

‘The scale of building development in Brazil is simply breathtaking’

Angus Morrogh-Ryan reports on his recent trip to Brazil as part of a United Kingdom Trade and Investment mission to Rio and Recife

BRAZIL Having just returned from a UKTI mission to Brazil as it prepares to welcome the world to the World Cup and Olympic and Paralympic Games, the temptation is to hyperventilate about white elephants and behind-schedule stadia and transport links.

Brazilians are world masters at mass gatherings: Rio’s carnival, for example, accommodates 2 million people a day.

There is also an extraordinary paradigm shift occurring. A drive past Suape port sums it up: mile after mile of buses filled with boiler-suited dock workers. The rate of industrial change appears to be greater than the country’s infrastructure can keep up with. The North East Pernambuco region alone is said to have the third largest economy in the whole of South America.

At first sight it is not straightforward to understand. Take the 2016 Athletes’ Village masterplan, which is being undertaken by one Brazilian architect: it features several towers identical to others found in the Barra district west of Rio.

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However, it is not difficult to understand when viewed in the context of Brazil’s approach to dealing with broad social issues. These are polarised between the ‘Minha Casa, Minha Vida’ programme, which aims to upgrade all favelas to the necessary sanitation and structural stability by 2020, and the demands of a rapidly growing middle class.

Across the bay, Niterio is establishing itself as a commuter suburb that is hoping to put itself on the map with the nearly completed ‘Niemeyer Way’: it promises to be a promenade of typically gestural buildings that culminate in his Museu de Arte Contemporânea.

Then, there is the masterplan for the regeneration of the

original Porto Maravilha (literally Rio’s ‘marvellous port’), which is hugely impressive and surprisingly specific on massing but has no agenda for the zoning of use. The reasons can be found adjacent to Rio’s traditional beaches: the

limited spaces between sea and mountain have created a highly regulated and dense environment, with little opportunity to make big changes.

When free of this context, the impetus is to provide open market, deregulated conditions that will attract investment from developers, similar to our own docklands.

One would have thought that the tendency of emerging economies would be to always clear away the old in favour of the

new. There are plenty of examples of this but one senses in Brazil a growing appetite and recognition for re-use. In Recife (*pictured*), capital of Pernambuco region, the city planners are keen to find new life for the historic centre established by the Portuguese and Dutch settlers. The neighbouring Olinda is already a Unesco world heritage site. Although many buildings stand empty, within close proximity popular, unbranded markets are thriving.

It is only a matter of time before a version of gentrification starts. This needs to be managed carefully, otherwise the city is at risk of losing its deeper cultural narrative. The difficulty is in getting existing federal laws to effectively tax derelict or vacant premises. Like the Pernambuco region generally, it is likely to only work politically when incentivised with tax breaks, grants and the like.

Similarly, in the utterly vast São Paulo, despite having greater opportunities to continue to expand horizontally compared with its neighbour Rio, the metropolis is beginning to share an enthusiasm for the ‘retrofit’ of existing central buildings. City-centre values are now such that it is not only often more commercially expedient to retrofit but also the only viable option to maintain an existing and generous building volume against new planning regulations.

The discovery of oil off the coast and the logistical engagement with global trade routes are just two examples of how Brazil is radically changing. Coming from the UK, the scale was breathtaking. It is only on returning home that it is beginning to make sense – and I can’t wait to go back. *Angus Morrogh-Ryan is a director of De Matos Ryan*

2020
Proposed date for upgrade of Rio’s favelas