

## **Mega-events and planning: exploring the Rio de Janeiro case**

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Competitiveness, insertion in the global economy and promotion of the city image are the expressions that better define the guidelines of urban policy of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Since the early 1990s, all mayors follow this political and ideological direction and build together a long period of close relationship between government and business for defining urban priorities and policies that shall last at least until the end of 2016, when Mayor Eduardo Paes current term is over.

Hosting mega events, which promise to promote the city, attract investments and transform the urban scenario, is one of the expressions of this type of public administration.

The main effects of these mega-events in Rio de Janeiro are the changes in the municipal transport system (the official "legacy" of the games and the World Cup), the concentration of public investment in the city richest areas, the privatization of public and common lands and goods, the violent removal of tens of thousands of people living in popular settlements and the intensification, on an unprecedented scale, of the process of expulsion of the poor to peripheral areas without jobs or services and, therefore, the increase of inequality in the city. Other authors (Oliveira, 2015; Vainer, 2011) will also point out that the institutional field have been appropriated to create exceptions aimed at specific actors and to grant powers and interests also very specific.

We can also say that, in Brazil, decisions related to mega-events large projects generally do not result from any planning process. Usually, the projects are not even minimally evaluated for their local impacts. In fact, the main link between planning and major projects included in the city preparation for the World Cup and the Olympics are the devices designed to turn the planning legislation more flexible and to grant

exceptions to the implementation of real estate developments articulated with new sports equipment or arenas.

In the implementation of the World Cup and the Olympics in Rio, town land use legislation, plans and investment priorities are changed to meet interests presented as structural and necessary for the promotion of the City in a globalized world, even though they may be in many cases much more provincial than suggest these justification discourses. The great so called "partners" of municipal government in the production of the World Cup and the Olympic Games in Rio are, most of them, well-known companies, Brazilian ones with many interests in Rio de Janeiro, some of them with a longtime relationship with Rio City Hall.

One fundamental topic to understand some of the relations between mega-events and the city of Rio de Janeiro refers to informal urbanization. As some Brazilian authors have written since the 1970s (BONDUKI & ROLNIK, 1979; KOWARICK, 1979), informality has historically been tolerated as a way to transfer to the poor the cost of their reproduction and reserve public investment to areas occupied by the elites and the middle class. On the other hand, numerous studies have looked into legitimation processes of private interests by the change, facilitation or even suspension of urban norms and procedures (BENCHIMOL, 1985; CARDOSO et al., 1999; NACIF, 2001). Indeed, as Ananya Roy points out, urban informality refers not only to the production of housing (or city) of the poor, but it is a logic that helps to explain the production of the whole city (ROY, 2011).

In Rio de Janeiro mega-events, besides the exceptions to the law made to meet the requirements of the International Olympic Committee and FIFA, the City Council approved a series of laws that strongly increase the density of construction and enable new uses to turn possible large real estate developments in the Athletes Village and in the Olympic Park, besides other measures relating to the surroundings of sports stadiums and other venues. But these changes are not enough and the City Hall is called upon to complement them with illegal or some say dubious urbanization of private lands and *ad hoc* justifications for removal of popular settlements that threaten private businesses and the city's image as a good business environment.

Another point to note in the current context is that the Olympics and the World Cup were and are being held in the time of the launch of the federal housing program called *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* (“My House, My Life”), and unprecedented program in the history of the country in terms of number of units produced and public funds invested in social housing, but widely criticized for promoting the production of hundreds of thousands of homes for low-income in peripheral urban areas, or even semi-urban, far from employment centers and equipment and public.

This has a peculiar impact on Rio, where, despite a constant trend that expulses low income families to the periphery, the poor still are distributed throughout the urban area of the city. While the rich are more concentrated in certain areas, the poorest reside not only in the more peripheral areas, but also in slums in central and rich areas, close to major job centers.

Certainly the mega-events do not inaugurate these processes of urban expansion, socio- spatial segregation and peripheryzation of poverty, but they accentuate and accelerate those processes, as well as legitimate *ad hoc* exceptions to planning legislation and further advantages for the private operators of the built environment.

But not always populations threatened by mega events and related opportunistic measures subject themselves easily to the pressures of real state development or to violent state action.

In the areas directly or indirectly related to major projects of the World Cup and Olympics, resistances emerge everywhere and, although possibly fragile and ephemeral, they make visible the arbitrariness and violence of removal policies, often sold as benefits to the affected population (resolution of geotechnical risk, new residence in a housing project etc).

In Rio de Janeiro, conflicts around mega-events involve residents of low-income settlements, social housing movements, the social articulation Popular Committee of the World and the Olympics, environmental movements, collectives of athletes, neighborhood movements, political parties, alternative media, NGOs, as well as, on the other side, contractors of public works, the mainstream media (especially the Globo network), the Rio de Janeiro City Hall, the Government of the State of Rio de Janeiro,

the federal government, real estate developers, international actors (FIFA, IOC), to name only those agents which are more visible in the political arena.

The big investments and the multiplicity of interests related to mega-events usually inspire pessimistic predictions about the continuation and accentuation of socio-spatial segregation processes, city commodification and privatization of public funds. On the other hand, conflicts and resistances related to removals in Rio may express, to some extent, alternative possibilities of transformation.

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