
THIS IS NOT A BUS

BY RURIK INGRAM, BRUNSWICK, LONDON

Buses are not cool. As soon as they can afford it, most people go out of their way to avoid using them. But when he was Mayor of Bogotá, **Enrique Peñalosa** reinvented and rebranded the bus. Now Bogotanos don't say they're taking the bus, they say 'I'm taking the TransMilenio'

Enrique Peñalosa, former Mayor of Bogotá, is passionate about public transport. "I don't judge the success of a city by how many people own cars," he says. "I judge that city by how many rich people take the bus." Bold and uncompromising, Peñalosa is endlessly quotable on topics such as urban planning, public spaces and the role of transportation. This may be music to the ears of many city dwellers who have had to put up with congestion and pollution, but it jars with car owners who fight for their rights with equal passion.

Peñalosa has been embroiled in the politics of transportation for many years. When elected mayor of Bogotá in 1998, he realized that he had to do something radical to tempt people to use public transport in the Colombian capital and to communicate his vision for a better city. Rather than try to argue the case for the unloved bus, he decided to reinvent it.

Peñalosa's scheme was created as "an integrated mobility strategy" for the city's population of more than 7m. At its heart was TransMilenio (opened in December 2000), a bus rapid transit (BRT) system with dedicated bus lanes and elevated, station-style stops. The largest of its 1,200-strong fleet are articulated "bendy buses" with three sections that can carry up to 260 passengers. A single-trip fare is around 52 cents.

The program had several elements in addition to the main bus lines, including nearly 200 miles of cycle paths (*ciclo rutas*) and cycle parking areas at bus terminuses, a system of

pedestrian walkways that linked into the bus system, and a network of smaller green *alimentadores*, or feeder buses, that bring people in from outlying areas.

Why the focus on buses? Why not subway lines? "Are you a driver by any chance?" Peñalosa asks combatively. "Drivers love subways... if people ride the metro, it means fewer cars and buses on the roads and more space for them."

Peñalosa's feistiness is a legacy of the many battles he has had to fight and the many enemies he has made in his outspoken crusade against the car. When he became mayor of Bogotá, there was a state of near anarchy when it came to parking in the city – drivers were using sidewalks and shopping streets at will and forcing pedestrians on to the road. Peñalosa installed traffic barriers to reclaim the sidewalks and was nearly impeached for his trouble. "Parking is not a constitutional right," he says. Many drivers disagreed.

Peñalosa backs up his pro-bus argument with hard numbers. "Traffic congestion is never solved by building roads," he says, echoing a maxim of urban transportation: that adding more roads simply brings more cars.

He worries that the developing world is too timid when it comes to city and transport planning; countries are quick to follow the example of established cities, and inbound investment tends to focus on roads and railways. "Subway systems are just too expensive," he says. "One kilometer of railway

costs between \$200m and \$250m to build, whereas the equivalent amount of bus rapid transport network costs more like \$10m. Operational costs are much lower too." Also, a subway line can take years to plan and build – by which time the people and areas it was meant to serve may have shifted elsewhere.

TransMilenio was a concept borrowed from Curitiba, a planned city in southeastern Brazil, whose 1980s BRT has inspired several imitators worldwide, including the Metro Orange Line in Los Angeles, California. Peñalosa's version captured the imagination of Bogotanos, but it wasn't all plain sailing. The idea had to be sold not only to potential passengers but also to existing bus companies and their staff.

Before TransMilenio, Bogotá had thousands of small independent minibus operators vying for business and clogging the streets with competing services. The mayor sought the advice of McKinsey, the consultancy, and secured the backing of local financiers for a plan to pay local bus operators to deliver the TransMilenio service.

The solution says much about Peñalosa, who is both a member of Colombia's Green Party and the author of *Capitalism: The Best Option*. Born in Washington, DC he is a dual national who studied at Duke University in North Carolina. He shrugs off the idea that he is any kind of leftist eco warrior. Rather, he sees himself as a pragmatic politician and advocate for sustainable urban development.

In Peñalosa's scheme, a system for car access to city areas which rotates based on





license numbers (*Pico y Placa*), was hardly radical – several other cities had introduced such policies before. But it delivered practical results – including a 40 per cent cut in car traffic and measurable improvements in road safety and air quality – which were praised by the US Federal Transit Administration (see box).

Interviewed in London after a well-received speech on urban planning, Peñalosa was scheduled to meet Boris Johnson, London’s Conservative Mayor, who is also a keen cyclist. Johnson’s most visible achievement has been a scheme whereby public bicycles can be picked up and dropped off across town. “Boris bikes,” sponsored by Barclays bank, have captured London’s imagination. As *The New York Times*

said recently: “Velophilia is about as close as the city currently comes to a political philosophy.”

Peñalosa is, of course, a fan. He recognized the importance of linking cycling to public transport early on. “People rarely use public transport out of love for the environment. Bicycles are a different matter. People ride them because they are inexpensive, fast, but also because they are fun,” he says. Bogotá had some bicycle-friendly policies before Peñalosa became mayor – the *ciclovías*, or temporary bike paths, close roads to traffic for seven hours on Sundays, when a million and a half cyclists and pedestrians take to the streets.

By “rebranding” bus travel to make it feel like an upmarket alternative to the city’s old bus system, and making cycle riding an important

part of that journey, Peñalosa succeeded in lifting the stigma of buses and bikes.

The system has found support with businesses in Bogotá. “Developers are working along the routes, bringing with them further infrastructure improvements,” he says. “The TransMilenio is good for business.” Despite recent complaints about overcrowding and problems with personal security, a survey in 2010 found that more than 79 per cent of Bogotanos rated the system as good or very good.

Peñalosa’s ideas stretch beyond transport, and encompass the whole urban experience. “Shopping malls have replaced parks as places for people to meet,” he says. “We need big open spaces, like Central Park, in our city, to make people healthy – and happy.”

A plan to convert the exclusive Country Club of Bogotá into a public park partly cost him the mayoralty in 2001. But Peñalosa has been busy developing an international reputation, spreading his TransMilenio and urban planning gospel. He is up for election again later this year and his poll numbers have been good. “I hope to pick up where I left off,” he says. 🗳️

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TransMilenio: Beating the traffic jams in Bogotá

IN PRAISE OF TRANSMILENIO

The success of Bogotá’s TransMilenio has helped spread the word about the benefits of a well-planned urban bus system. In a report five years ago commissioned by the US Federal Transit Administration (FTA), TransMilenio was praised as “one of the world’s premier Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems.” The report described many benefits of TransMilenio, including its advantages over rail. An alternative heavy rail proposal would have provided 18 miles of rail-line for a total cost of just over \$3bn, amounting to a cost of \$169m per mile, the report noted. It would have carried an estimated 795,000 passengers per day, equating to 16 per cent of the city’s total transit trips.

In comparison, TransMilenio’s first phase provided more transitway (25.6 miles) and similar ridership levels, for a total capital cost of \$340m, almost one-tenth of the cost of the heavy rail option. The FTA was particularly impressed by the scheme’s use of the private sector. “One of the greatest achievements of the TransMilenio system was the successful implementation of a concession contract-based system for regulating service operations,” the report noted. “Paying the concession holders on a per-kilometer basis as opposed to a per-passenger basis facilitated healthy competition ‘for the market’ as opposed to the unhealthy competition ‘in the market.’ This has undoubtedly enhanced operating efficiency, while reducing the fiscal risk imposed on Bogotá’s city government.”