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Rio 2016: How will the Olympic Park look?

By Ollie Williams, for CNN

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Photos: Rio 2016: The transformation of the Olympic Park

Building the bus network - "The transport system in Barra is definitely a plus," says local architect Iseli of other Olympics-inspired upgrades to services like the bus network.

11 of 17

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Olympic Park dominated by a series of vast venues

But Rio cityscape itself "is the dominant icon"

Key planner says Rio "will shine"

become signatures of this summer's Games.

And so far, to locals at least, what we're about to get is a bit of a mystery.

"Until now, there has been no access for the public. It has been a construction site," says Swiss architect Barbara Iseli, who moved to Rio just under five years ago and now offers guided tours of the city's finest buildings.



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compared to economic, political and health crises.

There have been comparatively few noteworthy delays, though the track cycling velodrome was recently hurriedly handed over.

This is happy news for Bill Hanway, one of the people who does know exactly what Rio's Olympic Park looks like.

Hanway works for AECOM, the company that won the right to design the masterplan for the park.

Everything from transport and crowd modeling to the look and feel of the park comes under AECOM's

(CNN) — Beijing had the Bird's Nest. London, a towering sculpture of twisted steel. How will Rio's Olympic Park leave its mark?

Like the past two summer Olympic hosts, Rio de Janeiro is turning existing landmarks into venues. The world-renowned Maracana Stadium hosts football, while the Sambadrome — a centrepiece of Rio's annual carnival — will welcome the Olympic marathon and archery.

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But it's on the Park that you find the new venues soon to

This year, trips to the fence guarding the main Olympic Park — at Barra di Tijuca, a neighborhood in Rio's west zone — have been a recurring request from tourists.

"There were test events on the site so some people have already been in, but only for specific events," says Iseli. "Otherwise, the park is on a peninsula and it's a closed area. You can't even really see the buildings, only the ones at the front."

Vast venues

It's hardly uncommon for Olympic parks to be sealed-off construction sites until shortly before a Games, and venues are about the least of Rio organizers' problems



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80

121



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auspices, working with a selection of architects, planners and other suppliers.

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Work on the masterplan started before the London Olympics, in January 2012, and has progressed through an unsettling about-face in Brazil's economic prospects.

Hanway and colleagues had to make sure the Olympic Park did its job and looked the part despite fluctuating timelines and budgets.

"We had one of the most thriving and powerful economies back in 2011, about to overtake the UK in terms of GDP," says Hanway.

"Since then we've seen all the challenges — political instability, financial instability and everything that comes with that.

"We've had to make adjustments in terms of meeting new budget constraints and finding ways of saving money. But at an Olympics you can't just skip the main stadium or the basketball arena. You can't make those giant cuts."

The Olympic Park will still be dominated by a series of vast venues.

Walking the wavy Olympic Way, you'll see the velodrome on your left and tennis courts on your right before three huge training halls — home to various indoor events — hove into view.

There is a bridge overlooking a lagoon, a home for bands and entertainers to play throughout the Games, and the Olympic aquatic center.

Rio cityscape

However, the apparent consensus is you shouldn't expect the park to provide an iconic Olympic venue remembered generations hence.

"The sports venues — the arenas, the aquatics centre — are architecturally ... it's difficult to say," says Iseli, searching for the right words. "People aren't really talking about these venues.

"The arenas in Barra, they just don't seem especially attractive. But neither do they seem bad. The architecture is more functional."



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the Games magazine earlier this year, he said it was pointless being "excessively iconic" when "in Rio the cityscape itself is the dominant icon."

Natural beauty

Hanway argues that approach works because the masterplan fits relatively bland venues into Rio's dramatic, mountainous sprawl of a backdrop.

"In Rio it's not difficult to do this," he says. "In between every one of the buildings you get to see long-distance shots of mountains.



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If you come to Rio expecting the venues to dazzle like the athletes, you may be disappointed — like the German tourists from Hamburg who recently paid for one of Iseli's tours.

"Hamburg recently voted to withdraw their 2024 Olympic bid. After they saw our venues these tourists said, 'Maybe it was good that we didn't vote for it,'" recalls Iseli.

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Even the architects themselves admit they weren't going for visual extravagance with their designs.

Bruno Campos, from BCMF Arquitetos, worked on a number of Olympic venues. Interviewed by Architecture of

"If you look to the water you can see the oceans. It's not just the buildings and the park itself, it's the composition of natural beauty against the venues."

He also points to touches that might initially be lost on some tourists, but which may just become the visual elements you remember when you leave: like the flooring of the Olympic Way.

The main path up and down the Olympic Park will be black and white, echoing the traditional paving found in all Portuguese-speaking countries. "It's very powerful," says Hanway.

Moreover, Rio is not reliant on these venues for new-look architectural wonder. Redevelopment projects, spurred by the hosting of successive major events like the Olympics, World Cup and Paralympics, now boast design gems of their own.

Nomadic architecture

Rio's Porto Maravilha is one example.

"This is the former harbor and historical center of Rio," explains Iseli. "Parts of the area used to be abandoned because the harbor activity had moved away, but recently they tore things down to build new roads, tunnels and a cable car."



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42

148

Porto Maravilha's new showpiece is the Museu do Amanhã, or Museum of Tomorrow, a science museum designed by Spaniard Santiago Calatrava and opened last December. Iseli says the museum is already a popular destination.

"Now the harbor has historical and contemporary architecture at the same time and it's one of the places I take people."

The Museum of Tomorrow will still be waiting tomorrow, when the Games are over. But don't necessarily add the Olympic Park's venues to your 2017 sightseeing list. When Iseli says they are functional, she means it.

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Several of the venues are designed to transform beyond recognition once the sport concludes. "Nomadic architecture" is the term used by Rio's mayor, Eduardo Paes, and the result is modular venues ready to be broken down and even transported elsewhere when the Paralympic Games finish.

"So the handball venue can be transformed into four primary schools after the Games are over, and those sites have already been identified," explains Hanway.

"Equally, with the temporary aquatics venue, that is going to be split into two community and elite athlete training centers around Rio — one with 5,000 seats and one with 3,000 seats.

"Even some of the permanent buildings are going to be transformed into secondary schools or sports-based academies."

'Rio will shine'

However, this is where the real impact of Rio's recent troubles may be felt. While Hanway thinks construction delays and loss of funding won't be noticed this August and September, those academies and community centers could be some time in materializing when the spotlight shifts away once more.

"I think you'll see it in the speed with which some of the legacy transformations occur on the site," he admits. "Where the main site was designed around movement of people safely and securely — a lot of hard surfaces and open avenues — post-Games that all gets transformed into a public park."

With less money to get things done, he concedes, "The phasing is much more slowly delivered than we would have initially planned."



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least, he believes Rio will be ready.

"With all the negative publicity," he says, "including Zika, I still think there is a moment in time Brazil will shine — and Rio will shine."

That won't mean those plans simply get dropped in future, Hanway insists. Since the park is being delivered as a public-private partnership, a consortium of private investors need to make the post-Games park work in order to recover the money it initially sank into the project.

"So the site won't be abandoned," he says, "but what might have been a 15-year plan may take 20 or 25 years."

Iseli says that is the kind of thing that's wearing down the optimism of Brazilian citizens about the Games.

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"People are kind-of ashamed that there is so much delay. And also angry, because this is something that happens a lot in Brazil," she tells us.

But the consolation for Hanway is, come this August at



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