Rio de Janeiro’s Mayor Eduardo Paes envisions long-deferred improvements in mass transit, downtown revitalization, and urban integration. In conversation with urbanDNA, he explains how the upcoming sporting mega events will serve as catalysts for the city’s development.
Host city Rio de Janeiro is bracing for the arrival of millions of tourists for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. The sporting mega events will focus world attention as never before on a city famed for its dramatic landscape, the Christ the Redeemer statue overlooking Guanabara Bay, and the seductive, laid-back culture of the cariocas, as Rio natives are called.

For Rio’s young Mayor Eduardo Paes, however, the most important benefit for his city will be not the tourist dollars or the enhanced image that the events will confer, but the urban infrastructure that will form the “legacy” of the games: the roads, mass transit systems, hotels, and downtown redevelopment now being built to assure that the sporting events come off smoothly and enjoyable for visitors. The ebullient mayor, who often speeds through the corridors of Rio’s city hall in rolled-up sleeves and with shirttails flying, recently sat down with urbanDNA to discuss his urban vision that embraces mass transit, “punishes” cars, and focuses on better integrating favelas, the slums in which nearly a quarter of Rio’s population resides. He also explained how projects built for the mass spectacles will pay long-term dividends in mobility and equality.

Better Quality of Life for Decades to Come

Busy with building dedicated bus lanes, overhead cable cars, and the US$4 billion urban renewal project called Porto Maravilha, Rio and its suburbs are alive with construction of long overdue public works projects now being hurried to completion. They will enhance the experience of tourists next summer and in 2016 – and improve the quality of life for Rio’s 6 million residents for decades to come.

“Mayors are the ones who will get things done,” says Rio’s Eduardo Paes.

“The best gift we ever got,” says the 43-year-old Paes, a former congressman and political wunderkind who was reelected to a second term as mayor last year with 64 percent of the vote. “Rio has suffered from an infrastructure gap, and we regard these big sporting events as an opportunity to get things done. These events have to do with much more than just with sports itself.”

A prime example is the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), a citywide US$2.4 billion network of dedicated lanes and high-capacity buses now coming on line. Modeled after a hugely successful system in Bogotá, it will connect all four Olympic event nodes in Rio by the August 5, 2016, opening ceremony. Since the first of four BRT routes opened in June 2012, users’ commute time has been cut by up to 70 percent.

“When I took office in 2009, only 18 percent of the population was regularly using high-capacity transport; by the start of the Olympics in 2016, more than 60 percent will be moving around on those systems,” Paes says. “So, there are lots of interesting things happening in the city.”

Culture, Transport, Traffic Management

The massive Porto Maravilha, (“Marvelous Port”) downtown redevelopment project will serve as a cultural hub for tourists – but also reclaim a long-neglected 1,200-acre port zone. It will include two world-class...
museums, including one by famed Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, and a 28-kilometer light rail tram system connecting the project with the Santos Dumont commuter airport. A 3-mile section of overhead viaduct is being demolished and replaced with a tunnel to better reintegrate the zone with the city’s core. Some of the US$7.7 billion in Rio infrastructure projects that Paes has pushed for, and which were partly inspired by the coming sporting events, won’t be as visible to visitors as an electric tram or new museum. Nonetheless, they will make for a safer and smoother time for Rio visitors, as well as a more livable and sustainable city for cariocas in the future. One is the new City Operations Center, a high-tech crisis management system that enables officials to respond quickly to traffic jams, crowd control emergencies, and natural calamities.

Built in the aftermath of devastating floods that killed dozens in 2010, the center relies on access to 900 video cameras spread around the city – and the presence of representatives from 30 agencies in the center – to expedite emergency decision making. It passed its baptism of fire in July 2013, when it helped officials manage crowds estimated at over 1 million attending the mass celebrated by Pope Francis on Copacabana beach. As with the BRT system, Paes said he got the idea for the operations center from other cities, including New York and other large metropolises that have installed successful versions. “Why invent everything when there are so many good ideas out there,” says Paes, whose English bears traces of his year as a high school exchange student in Denton, Texas. “What we are trying to do here is come up with innovative and inexpensive solutions to the big problems we have.”

Urbanizing the Favela

Another Paes project that visitors may not notice, but which could indirectly impact them is Morar Carioca, or Living Carioca, a project to urbanize all of the slums called favelas by 2020. By improving security, roads, etc.,
Below: During tunnel construction, a new replacement highway will connect to Rio’s Portu Maravilha, which will host the media center for the 2016 Olympic Games. Bottom: A new housing project in the Morro da Babilônia favela, part of the Morar Carioca program.

Below: The Binário highway tunnel will replace the Perimetral elevated highway (bottom), beside the construction site, builders have set up a small oratory. Beyond the Perimetral, architect Santiago Calatrava is building the Museum of Tomorrow.

Below: Doorman Luiz Henrique de Souza enjoys the view of Copacabana beach from the Morro da Babilônia favela, which is being revitalized through increased security as well as municipal and state infrastructure projects.

Below: A view of downtown from the terrace of the recently inaugurated Rio Museum of Art; Marcos Antonio Silva de Oliveira installs Internet connections in Morro da Babilônia; João Medeiros da Silva, a retired plumber, at his new apartment in a recently built housing project in the favela.
Paes aims to reduce inequality and the marginalization of slum dwellers that has been one of the causes of the city’s high crime rate. If successful, this could reduce the chances of tourists becoming crime victims.

“The favelas were built in the past because of two problems: the lack of public housing and the absence of mobility,” Paes explains. “But suddenly, favelas are seen from an urban perspective as having some positive characteristics. They are close to work, they are densely constructed, and they are places where people gather a lot on the streets. So we are urbanizing them, and by doing so, we will have a more integrated, less unequal city.”

Morar Carioca’s showcase pilot project is in the favela called Morro da Babilônia, located on a steep hillside above the high-rent Leme ocean front neighborhood. The program started three years ago, when state police flushed out drug gangs that ruled and terrorized local residents at the time.

The difference compared to past operations was that this time, the authorities stayed, establishing police stations called “Pacification Units.” Better security and new roads and pathways have created a new sense of security – and have caused housing values to double, says resident Luis Henrique da Souza, a plumber.

**Good Prognosis**

Paes’ beliefs in sustainable, forward-looking urban policies are well known among his peers. His projects, combined with Rio’s growing role as an energy hub, make for a good prognosis for Rio’s future, according to a Siemens study completed in November called “Pictures of the Future: Rio 2030–2040.” It found that the infrastructure initiatives could contribute to Rio becoming “the Latin American capital of business, tourism and high-tech research and development” by the middle of this century. Much of Rio’s research activities are focused on oil exploration technology to exploit newfound oil riches, specifically the vast crude oil deposits that were...
discovered in the underwater presalt layer off Rio’s Atlantic coast. Rio’s infrastructure gap in one sense is symptomatic of most fast-growing Latin American cities. Over the past decade, planners in Brazil and elsewhere have been unable to keep pace with economic growth driven by the global commodities boom of which South America’s most populous country has been a prime beneficiary. Even as Brazilian incomes have risen, and more people take plane trips and buy cars, the government has failed to expand airports adequately and build roads, a phenomenon that currently affects any visitor to Rio stuck in the interminable traffic jams.

“How do we resolve the problem? Get rid of the cars! What I do and what every mayor should do is not make cars an issue in the city. We should invest not in roads and parking lots, but the best mass transportation systems we can,” says Paes. Rio’s geography, its history, and its rapid urbanization, which is visible in the proliferation of the favelas, offer their own set of infrastructure challenges, Paes notes. “Rio has a natural beauty that is amazing. It’s a great quality and asset. But at the same time, it’s a problem. With all these beautiful mountains and hills, it’s tough to build infrastructure.”

Time for Change
Moreover, decision making in Rio is complicated by the “particularity” of its deep-seated and slow-moving bureaucracy, a legacy of its history as a former colonial and imperial capital under Portugal, and subsequently as the Brazilian national capital from independence in 1822 until 1960, when the national seat was moved to Brasilia, Paes points out (Rio is now capital of Rio de Janeiro state).

“Ever since the bureaucracy moved here from Portugal 200 years ago, it has built its roots into our mood and traditions, leaving too many old institutions and too much government, which are never good for a city,” Paes says. His impatience with bureaucracy and a desire to change it is partly what

Morro da Providência is the oldest favela in Rio. It is currently being equipped with a cable car to facilitate better access for residents and tourists as part of the Porto Maravilha revitalization scheme.
drove Paes to run for the mayor’s job. He believes it was a similar impulse that spurred thousands of marchers to flood city streets across Brazil last summer to protest corruption, poor quality of life, and unequal distribution of the benefits from Brazil’s decade-long economic boom. President Dilma Rousseff responded by announcing a raft of measures, including the promise to spend US$23 billion on local mass transit projects. “It’s not a movement that’s particular to Brazil. You see it in the USA with Occupy Wall Street. In Spain, it’s the economic crisis and youth unemployment, and in the Middle East, we are still witnessing the Arab Spring,” says Paes. “People feel they are not being represented. They want to participate more, and be part of the business of politics.”

**Visionary Politics**

Born into a nonpolitical family in Rio, Paes became involved in student politics as a high school student in the mid-1980s, when Brazilians were clamoring for an end to military rule. His talents were recognized on a local level, and he was appointed deputy mayor of Rio at age 22. He then went on to serve in the city council, in the National Congress, and as Rio de Janeiro state minister of culture and sports. Paes says mayors have increased responsibilities to forge visionary policies for the welfare and happiness of their constituents because of ever-increasing urbanization and the devolution of power to city governments. “Mayors are the ones who will get things done,” Paes believes. “Issues that previously were not the responsibility of mayors, like economic development, are becoming more so. The reason is that everyone is coming to the cities. I saw from the moment I became deputy mayor at age 22 that the best way to help people was to become mayor.”

The BRT express bus system is at the heart of Rio’s transport strategy for the 2016 Olympic Games. Above: Control center; below: The Alvorada BRT terminal.

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*Chris Kraul*

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*Are major international events worth their high cost in terms of the tourist dollars, image boost, and “legacy” public infrastructure that they generate for the host city? Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup tournaments, and Expo World Fairs are opportunities for governments to promote and “rebrand” their cities for vacation and business travelers. These mega events accelerate the construction of mass transit, housing, and other urban development projects that otherwise might take decades to get done.*

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Text: Chris Kraul