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Post-event Outcomes and the Post-modern Turn: The Olympics and Urban Transformations

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ABSTRACT The Olympics are analysed from an urban perspective as an event that has an impact on cities beyond sport. The focus of the paper is on post-event outcomes and particularly on Olympic-related facilities and how they are used once the Olympics are over. The 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics serves as the primary illustration of the processes described. The transformation of the urban order is discussed in terms of the post-modern turn and it is shown how the Olympics are affected by and contributes to the support of the shift toward leisure consumption as a dominant theme in the new urban symbolic economy. Issues such as place marketing, urban restructuring, urban regionalization, surveillance, and social exclusion are also related to post-Olympic outcomes.

There is considerable agreement that the Olympics is not just about sport but is also about politics (Espy, 1979; Andranovich et al., 2001) and capitalist economics (Lenskyj, 2000). It was not until recently that it has become increasingly clear that the Olympics are also about cities (Essex & Chalkley, 1998; Hiller, 1999). The primary signal of this fact comes from city leaders themselves that do not think of the Olympics just as sport but as an opportunity to accomplish items on their own urban agenda. The question of why cities are willing to mobilize resources and energy to even become a candidate city, let alone be willing to serve as a host city, defies simple explanations but implies the existence of important urban objectives.

Even though the primary purpose of being a host city is to serve as the location for sporting events, there must be much more at stake than merely providing a venue for sport competitions. Much attention has been given to the economic impact and tourism impact of hosting the Olympics which
stresses the role of the Games themselves. What has been neglected is how the Olympics are related to the long-term goals of the city. The Olympics must be understood not only in terms of the preparation and hosting phase but also in terms of the post-event consequences to complete what is known as the Olympic cycle (the four phases being the bid phase, the preparation phase, the event phase and the post-event phase (Hiller, 1998)). The most concrete long-term impact is related to the built environment. In fact, one of the unique aspects of the Olympics as a mega-event is that while it is both a short-term and high profile event, hosting the Olympics almost always involves significant capital costs through the construction of specialized buildings and other infrastructural improvements. Thus, if there is any long-term impact on cities, it is usually related to these capital expenditures and the built environment changes that result. It is not just the structures created for the Olympics itself but the side effects, residual effects, or parallel linkages (Hiller, 1998) that play a role in transforming the urban environment that is important. Cities often use the Olympics to accomplish other objectives that may support the Games but which are of even greater long-term value. Another issue is that of the after-use of Olympic facilities and infrastructure whose size and scale may not always be consonant with future urban needs. The 110,000 seat stadium built to accommodate the Olympics in Sydney is one example of a structure that was built with far too much capacity for after-use (Cashman, 2006), and velodromes are another example of a structure with little continuing demand. Given the expense involved, after-use is a major issue, and cities often have difficulty aligning Olympic needs with post-event usage in the light of capital cost expenditures.

From the point of view of understanding the long-term impact of the Olympics on cities, the construction of event facilities are perhaps the most enduring and visible legacy. Infrastructural improvements such as in transportation or urban renewal may have been some of the key benefits anticipated by a host city in winning the bid. But some Olympic facilities may have little utility in the post-Olympic period. What role do they play in cities and how does their post-Olympic usage reflect what is happening to the urban order? In other words, how does the Olympic agenda impact the built environment of cities on a long-term basis, and how are these structures adapted for long-term usage? Above all, how are they related to the changing nature and structure of contemporary city life? These questions are not asked from the perspectives of architecture, engineering, or economics but from an urban perspective in terms of how post-event usage relates to urban processes. They are also asked in a sociological context in which usage is understood as human behaviour.

The focus of this paper will primarily be on specialized event structures. In many ways, they are lasting Olympic legacies in the city but they also represent dilemmas and challenges for cities. The issue of after-use will be related to how the contemporary Olympics are connected to urban transformations, for the shape and form of the modern Olympics both contribute to and reflect the transformations of the urban order that is
occurring. Once the Olympics have been placed in this urban context, the long-term impact of the Olympics on cities can be understood. In comparison to the Summer Olympics, the Winter Olympics provide a different illustration of this process, and sufficient time has now passed to support an analysis of the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. Some additional references will be made to the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics.

The Olympics and the Restructuring of Cities

Much has been written about how the urban order is undergoing a massive transformation (Soja, 2001). Five characteristics of this urban restructuring can be identified, and then the after-use of Olympic facilities can be related to the post-modern shift in urban transformation.

Cities and the Globalization of Capital, Culture and Information Flows

The globalization of the economy has meant that cities are now part of a hierarchy of urban places in which power flows from global cities which serve as command centres and peripheral cities struggle for a significant place within the global urban hierarchy. Of particular importance is the emergence of what has been called the “entrepreneurial city” in which coalitions of urban elites unite to promote the economic development of their city (Harvey, 1988; Hall & Hubbard, 1998). Elite coalitions involve politicians, planners, real estate developers and business leaders attempting to make their cities more competitive by attracting new sources of funding and direct investment to support various forms of business development and employment creation, as well as to improve the built environment either for its own sake or to change the image of a city. Globalization therefore means greater intercity competition, both nationally and internationally, in which entrepreneurial cities seek a competitive edge.

The role that the Olympics play in place marketing is well known but usually is acknowledged more indirectly (Whitson & MacIntosh, 1996; Roche, 2000). The emphasis in presentations to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is usually on the city’s technical competencies to host the Olympics whereas the rationales presented to local and national constituencies emphasizes spinoff effects such as employment creation (often not explicitly acknowledged as short term), tax revenues and tourism development. But lurking not far behind these economic justifications is the global publicity given to the host city that usually results in a concerted public relations effort to market and massage the image of the city throughout the various phases of the Olympic cycle. Urban elite coalitions visualize the Olympics as an opportunity to enhance and broaden the profile of the city not just for its “demonstration effects” (i.e. to demonstrate that the city has the capacity or ability to host such an event) but to “showcase” the city as an attractive place for investment. In some cases, this is public investment for infrastructural change from higher levels of government (which will be discussed below), but a central goal is also to make the city attractive as a
place for private investment, including from international sources (Searle, 2003, p. 125). Cities bidding from developing countries or countries wishing to redefine their global position have been especially attracted to the Olympics for this reason. The Olympics then becomes a tool in the more general goal of greater economic development as represented by urban boosterism (Smyth, 1994). This role of the Olympics has become particularly important in a global economy characterized by more competition between cities. Presumably, then, the ability to mobilize capital for Olympic infrastructure is considered to be symbolic of a city's capacity to compete with other cities by taking on such a large-scale multi-faceted project. But it is not just the Olympic facilities themselves that are important but the supporting infrastructure of transportation, housing and leisure activities that must be upgraded (discussed below) in order to enhance the city's environment and its global appeal.

*The Economic Restructuring of Cities*

One of the primary characteristics of cities in the developed world has been the shift to a post-Fordist economy. This is the process of deindustrialization where factory-type jobs and a manufacturing producer economy have been replaced by information technologies and a service economy. Business services, finance, and leisure industries take on a much more prominent role, and heavy industry almost disappears to developing countries where labour is less costly.

There are two consequences of this development for the importance of the Olympics for cities. One is that post-industrial cities are eager to either find uses for old buildings that once had an industrial use, or they are interested in replacing them with buildings that are more relevant to the service economy. It is in this context that the Olympics become a useful tool in the process of urban regeneration. The transformation of waterfront or inner city locations (e.g. Barcelona: Moragas and Botella, 1995), whose value was once important for industrial uses, serve as a typical example of how cities conceive of the Olympics as a prompter to some sort of transformation of the built environment. Almost every city that engages in the construction of significant new buildings for the Olympics targets older areas requiring some kind of renewal (Gratton & Henry, 2001).

The second aspect of this economic restructuring is that the shift to a service economy results in a different labour pool within the city. A service economy means a post-industrial city that supports leisure industries which are vital to a successful Olympics, and this point will be discussed further later. It also means a city with the urban ambience (including cleaner air) that Olympic administrators and athletes value. Service workers (primarily white-collar employees) fit the model of personnel required as volunteers for the Olympic effort. Persons with office jobs are more likely to be available and interested in volunteering and fit the profile of conscientious, disciplined and image-conscious workers which the Olympics require. Such people are also more likely to afford tickets to
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Olympic events. In short, the Olympics fit well with an urban service-based economy.

In both developed and less developed cities, the Olympics provide the occasion for cities to appeal to the public sector (particularly the national government) for the allocation of funds not otherwise available. It legitimates public expenditures in one city that may not be available to other cities in the same country. The IOC likes to think of the Olympics’ lasting contribution to a host city as a “legacy” that is almost always conceived of as a sporting legacy. But cities are increasingly interested in a legacy beyond the sporting world and that contributes to making the city a better place. In that regard, preparation for the Olympics, especially in recent years, has stimulated investment forums that are oriented towards using the Olympics to encourage inward investment or for local businesses to seize the occasion of the Olympics to develop new business opportunities. Private businesses, particularly in the tourism industry, may become involved in new construction or renovations and, in general, the Olympics often serve as a catalyst in the beautification, restoration or refurbishing of varying aspects of the built environment. For example, one month before the Olympics in Athens, it seemed that everywhere everything was under construction or renovation (whether directly Olympic related or not) in preparation for the Olympics, which served as a completion goal for all kinds of actions (e.g. painting, cleaning, modernizing) that otherwise might have been completed without a uniform time-line.

There is also the likelihood that Olympic sites themselves can have a spillover effect on adjacent property that spurs new development. Olympic venues often lead to vastly improved public spaces that also usually make adjacent property more valuable and desirable which attracts a more upscale class of residents and therefore more upscale uses. Olympic related housing (athletes, media, etc.) in particular must be built to standards for their occupants and also are often built under pressure to be sold at high market values to pay for the construction costs (and perhaps even to make a profit). After-use, then, might shift to persons of higher income rather than the provision of housing for low-income persons. Barcelona, for example, experienced this kind of gentrification as the Olympic Village (Icaria) eventually transformed the area from a working class district to a community largely inhabited by upper-middle and upper-class residents after the Games (Kennett & de Moragas, 2006). This raises the question about who in a city benefits the most from hosting the Olympics, and it is for this reason that the Games almost always trigger opposition by those who prefer that a city’s scarce resources be directed to benefit those most disadvantaged rather than supporting profit-making and the embourgeoisment of the city. Since one of the primary characteristics of the post-modern city is the increasing polarization of urban populations in which the wealthy and the poor have very different urban lives, the Olympics then are often viewed as reinforcing this trend in the post-Fordist city. Thus, the Olympics can impact the built environment of cities in a variety of ways.
In short, the Olympics can serve a useful role for a city engaged in some type of restructuring or renovation. It facilitates the process of reconditioning and usually leads to the construction of new facilities that contributes to a changing built environment. These changes usually occur in support of a shift by the city to an urban service economy but with differential effects on the city’s residents. It is also possible that beautification efforts might mask growing inequalities in a restructured city.

Leisure Consumption and the City

If the city was once the place for the space intensive and labour intensive activity of the factory and then the office, the post-modern city with its emphasis on services is now increasingly coming to be defined by consumptive leisure in culture, dining and entertainment (Clark, 2004). Cultural districts and museums, branded retail emporiums, themed restaurants and bars, mega theatre complexes, virtual arcades, sport venues, hotels, and other leisure areas have become high profile “landscapes of consumption” in what Zukin (1995) has called the “symbolic economy”. Using Disney-esque surreal design, the end result has been “sim cities” or “fantasy cities” in which unique architecture is used not as works of art but as a mechanism to foster spending and entertainment, whether by tourists or urban residents, and to create images whether real or imagined (Hannigan, 1998).

The Olympics, of course, are an entertainment spectacle par excellence. But, more importantly, it also reinforces the direction of this trend towards consumptive leisure because hosting the Olympics requires preparation for high-demand consumer behaviour. From the point of view of visitors as well as local residents, the Olympics intensify leisure consumption and, as will be shown, become intimately related to facility after-use. It is not surprising, then, that the consumption industries are major supporters of the Olympics because they benefit through all stages of the Olympic cycle. Industry members even use the Olympic cycle to enhance their product through things such as the building or redevelopment of hotels, tourism packages for visitors and the opening of new leisure activities (Preuss, 2004). Indeed, from the urban merchant’s point of view, and from the point of view of governments who receive retail taxes, one of the major objectives of the Olympics is to increase revenues through consumer spending. From the point of view of this analysis, what is important is that the Olympics both contribute to and reinforce this trend towards leisure consumption in the post-modern city.

The Polycentric Mega-city

Whereas cities have always had a strong central core, the continuing growth of cities to produce mega-cities has meant that cities have now become more de-centered into vast urban regions. The regionalization of cities has created metropolitan areas consisting of a plurality of urban municipalities. The
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mega-city then is not just one city but a multiple of cities forming an urban region. There are two implications of this trend for the Olympics.

First, the range of facilities that is needed for Olympic events usually means a dispersal of those facilities within an urban region. While the IOC and athletes might prefer a compact Olympics in which all venues are in the same general vicinity, that is not possible, and the increasing size of cities makes transportation between sites a major issue. The dispersal of competition and practice sites (often amidst heavy traffic) and even the choice of location of athletes' villages (sometimes in more than one location) mean that the modern Olympics cannot be contained within a single urban space, and its activities are distributed throughout the metropolitan galaxy.

The second point of some significance is that the modern Olympics with the various constituents of the "Olympic family", from athletes, federations and sponsoring corporations as well as support services and media requirements, has meant that the Olympics can only be held in large cities with a strong regionalized support structure. For example, central city hotels are not usually adequate and hotels in the urban region are required. Cities must be large enough to support a variety of international air carriers in order to service Olympic needs properly. Hosting the summer Olympics is increasingly limited to only the largest cities and even winter Olympic requirements have led to a shift away from small remote centers (e.g. Lake Placid, Lillehammer) as Olympic venues to larger cities (e.g. Turin, Vancouver) or at least sites adjacent to such cities. It is not only the urban infrastructure and services that are required to support the Olympics but the Olympic sites themselves (e.g. arenas and stadiums) that require large populations to make them viable on a long-term basis.

The City as Fortified Space

Fear and security increasingly dominate life in post-modern cities. Surveillance and policing have become dominant themes in the "carceral city" which has become a series of fortified spaces. Surveillance cameras have become typical devices whereby activity is monitored as a means of controlling behaviour, protecting property and ensuring public safety.

The Olympics are both affected by this urban trend and contribute towards it. On the one hand, the security needs of the Olympics are a defence against fear of attack from those who want to use the event for their own purposes or who oppose it. The high-profile nature of the Olympics makes them (or their officials or participants) an accessible target if proper precautions are not taken. On the other hand, the security needs of the Olympics are also a result of the Olympic product itself, which the IOC works hard to create. The marketing of the Olympics and its heroes, the protection of its brand, the controversies within the IOC or the issues in which it becomes embroiled, have intensified the need for a host city with significant fortified space. The modern Olympics have become synonymous with high security requirements and considerable attention to various forms of policing. Olympic villages are not only fortified spaces but increasingly so
are Olympic venues. Considerable attention is paid to protection of members of the Olympic family, volunteers undergo various forms of screening, and the use of the Olympic brand and symbols are under watchful surveillance. Police have developed elaborate methods for crowd control and restricting access, and the development of policing strategies is consuming ever increasing costs for cities hosting the Olympics.

The Post-modern City and Long-term Olympic Impacts

If the goal of cities is not just to host the Olympics as a one-off event but to improve the city in some more enduring way, then it is important to determine what kind of changes it supports (Chalkley & Essex, 1999). Infrastructural improvements can be detailed but what is proposed here is to identify how the Olympics, and especially Olympic structures, are related to the post-modern city in the post-event period. There will be no attempt to deal with all of the matters raised above but a select number of issues will be examined that emerged particularly in the post-Olympic period in Calgary.

The assumption that structures this analysis is that Olympic outcomes go far beyond sport and that, from an urban perspective, non-sporting outcomes may be even more important than the sporting outcomes.1 Having more facilities in which athletes can be trained may be an outcome considered a legacy, but the demolition of low-cost housing to build a new Olympic venue is also an outcome but would not be considered a legacy. Persons interested in a city’s new training facilities would make one evaluation of this impact whereas persons responsible for housing the poor might have a very different evaluation. In short, the urban impact of the Olympics is much more complex and mixed (not just positive) than a sporting perspective might suggest. It is also important to recognize the distinction between planned versus unplanned or unintended outcomes. The goal might have simply been to build a new Olympic facility with no intention of deliberately making people homeless in the neighbouring area but that may have been the unintended result.Acknowledging only primary impacts without also being attuned to secondary consequences provides misleading interpretations of Olympic outcomes.

The post-Olympic period is perhaps the most ignored phase in the Olympic cycle. Because, by definition, the focal point of the cycle is the Games themselves, the emphasis is always on the Olympics, and what occurs afterwards has the lowest priority. The Organizing Committee has been disbanded, politicians are replaced or move on to other issues, and even the media lose interest. Once the euphoria is over, the Olympics drops from the public agenda and it becomes an event in the past. Several issues can be identified that underscore the long-term impact of the Olympics in light of the urban themes identified above.

The Residual Marketing Value of Being a Former Host Olympic City

Presumably the primary marketing time for a host city is in the pre-event phase and during the Games itself (e.g. Mount & Leroux, 1994). But does
being a former Olympic city have any value at all? There is evidence that there is some kind of residual benefit to having been a host city, but that this benefit drops off dramatically over time (Preuss, 2003; Ritchie & Lyon, 1991). Having been a host city allows a city to commemorate that fact through its inclusion as an historic marker in the city’s history and for which there might be some global public recognition. There may be a halo effect to having been an Olympic city, but its value wears thin as time passes and public opinion is directed to new and perhaps more recent Olympic sites. A new generation of citizens both locally and internationally has no recollection of the event at this place at all. While a successful Games may produce nostalgia and many collective memories among some residents, there is minimal value in them for cities to use the Games as a marketing tool in the post-event period. While Calgary has signs at the entrance to the city commemorating the Games, the fact that the city has searched for other events of global proportions (e.g. a failed 2005 World Expo bid) to sustain the marketing thrust serves as evidence that the impact of the Olympics was waning.

Former Olympic facilities, though, do provide an interesting illustration of how the Olympic influence is both preserved and transformed. The naming rights of the Olympic Saddledome (the primary indoor ice event venue seating about 20,000 people) was sold to corporate interests and named in succession the Canadian Airlines Saddledome, and then the Pengrowth Saddledome with the “Olympic” designation totally removed. The Saddledome is the home arena for the city’s National Hockey League team which receives considerable media exposure, but seldom is the linkage to the Olympics mentioned. On the other hand, the Olympic Oval on the university campus retains its name, presumably because its naming rights have less economic value. Both the Saddledome and Oval are signature structures for the city because of their size and visibility but the Oval receives much less publicity though it remains an active training/competition site for Olympic athletes in speedskating.

Canada Olympic Park (COP) which housed ski jumping and luge/bobsled on the edge of the city, however, has become a central piece in tourism marketing for the city. Located on a major highway 30 minutes from downtown, COP is unique in that it was a site for outdoor Olympic competition but within the boundaries of a major metropolitan city. Marketing itself as “the crown jewel of the XV Olympic Winter Games”, the Park not only retains its Olympic name but also houses the Olympic Hall of Fame and Museum which celebrates the “glory” of the Calgary Olympics and other Canadian Winter Olympic achievements. It also continues as a training site for Olympic athletes in the competitions noted above. It has been argued by its management body (Calgary Olympic Development Authority) that COP is a tourist attraction that adds an additional day on to a visitor’s stay in the city (although the evidence of that is waning). COP is the major remaining landmark in the city explicitly commemorating the Olympics and of continuing Olympic significance. While it is difficult to use former Olympic facilities as a way of “hard-branding” (Evans, 2003) a city
(in the same way that a grand museum or “world’s largest mall” might be able to do so), COP attempts to play a role in marketing the city as a tourist destination. The outline of the Saddledome in the Calgary skyline appears in many promotions of the city but, as already noted, its Olympic connection has been largely stripped away.

In sum, while there is some name recognition for the city of Calgary as a former host city at the global level, it has largely faded and remains only an historic benchmark. Furthermore, the facilities that were built for the Olympics and named accordingly have had mixed residual value in promoting the city. The hosting of occasional World Cup ski jump competitions and the legacy of the buildings as visible landmarks and training sites are important but have limited value as marketing tools for the city.

The Adaptation of Olympic Facilities for Post-Games Usage: Consumptive Leisure

Specialized competition facilities (e.g. velodromes, stadiums, speedskating ovals, etc.) might continue to host sport competitions or serve as training centres but not without a constant eye on requirements for upgrading to ensure the facility is at world standards. Many former Winter Olympic sites are allowed to fall into disrepair. The Olympic Oval in Calgary is one of only three indoor speedskating ovals in the world and is known to have very fast ice. Therefore it continues to attract athletes for training purposes as well as for World Cup competitions. Canada Olympic Park recently built “the world’s only indoor year round” push start training facility for sliding sports known as the Ice House or National Sliding Centre. In an attempt to retain its place as a training facility for winter sport, largely due to its expensive refrigerated track, the Calgary Olympic Development Association (CODA) announced in 2002 its intention to establish Canada’s first Canadian Centre of Sport Excellence (CCOSE) for which it needed CDN$260 million to ensure a state-of-the-art training facility which also would support research and new technologies. An FIS sanctioned Superpipe was also built for snow boarding and plans exist to build a water ramp for summer training for freestyle skiers. In other words, it was recognized that a former Olympic site must continue to reinvent itself and aggressively seek to retain its edge if it does not want to become obsolete.

But there are two other matters. One is that the demand on these sites for training or competitions was not significant enough to warrant its dedication only for that purpose. Second, on-going expenses meant that these facilities were expected to generate revenue, so they are rented out for both sport and non-sport uses. Stadiums and arenas have the greatest potential for multiple uses and revenue generation. For example, the Saddledome (located near the centre of the city) bills itself as “Calgary’s leader for entertainment”. “Today great seating, fabulous food, superior service, and state-of-the-art technology make the Saddledome the perfect choice for an unforgettable entertainment experience (website accessed June 2004)”. COP advertises “wild slide
rides” (luge or skeleton) at high speeds including a complete video analysis of your slide”. Bobsleigh rides are advertised as “high banked corners and blinding straightaways” for $120 per person. Competitive sports facilities, then, are marketed for public consumption.

But if the description of these rides sounds more like a theme park, there are other aspects of the park that support consumptive leisure but also at a price. There is euro-bungee and wall climbing for a fee, the museum has a state-of-the-art theatre and Discovery Room “for hands-on fun”, and a virtual reality hockey shootout game. There is mini golf, beach volleyball and softball diamonds for summer activity, and a 25k mountain bike trail (winter and summer). There is a retail shop for gifts and accessories, Sunday brunch at the Naturbahn Teahouse, tours of the park including rides on a glass elevator to the top of the 90-metre ski jump, and vacation packages with accommodations at an urban retreat and spa. Future plans are for the ski jump bowl to be transformed into an entertainment bowl that can seat 10,000. All of these activities have been developed since the Olympics and have been designed to increase revenue through leisure consumption. Future plans for a Festival Plaza, Athlete’s Plaza and Centennial Plaza for COP all suggest the creation of even more of a theme park atmosphere.

There is a further problem related to the threat of obsolescence. In recent years, planning for post-Olympic usage has focused on designating a sum of money from Olympic revenues to assist in the on-going operation of Olympic facilities. But operational costs are quite different from structural redesign, major improvements and technical upgrading which involve huge cost outlays. Facilities that may have been state-of-the-art at one point in time may easily be considered outdated ten or 20 years later. Facility managers then are left with a real struggle about how they will reinvent themselves to find the funds to move forward. This is particularly an issue because the urgency of investment to prepare for the Games is over and there is little incentive for governments to provide new funding.

In Calgary, several Olympic Endowment Funds were established after the Olympics (Warren & West, 2003) but this was hardly enough to make redesign changes or major repairs (e.g. the expensive leaking roof of the speedskating oval). CODA knew that if it wanted COP to continue to serve as a world-class training site that it would have to make some structural improvements. The way in which this was done was by proposing to establish a National Centre of Sport Excellence, a thematic rationale that allowed it to appeal to the government for new funding as well as to justify an appeal to the private sector for funds. The concern was not only to update the facilities but to ensure that the competitive advantage that the city had as a training site was maintained. The post-Olympic construction of the Superpipe, the Sliding Centre, and more recently a Gymnastics Centre represented an explicit attempt to prevent the erosion of the site as a unique training centre. This particularly became important in view of the fact that Vancouver won the bid for the 2010 Winter Games. If Vancouver’s training/competition facilities became superior, then Calgary’s facilities automatically would become nothing but an historic relic. All of this illustrates how
the long-term future of the facilities must be related to standards of sporting excellence for which the bar is constantly being raised and which requires new investment or the facilities run the risk of becoming dated and obsolete. Obsolescence virtually eliminates the site from use by high performance athletes and reduces its significance for spectators and tourists as well.

The Issue of Public Expenditures and Social Exclusion

Almost all Olympic facilities are built using public funds. Restricting their use for elite sport must be counter-balanced with a desire to also make them accessible to the general public. This particularly becomes an issue in the post-Olympic period. Two interesting but very different examples in Calgary have been the open air Olympic Plaza in the downtown, on the one hand, and the Olympic Saddledome, Speedskating Oval and COP on the other hand. The Saddledome is used primarily by persons who purchase tickets for events, such as concerts and hockey games for which the renter charges an admission fee. Because of the cost of renting the facility and the cost of the entertainment provided, admission charges are always high meaning that public accessibility to the building is limited. In contrast, the Oval surface can be viewed from a visitors’ gallery on the inside without charge, and the ice surface or the surrounding track can be used for a small fee. Canada Olympic Park plays a significant role as a training facility for young skiers who come with their school classes for which there is also a nominal fee. Summer camps, mountain bike racing, tours, etc. are also available to the public but always at a charge. Thus while COP is a “park”, it is a private park that opens itself to the public but for a fee.

On the other hand, the Olympic Plaza which is located downtown is a public park with no barriers. Created as the site where medals were awarded each evening during the Olympics, and as a place to honour citizens of the city who paid to have their names inscribed on bricks, the Plaza is a very important urban legacy of the Olympics because of its role as a central city gathering place. Bounded by City Hall, the Centre for the Performing Arts, the Convention Centre, the Glenbow Museum and historic structures such as a cathedral, public art (the Famous Five), and former banks (now converted into restaurants), the Plaza provides open space for leisure in the heart of the downtown. The plaza has become a central location for community celebrations of many kinds and is often the site of concerts and other activities such as the International Children’s Festival (“the happiest place in town”), skating (winter) and wading (summer), and an entertainment zone (Rope Square) during the annual Calgary Stampede summer festival. But it has also been the site of protest such as during the World Petroleum Congress and the G8 Summit in which surveillance increased dramatically and police presence was extremely high. The accessibility of the Plaza also means that homelessness and loitering have become issues which also increase surveillance. The Plaza is very close to the facilities that assist homeless people which ironically might also make it “the saddest place in town”. However, in keeping with the urban theme of leisure consumption,
surrounding businesses have banded together to use the Plaza as a way of marketing their businesses as the “Olympic Plaza Cultural District”—a cluster of 54 restaurants, bars and coffee shops within a two-block radius in support of five performing arts theatres, art galleries and a museum. It is clear then that the Plaza often becomes contested space in which the poor struggle for a place with those who link the space to more consumptive activity.

In contrast to Calgary, the medal ceremonies in Salt Lake City took place downtown in empty parking lots which were refurbished with temporary structures and then dismantled after the Games. Desiring to have a place where volunteers and local sponsors could be honored, an Olympic Legacy Plaza was created after the Olympics with a unique Olympic Snowflake Fountain featuring dancing waters, music and a wall inscribed with the names of 28,000 Olympic volunteers. However, the location of this unique feature was in a shopping and entertainment district known as the Gateway, a private commercial development in an old part of the city that was rejuvenated just in time for the Olympics. The Gateway consists of 90 stores and restaurants, a planetarium, 12 movie theatres, and condos and apartments. The Olympic Plaza, then, was linked to consumptive leisure and supported the embourgeoisment of inner-city space. Other than artwork or signage scattered throughout the downtown, this Plaza is the primary marker of the Olympics in the central city.²

Olympic facilities and sites built with public money must be protected and maintained, which establishes a quandary for their managers. Users paying fees help to deal with that problem. On the other hand, user charges serve as a basis for exclusion—a clear characteristic of the post-modern city. Public space is most closely allied with the interests of consumption industries and the public legacy of the Olympics seems to be easily linked to these activities.

The Impact of Olympic Facilities on Urban Form

As a foothills city in the Rocky Mountains of western Canada, Calgary was awarded the Olympics and hosted the Olympics during a time of tremendous population growth. This growth has continued (to now more than one million residents) particularly because Calgary serves as the headquarters for an ever-expanding Canadian and international oil and gas industry. Calgary is then a relatively young city that has grown significantly since the mid-1970s. While the concept of rapid transit seemed premature for a city this size at the time, the first leg of the light rail transit (LRT) became operative in 1981, which meant that the transportation needs of an extending city fit well with the transportation needs of the Olympics. The Olympic Saddledome, the Olympic Plaza, and the main Olympic Village all were located on the LRT line. It also meant that persons staying on the outskirts of the metropolitan area had convenient public transportation to major Olympic events. Other events, such as curling or NOC hospitality suites, were scattered throughout the city again reaffirming the fact that the Olympics require a large metropolitan area to accommodate all of its needs.
The preparation for the Olympics occurred at a time when the city was growing and, at least in some respects, this made the Olympics an important symbol for an ascendant city. The city needed a major indoor entertainment and ice centre anyway so that the construction of the Saddledome for the Olympics dovetailed nicely with urban needs. An expanding university needed more housing as well so the placement of the Athletes’ Village at that location received strong support. The point is that many of the facilities required for the Olympics were recognized as imperative for the city anyway which reduced the sense of controversy that the Olympics provoked.

Another one of the issues which we have identified is how Olympic facilities have an impact on adjacent communities. This is a neglected aspect of Olympic impact analysis. Because many Winter Olympic events are held in the mountains, it is sometimes assumed that the urban impact of the Games in this manner is reduced in comparison to the Summer Games. Nevertheless, two illustrations from Calgary can be given which demonstrate how the Winter Olympics can affect urban form.

The Olympic Saddledome was built within an older inner-city community bordering the central business district in an area called Victoria Park East. The construction of this building played a role in the continuing deterioration of the area as a residential community and its eventual collapse (Hiller, 2000). In the first instance, the fast-track construction required for quick action to prove to the IOC that Calgary was a serious contender in the Olympic bid skipped the usual hearings and consultations with the community which had long experienced conflict with the city and developers. The question was whether the community of largely single detached homes should be preserved as a low-density area or whether it should experience urban renewal with much higher density development. This residential area was also located adjacent to the Stampede grounds where the world-famous Calgary Stampede is held every year and where the Saddledome was to be built. The Stampede had their own goals to make the grounds into a year-round entertainment centre, and expansion into the residential area would have to occur to accommodate the Saddledome. As the community continued to deteriorate due to its uncertain future, the family-oriented residents moved out and these residents were replaced by low-income renters in a rooming house configuration. Redevelopment of the residential area then meant the dislocation of the poor, and this process also continued after the Olympics to accommodate other Stampede plans for expansion. It is significant to note that, again, it was leisure consumption that allied Olympic development with Stampede goals. Since the Olympics, almost all of the poor have been displaced, and the area is ready for both its growing entertainment role and the gentrification of the community.

Canada Olympic Park also has plans to expand as an activity and entertainment centre and has purchased another 300 acres (which doubles the size of this site) to accommodate its future plans. However, this property known as Paskapoo Slopes is environmentally sensitive and requires a series of hearings before further development is allowed. Adjacent residential communities are also somewhat concerned about how COP’s plans will
affect them. These examples demonstrate that after-use can have a continuing and even more intrusive impact on neighbouring communities long after the Olympics are over, especially as adjustments are made to ensure the viability of the facilities. Displacement effects or the re-evaluation of property are both matters that ought to be part of the research agenda in the post-Olympic period.

Conclusion

There is no question that there is a sporting outcome for a city in hosting the Olympics. Maintaining event facilities at world standards in the post-event period can continue to give the city an international profile, at least in the sporting world (e.g. Calgary hosted the World Figure Skating Championships in 2006). However, after the Olympics, the use of Olympic facilities must be re-evaluated and integrated into the fabric of urban life and the needs of its residents. To the extent that Winter Olympic facilities are based in cities, the evidence, after almost two decades, in Calgary is that the post-Olympic use of Games’ facilities are primarily playing a role in supporting the post-modern turn towards leisure consumption as a marker of urban life.

References


