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TRANSPORTATION

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

**From Brazil: A different kind of bus system**

By JENNIFER LANGSTON  
P-I REPORTER

Jaime Lerner has a favorite saying: A car is like a mother-in-law -- you need to have a good relationship, but you shouldn't let her dictate your whole life.

The former mayor of the Brazilian city of Curitiba -- and an architect and international sustainability guru -- is a champion of public transit systems that use buses in a different way.

The buses run in dedicated lanes so they don't get stuck in traffic. Tubular stations on the street help make boarding swift and easy in Curitiba, where roughly 2 million people use them.

More than 80 cities around the world today are using or building similar "bus rapid transit" systems, which Lerner says can be constructed 20 to 100 times more cheaply than light rail or subway systems.

Visiting Seattle this week, Lerner shared his impressions about how to tackle this city's traffic:

**What is the difference between the way our buses in Seattle operate and your city's system?**

"A system of bus rapid transit is not only dedicated lanes. You have to have really good boarding conditions -- that means paying before entering the bus and boarding at the same level. And at the same time having a good schedule and frequency. We have a system where you don't have to wait more than one minute. That defines the quality."

**Is there a way to create dedicated bus lanes in a cramped city like Seattle?**



zoom Dan DeLong / P-I

Jaime Lerner, former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, says: "If you present the solution as a bus, it's a bus. If it's a system, the people will understand."

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"There are many ways, many corridors where you can have a really good system. ... Sometimes you think, 'Aaah we don't have enough space.' ... There's always a good solution."

**Could you talk about how to effect change in a city quickly through what you call "urban acupuncture"?**

"The normal process for planning takes time, and it should. ... But sometimes you can make some focused interventions that can give a new energy. ... That's what I call urban acupuncture."

**Could you give some examples?**

"Good acupuncture is the I.M. Pei project for the Louvre (a sculptural addition to the French museum); good acupuncture is a small park in New York at East 53rd Street. ... It's something that's good for the city immediately or something that really changes the city. I would say sometimes it's an attitude and not a public work."

**Do you think Seattle's waterfront has the potential to be one of those intervention points?**

"Ahhh, yes. It's wonderful."

**What do you think about replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct?**

"I would just vote one thing ... the viaduct definitely is not the solution. To give you an example not far from here -- San Francisco -- the city became much better when they removed the freeway at the Embarcadero Center. And the traffic is better."

**Some people say that if the viaduct were replaced with nothing but a surface road, heavy traffic along the waterfront would ruin it.**

**Do you agree?**

"If you provide good alternatives for public transport, you won't have traffic problems. ... Can you imagine how much better the city could become with 30 percent less of the cars running in the street? It's very easy. The main issue is having good public transport and after, if it's needed, the wall to protect the waterfront -- I don't have the answer to that. But definitely it's not the viaduct."

**Some people in Seattle don't like buses. Did you have trouble convincing people?**

From Brazil: A different kind of bus system

Getting There: Glitch jams traffic cameras along 522

Downtown demonstration may snarl traffic Monday

City weighs \$15 million investment in Monorail

25-year ferry plan calls for \$400 million

"If you present the solution as a bus, it's a bus. If it's a system, the people will understand. And if they understand it's a better alternative, they will take it. So you have to be sure it's a better alternative. ... If you don't have to park, if you only have a one-minute wait, would you change for public transport? Of course you would."

**How long does it typically take to set up a bus rapid transit system?**

"You can build in two years a good system. It's not difficult, because it has not too much public works. It's very simple."


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