore, with the struggle for housing. It was also interesting to observe that, in the mayoral elections in 2012, there was a candidate who opposed the ruling broad coalition and supported the critics of the mega sports-events. Although this candidate, Marcelo Freixo, was from the extreme left and had very limited financial means, he obtained 28 % of the votes.

By way of a conclusion, and in terms of politics of urban

development, it is an open question whether Rio becomes a city of negative or positive exception. However, I am convinced that the Olympic Games in 2016 will be increasingly contested, socially and politically. In that sense, Rio might establish itself as a city of exception in the history of mega sports-events.

* You can watch Einar Braathen's documentary film (13 minutes) about Rio de Janeiro here: <http://youtu.be/RxHI4jushGQ>



Battle units of the state police surveying a large favela area. (From "Before The Party").

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Chance2Sustain examines how governments and citizens in cities with differing patterns of economic growth and socio-spatial inequality make use of participatory (or integrated) spatial knowledge management to direct urban governance towards more sustainable development.

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