Toward a Science of Olympic Outcomes:  
The Urban Legacy

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1. Introduction

While some may view the Olympics as primarily a sporting event, and others as primarily a media phenomenon, it should not be forgotten that the Olympics are also about cities. After all, cities provide the site, identity for specific Olympics and are also impacted directly by the Games. As a mega-event, the Olympics are short-term, one-time, and high profile. From an urban perspective, the mega-event has significant consequences as it usually involves intense bidding, planning and implementation.

The dilemma for a host city is that the ground rules for the event are established by a body external to the city, and the inter-city competitive process utilised by this external body for determining who will host the event causes cities to manipulate the planning process to produce a successful bid. Thus, the Olympics is in many ways an intrusion (though often a welcome one) in normal urban processes and urban decision-making. Cities are forced to rearrange their urban planning around what will help to win the bid as well as what will produce a successful Games event. Event planners consider their work completed at the conclusion of the Games and the focus then turns to the next host city and their planning process. Increasingly, however, cities have put more emphasis in this longitudinal process on the post-Games context stressing the long-term impact of the short-term event for the city itself.

The term generally used to describe this focus on the post-event impact is "legacy". Given a golden halo, the concept of a legacy is usually considered to be a positive end result that enhances the city in some way. The most typical legacy is the event structures that remain after the event and that can be used by athletes and sport after the Games are over. Indeed, enhancing the facilities for sport and the benefit of its athletes is one of the prime objectives of the Olympics, and is the legacy that is of greatest interest to the IOC and the sports federations. Another form of legacy (especially in recent years) has been a financial largesse for sporting bodies to assist with athlete development. These two forms of sporting legacy fit the mandate of the IOC. But if sport is the primary interest of the IOC, the Olympics has also been captured by other interests (e.g. corporate capitalism) whether through official sponsorships or other forms of corporate advertising. Another player in the Olympic field that has attempted to use the Olympics for its own ends are cities themselves. Instead of just being viewed as neutral venues for Olympic events, cities and their interest groups have come to realise that the Games is a prominent mechanism for place marketing and various forms of urban boosterism. Perhaps of greatest interest to urbanists is the recognition that the Olympics can also provide an opportunity for urban transformation or renewal. It is this side of the Olympics that is drawing more and more attention, to the extent that Olympic planning must now be viewed as almost synonymous with urban planning.

The Olympics take place largely in urban space, and whereas the Games are of short duration, the urban consequences of the Games may last forever. Consequently, the urban impact of the Olympics might not be of primary concern to the IOC, which is merely looking for a suitable location that is capable of meeting its requirements, but such an emphasis has increasingly become the primary concern of host cities. In fact, while the place marketing role of the Olympics for cities is still a dominant attraction for those who see benefits from being at the centre of the media universe, it is primarily the opportunity to

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1 The author is an urban sociologist and this paper represents a consolidation of his knowledge and experience with a number of successful and unsuccessful bids.
contribute to urban transformation that mobilises leadership and financing in many bid and host cities. From this perspective, the Olympics is as much about cities as it is about sport. Responsible planning can no longer only be concerned with planning for the event itself but also must consider the urban context not only as a residual effect but increasingly as simultaneous objective.

2. The Olympics and the urban context

There are several reasons why the Olympics generate urban conflict. First, as noted earlier, the Olympics as a one-time, short-term and high profile event are intrusive in normal urban processes. All of a sudden, because some person(s) or groups think that the Olympics would be a good thing for the city, the Olympic project becomes a high profile item on the urban agenda. Local newspapers are often captivated by the idea, sometimes as boosters and sometimes as critics. For people whose passion is music rather than sport, for example, or for people who are primarily concerned about urban inequality in its various dimensions rather than elitist sport, the fact that the Olympics has squeezed its way to the top of the urban agenda is often in itself enough to generate strong opposition. Related to that is the fact that criticisms of the IOC and its mode of operation has, in recent years in particular, generated a built-in resistance to anything connected with the Olympics. Consequently, the idea of the Olympics in itself is not universally accepted as either a priority or an option by at least some urban residents. In other instances, persons advocating the Olympic idea may already have personal opponents (whether political or otherwise) within a city that help to generate a second look if not outright opposition. In other instances, politicians have their own personal agendas that steer the debate. The whole news reporting genre in itself searches out alternative viewpoints as well, so the end result is an element of contentiousness about the Olympics right from the start. In other words, the idea of the Olympics in itself triggers contestation and opposition through existing channels of the media and political bodies within cities that make it a high profile matter of debate. And if it is not the idea of the Olympics itself that generates this opposition, then it is the controversies over other items such as site selection or financing. In short, at minimum, the Olympics in many cities come to stand for controversy.

Second, the Olympics has its own timelines of preparation. Dates are set for bid applications and requirements for the content of the bid are determined by the IOC. In itself, the date setting may become an externally opposed irritant because the timelines may not be appropriate for the issues that must be dealt with in a specific city. In that sense, residents and leaders may feel that they are being railroaded into something without appropriate discussion. An externally imposed schedule often appears to fast-track planning at the local level which inevitably leads some to feel that a lack of consultation and discussion has occurred. Related to this is, the fact that the separation of the bid phase from the planning phase often leads some organisers to make their bid statements somewhat unrealistic on the grounds that this is only a preliminary document and winning the bid is the primary objective. In fact, since some may view the outcome of the bid phase as uncertain, they may not give it as close attention, and it is not until the bid has been successful that others begin to take the whole process seriously. It is here where a conflict occurs between the IOC/local organising committee and local groups because the former see the bid documents as the basis for the acceptance and do not want to debate the accepted document anymore, whereas others see that document as more provisional and open to new debate and revision. Conversely, local organisers may find the accepted bid document as problematic in some way after the bid is won, and seek to amend it, which then raises issues and debates once again. But if the bid is successful, now the local implementation committee has a new deadline of the Games themselves that it must deal with. Design and construction fast-tracking are now the new enemies of consultation and planning. Indeed the history of the Olympics is strewn with untold instances of design, location, and financing issues that pushed ahead based on a sense of urgency about the imminent event that required quick action.

Third, the sport federations have their own requirements, which may or may not be easily accommodated in a particular city. There are issues of cost and after-use related issues that are often in
conflict with local needs and affordability. Federations may reject preferred locations or suggested designs as proposed by local organisers. Again, the federations have a different agenda from local planners. Their concern are things that will make the competition technically better whereas local planners may prefer to make decisions based on cost or fit to the urban plan or other matters of local design suitability. Again, this gives the sense that the event and its details are externally controlled in which local urban input is a secondary consideration.

Fourth, the Olympic bid/planning organisation usually stands at least somewhat apart from ongoing agencies and elected bodies and takes initiatives and makes many decisions rather independently. Often it is the sense of urgency, which is used as a mechanism to handle the need to proceed and make decisions without being bureaucratically consultative. Organising committees conceive their task as that of completing their mandate and while consultation occurs, including with urban residents and local communities, it is often perceived as merely informing people of plans rather than truly seeking input about these plans from the ground up. Again, this is where conflict occurs between those who view the bid document as baseline acceptance by all concerned and, on the other hand, those for whom implementation planning is not second stage input but often first stage input. Another issue pertaining to the independence of the organising committee is that it is often accused of being arbitrary with no public accountability. The planning organisation usually counters by arguing that it indeed has public representatives on its committee who have been elected to defend the public interest. But the argument is sometimes made that it is quite different to have elected officials and their appointees driving the planning process than it is to have a few elected officials sitting on an organising committee made up of entrepreneurs and boosters who are in reality driving the planning.

Related to this is a fifth point that seldom is the decision to bid for the Olympics let alone the decision to host the Olympics conceived of as a democratic process. Often it is entrepreneurs and urban boosters who promote the idea, and this group seeks the support of elected officials who together form a coalition of advocates. Burbank, Andranovich, and Heying (2001) refer to this as regime politics among boosters who see the Olympics as a platform to promote a growth agenda. The international exposure, which the Olympics provide not only is viewed as supportive of economic development and growth, but presents that agenda in such a compelling way through its appeal to recognition on the world stage that it attempts to overwhelm opposition. That mode of thinking (i.e. the growth ethic) is open to debate in itself as there are always those who reject the growth theme and see it as representing special interest groups. So the question inevitably arises about whether hosting the Olympics is the goal of these interest groups or whether this is truly an objective endorsed by the city population at large. While some view the actions of political actors in this context as appropriate to people who have been elected to take new initiatives, others fear the mega-event will rearrange urban priorities and expose taxpayers to financial risk. Consequently, cities are often torn apart by contending groups, some of whom appear to reject the idea of the Olympics altogether while others fear the fiscal uncertainties. Those in support of the Olympics often are quite prepared to allow organising committees to proceed whereas those who are opposed insist that the entire process be conducted more democratically.

Sixth, funding for the necessary Olympic infrastructure and its supporting elements almost inevitably requires public funds, usually beyond the capacity of cities themselves. This puts the whole process at the mercy of higher levels of government that may or may not decide to make financial grants and when they decide to do so, it is that body which decides precisely on what the money is to be spent. This uncertainty and yet dependence on higher levels of government often makes city taxpayers very nervous. But even at the local level, there is usually a sense that there will be costs, which local taxpayers will have to bear, and there is often the perception that event costs are either too uncertain or in fact uncontrollable so that no cost estimate is reliable. Whether it be design issues or matters of policing or crime and crowd control, there is a clear sense that considerable municipal resources will be mobilised to host the event, and that these costs may be hidden and not recoverable. And furthermore, once the process of aestheticization begins (i.e. making the city look good by removing, repairing, and replacing unsightly aspects), there is no sense where this could begin and end in terms of costs.
3. The Olympics as urban opportunity and urban liability

Perhaps the best way to describe these issues is the perception that the Olympics actually highjack the urban agenda. Not only will it reprioritise issues within the city with its cost implications, but it will also literally eat up thousands of hours of time of urban employees from officials and planners, to city personnel in areas like waste disposal and security who will then be unavailable for other issues and routine matters. It is therefore assumed that urban residents will be clearly affected one way or the other. At the same time, the Olympics also represent new opportunity. Perhaps at the forefront is the fact that the Olympics can be used to leverage funding otherwise unavailable, particularly from higher levels of government. This funding then can be used to construct event facilities, which may serve as signature structures for the city, but this funding is also often used to improve the urban infrastructure in some way, particularly forms of public transportation. The notion of utilising the Olympics as an explicit tool of urban renewal is a more recent concept but has become more prominent. Inner city locations are particularly targets for such projects because they contain ageing and decrepit buildings related to uses that no longer characterise the area. Redevelopment of areas considered urban blight means the Olympics provides the opportunity to Marshall resources for matters from land assembly to financing for on-time delivery of the site for Olympic use. Unfortunately this process often sparks its own controversy as due process in the normal planning procedure is ignored, and particularly when poor residents (and the residents of these areas are normally poor) are displaced. Thus while the Olympics represent opportunity for cities to take new initiatives which would not otherwise be as likely to occur, the Olympics also represent both responsibilities and liabilities which have both short-term and long-term impacts on the city.

4. Categories of urban impact

There are four categories of ways in which cities can be impacted by the Olympics. The first category pertains to the built environment and includes attempts to add new structures (sometimes with interesting architecture), transform urban space in specific areas of the city, and improve urban infrastructure. The second category is essentially economic and focuses on how the Olympics can assist with economic development, promote tourism, and provide a more attractive image for inward investment. These two themes are the dominant objectives that are referred to when the benefits of hosting the Olympics are cited. Clearly transformations of the built environment is a permanent legacy whereas the economic benefits of the Olympics may be considered more short-term and the residual benefits are often a matter of debate (for example, does place marketing and name recognition have an enduring economic benefit for the city?). Whether anyone remembers or cares that Los Angeles hosted the 1984 Olympics, or whether it is part of that city’s identity in any way is clearly debatable. The multiple international images that Los Angeles already has can be compared with nascent international cities like Calgary where serving as an Olympic city is much more important to Calgary’s identity and global recognition. So the Olympics may be much more important as a marketing device to cities seeking to launch a more international profile rather than to promote an existing international identity.

There are two other categories of Olympic impact that are even more difficult to quantify but that are often ignored even though they are real. One of these categories I will call the social psychological impact of the event. What mood did the Olympics in all of its phases from bid to implementation to the event itself and the post-Olympic period create in the city? What memories does the event leave for urban residents as opposed to the spin given to it by Olympic organisers? Was there negative fall-out from things like debt? What role does the media play in this evaluation (for example, the transportation issue in Atlanta)? Did the Olympics transform resident’s own perceptions or evaluations of their city, and if so, in what way? For example, one of the reasons why the Olympics was viewed so positively by urban residents in Calgary was related to how the Olympics was transformed by urban residents from an elitist event to an urban festival. Such an evaluation of course not only varies with the particular host city but also can vary from one population group to another within the city.
The fourth category is what I call the city as community, or the city as a plurality of communities. What internal conflicts did the Olympics create or reinforce? What effects did the Olympics have on the city's political leaders? It is not unusual for the political leadership of a city to change throughout the various stages of the Olympic experience, and we have not carefully charted what effect the Olympics have had on political careers or the establishment of new voting blocks. Who were viewed as the winners and losers of the Olympic experience? To what extent did displacement occur and to what extent were the economic benefits of the Olympics viewed as confined to specific segments such as tourism or construction? To what extent did the Olympics aggravate pre-existing internal conflicts and to what extent did it create new conflicts?

5. From legacy to outcomes

The concept of legacy assumes a positive benefit to the city, and usually focuses on those things that are in some sense tangible, i.e. transformations to the built environment or a fund to finance continuing costs. In particular, the IOC is interested in sporting legacies that support athlete development. However, what is proposed here is that the legacy must be conceived much more broadly to include things that are less tangible but nevertheless real, and that it also must be acknowledged that the legacy of the Olympics for a city may not always be positive. For example, unexpected costs or debt is a legacy but not necessarily a positive one. Heightened political conflict may be a legacy but is an effect which may transform the politics of a city. Furthermore, what may be viewed positively by athletes/sporting bodies may be viewed very differently by residents of a specific community who now not only have the new structure to contend with but also the resulting traffic. Residents in another part of the city may have a totally different view of the urban changes produced. Some consequences of the Olympics for a city might be considered unexpected by-products for which Olympic organisers refuse to take responsibility. For example, the goal of Olympic organisers might be to construct an appropriate venue, and if it eliminated urban blight along the way, that was a good thing. But the fact that it displaced poor persons or created new wealth for landowners just happened to occur as a result of the process. So the evaluation of the impact of the Olympics on cities may be dependent on the point of view of the evaluator. In any case, it is clear that the concept of legacy is problematic if it assumes that legacies are always positive or that they are only limited to the sporting aspects.

In place of the concept of legacy, I propose the concept of outcomes, which in my view is a more neutral term. The concept of legacy often implies that a specific result of the Olympics is not only positive but that it is planned. In contrast, the point made here is that many of the impacts of the Olympics are not always positive but are either unanticipated or unplanned, often because they are outside the sphere of the primary objectives for the Olympics. Furthermore, there is a bias in discussions of legacy to how athletes and sport has benefited, and it has already been argued that there are many non-sporting effects, impacts, or consequences of the Olympics for cities. In place of the term legacy, and to accommodate this variety in consequences, the term "outcome" seems to be more comprehensive and demonstrates greater sensitivity to what the Olympics truly leave in their wake. It also avoids the narrowness of the IOC perspective on sport and acknowledges the realities in the local urban context. In order to conceptualise this analysis more clearly, we take this dichotomy of planned-unplanned outcomes and distinguish it from the other dichotomy of sporting-non-sporting outcomes. Using a two-by-two table with four cells, the focus of this paper is on the unplanned non-sporting outcomes. And even an outcome which may have been planned may have unplanned or unanticipated aspects, while other outcomes may have been outside the sporting vision.

There are several reasons why this focus on a variety of outcomes has been ignored. First, the local organising committee has only one objective, which is to host the Games, and it is often not attuned to secondary outcomes. Second, the office of the organising committee is shut down shortly after the Games are concluded, and there is no money or personnel to do a through evaluation of outcomes. Third, there is a strong political need to show that the outcome of the Olympics was positive which
means that negative outcomes are ignored or minimised. This means that the wisdom and knowledge of those aware of the broader range of outcomes is never clearly analysed. Lastly, there is also the thinking that the Olympics are now over and, whatever the outcomes, it is time to move on to other things. However, it is the thesis of this paper that we will never understand the Olympics as an urban event until we understand the full range of outcomes and impacts which the Olympics has on cities. Cities are not neutral containers in which the Olympics are the main event. Instead, we need to see how the Olympics intrudes in urban functioning to produce a wide range of consequences for the city which continues long after the Olympics has moved on to another city.

6. Outcome axes

From an urban point of view, four specific axes of tension can be identified as relevant to this discussion. The first one can be described as the tension between the Olympic agenda and the host city agenda. Increasingly, at least part of the internal rationale for a city to host the Olympics is that it will improve the city in some way. The question is whether this can be done without adding unduly to the costs, design, priorities and construction time pressures that already exist. I am reminded of a banner that appeared at the end of an unfinished freeway in downtown Cape Town that read “The Olympics will take care of unfinished business”. In this case, Olympic organisers were explicitly stating that the Olympics would contribute to urban infrastructural development and the expectation was clear that hosting the Olympics would contribute to urban transformation. While the Olympic agenda is to prepare for the event itself with minor attention to internal urban needs, politicians and urban residents alike rationalise their support for the Olympics by anticipating major urban improvements. In some ways, this is a matter of fiscal opportunism but in other ways, unrealistic expectations are placed on the Olympics as an event. One of the thorny issues in that regard is the role played by city planning departments in the Olympic planning process which is often at cross purposes and marginalized due to the single task orientation of the local organizing committee.

A second axis differentiates between primary impacts and the secondary impacts. Olympic planners often evaluate their actions in terms of the Olympic-related result. For example, the construction of a new sport venue (e.g. a stadium) means that Olympic planners have fulfilled their mandate. But there are all kinds of secondary effects, which have consequences for the city. For example, land surrounding the site may now be re-valued which may then lead to a transformation of function. What was once single family residential may now be more appropriate for high density residential or retail. What was once warehousing may now become commercial. And this residual effect may occur for many blocks with different impact dependent on whether the site is linked to a high-speed arterial road or a rapid transit station. What may have been a quiet community may now produce higher traffic volumes, and so on. These are just some examples of the kinds of impact that are secondary from the Olympic perspective but may be considered primary from the city’s perspective. In some cases, Olympic organisers look for “sites of least resistance” rather than the best site for other reasons. But in most cases, the Olympic agenda takes priority and there is often little discussion or later evaluation of the full implications for the city of Olympic decisions. And when there is attention to these matters away from the Olympic site, matters of cost, politics, or expediency can overrule what is best from an urban planning perspective.

The third axis of tension builds from the second axis by distinguishing between the intended outcome of Olympic actions and the unintended outcomes. An Olympic facility within a community may give it a new look or a new facility, which may be thought to be desirable for other purposes. But in the process of putting that facility in one community rather than another, that community may become a more pleasant place in which to live which may cause rents to go up or property values to rise. In the process, the existing population is displaced by a population that can afford the new property values. As a result, the displaced residents may view the Games as the root cause for their displacement. From the Olympic point of view, a beautiful and functional facility has been provided. However, that same
facility set into motion a series of unintended consequences which may be acceptable to some but not to others. Similarly, cities may view the Games as a unique high profile event that allows the city to celebrate together and to feel a sense of urban pride. Even the process of being short-listed or winning the bid may be viewed as a cause for celebration, which fuels notions of urban boosterism. Yet whatever these victories mean for some, for others they represent the renewal of conflict and controversy, which are internally divisive for the city. Many Olympic organisers spend much of their time dealing with this public urban debate, and even live in fear of the exposure of new controversy at each step of the way. Consequently, what was anticipated as a positive experience can just as easily deteriorate into a contentious and controversial experience, which was the opposite of what was intended.

The fourth tension can be conceptualised as the focus on the Olympics itself and its short-term impact in comparison to the more long-term impact as represented by post-event reconfiguration and usage. From an urban point of view, one of the critical issues related to legacy that is often ignored with Olympic facilities is the extent to which the facility will be reserved for elite athletes and to what extent it will be available for the use of the general public. Or to put it another way, is the facility for specialised use (e.g. velodrome or bobsled run) accessible and useable by the general public? In some instances, the facilities make little continuing contribution to urban life. This is particularly an issue when public funds are utilised to construct the facility and local residents perceive little widespread benefit. While the matter of continuing funding for after-event use appears to be less of an issue in recent years, there is increasing expectations among urban leaders that the Olympics should result in a non-sporting legacy of some kind. Parks and plazas fall into this category but so also does transportation and communications infrastructural improvements. The fiscal implications of these improvements and how they will be funded is not the only issue but also how many different types of improvements to pursue is a major concern. Much like renovating your house, once a laundry list of urban improvements is created, it is hard to know when to stop and where to start. In many instances, the Olympics becomes the rationale for funding support but the improvements are not ultimately connected to the Olympics in the public mind.

### 7. Conclusion

Cities can no longer be viewed as merely the container that hosts the Olympics. While the IOC has its own mandate and objectives, cities also have their own goals in hosting the Olympics. The sheer cost of hosting the Olympics now normally involves such great sums of money and mobilises such a wide range of urban resources that cities can no longer view the Olympics purely as a short-term sporting extravaganza. For that reason, the Olympics must be more firmly rooted in normal urban processes of decision-making, and particularly closely linked to local urban planners, as opposed to an independent body of event planners.

In some ways, it is appropriate for the IOC to say that many of these outcomes are primarily matters of local concern. How a city decides to fund its hosting role and what decisions a city makes in the process, and what the outcomes indeed are, may be beyond the purview of the IOC. On the other hand, every city knows that it is embracing both the opportunities and the risks that the Olympics presents, and that the trade-off between fulfilling short-term Olympic obligations must be counter-balanced with the more long-term needs of urban residents. Consequently it is not just the IOC that is looking for cities to fulfil its own requirements, but cities that are looking to capture the Olympics to support their own urban agendas. The only difference is that while the IOC knows what it wants from host cities, host cities are often divided and conflicted over what they expect and what they ultimately receive. More careful attention to Olympic outcomes (rather than legacies) will help us to understand why cities are sites of contention through their Olympic experience.