

Money no object

How many prestigious sports stadiums does Brazil need?



An oversized basket

Tourists come to Manaus in the northern state of Amazonas for rolling rivers, virgin rainforest and Belle Epoque buildings from the 19th-century rubber boom when the city was known as the Paris of the Tropics. The most striking monument to that era is the Amazonas Theatre. Decked out with European hardwoods, Carrara marble and Venetian glass, it took 12 years to build and went dozens of times over budget. Now Manaus is to get another pricey landmark—for some, another folly. This time the cost will fall on taxpayers.

Amazônia Arena, a 42,000-seat steel-and-fibreglass affair inspired by local hand-woven baskets, is one of 12 venues in 12 cities Brazil is building or refitting for next year's World Cup. It will cost 600m reais (\$265m), which will make it one of Brazil's most expensive football venues. Its external framework was shipped from Portugal in 800 pieces because Brazilian firms that could have delivered the required quality were booked out until 2016. The deadline for completion is December, but FIFA, the sport's governing body, fears that it will be missed.

Once the tournament is over, Manaus's new landmark is unlikely to see much sport. The city's football team plays in a low division, with matches attended by only a few hundred fans. The teams in three other host cities, Brasília, Cuiabá and Natal, also draw small crowds. The government says the four were chosen to showcase Brazil's diversity. Amazônia Arena's project manager, Miguel Capobiango, gamely talks of covering monthly running costs of 500,000 reais with business meetings, craft fairs and municipal shows. More likely, though, all four will become a permanent drain on public funds—though the other eight have a reasonable prospect of a useful future.

Brazil's taxpayers are outraged that 8 billion reais are being spent on all these sparkling stadiums when their country's infrastructure in general is so decrepit. Most of the transport upgrades planned for the tournament will not now be ready in time or have been axed altogether. June's protests coincided with the Confederations Cup, a trial run for next year's event. Placards demanded public money for new roads, schools and hospitals, to be built "to FIFA standards". The mood scarcely improved even when in the final Brazil beat Spain, the current world champion.

A four-hour flight south from Manaus, Rio de Janeiro is preparing not only for seven World Cup games, including the final, but also the 2016 Olympics. Organisational chaos during Pope

Francis's visit to the city in July cast doubt on its capacity to plan large-scale events: his motorcade got stuck in traffic, a blackout halted the metro for hours and Mass for 1.5m had to be moved to Copacabana beach when rain turned the original venue into a mudbath.

Rio's famous Maracanã football stadium scrambled to reopen before the Confederations Cup after its third renovation in a decade, which brought the total spent on refits to 1.35 billion reais. More may be needed before it hosts the Olympics opening and closing ceremonies. But new high-speed busways and an extension to the city's metro should be useful, and the run-down port area is being renovated with private money.

Hosting the Olympics, says Maria Silvia Bastos Marques, the boss of the Municipal Olympic Company, has given Rio a fresh "focus, determination and will". After the federal government moved to Brasília in 1960, incompetent and sometimes corrupt local governments left the once marvellous city looking down-at-heel. In Manaus, Mr Capobiango hopes the World Cup will teach Brazilians something new: that when it wants to, their government can build to a high standard and hard deadline. If only it would do so more often.

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