The Planning and Evaluation of Hallmark Events

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Abstract

It is argued that the impact of the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary goes beyond the new facilities and the events themselves to the ‘showcase effect’ which the Olympics have for Calgary as a city come of age through recent economic development. Because of limitations on spectators and the short duration of the event, the media becomes the key in helping the city to redefine itself and to transmit that new image to the world. Consequently, support for the Olympics is high due to perceptions of long term positive effects as well as multiplier effects on the city.

Introduction

On September 30, 1981, the International Olympic Committee meeting in Baden Baden, West Germany awarded the 1988 Summer Olympics to the city of Seoul, Korea, and the 1988 Winter Olympics to the Western Canadian city of Calgary. The tumultuous roar of approval by the Calgary delegation in attendance undoubtedly reflected the mood of most Calgarians that this decision was a victory for the city of Calgary. In many ways, however, the choice of Calgary was also momentous for the Winter Olympics. In contrast to the smaller communities which hosted this event in the past such as Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, and Lake Placid, New York, Calgary was a larger city with a population of 650,000. The selection of Calgary as the host city of the XV Winter Olympic Games meant that the Winter Olympics would be held in a city with an international airport, a rapid transit system, and a generally strong urban infrastructure.
From the perspective of the International Olympic Committee, the impact of the Olympics on an area is that it is to provide a legacy of facilities that would not have been possible with more inferior facilities. It is hoped that better facilities will help to heighten the profile of the sports involved providing better opportunities for training as well as sites for other national and international competitions. In other words, to the Olympic organisation, the Olympic Games are not merely an end in themselves but are meant to foster the broader goals of competitive sport. Impact then is measured in athletic terms.

In contrast to these objectives, the goals of the host city and community are much different. While the sporting legacy provides the broader rationale, potential host cities compete among themselves for selection because the perceived benefits far exceed the contribution to greater national or regional athletic prowess. In the first instance, there is the honour and global recognition that comes from being chosen from among international venues. Second, there is the infusion of external funding (meaning outside the city such as federal government sources) for a variety of capital projects which is defined by the needs of the coming event. Third, there is the economic stimulus that comes from the preparation for the event, the event itself, and the new opportunities which follow the event. Consequently, it is not surprising that the essential impact of the hallmark event is thought to be an economic one (e.g. Burns, Hatch, and Hules, 1986) in which tourism has received particular attention (Della Bitta et al., 1977 and Ritchie, 1984). With the event, as that which occurs during and after the event in terms of economic costs and benefits.

It is the objective of this paper to show how economic factors are mediated by less tangible psycho-social factors pertaining to civic boosterism, civic pride, and civic involvement to generate urban support for the event ever occurs. In other words, the hallmark event may have a non-economic dimension that is rooted in attitudes and social interaction among the residents themselves. If, on the one hand, hallmark events may be distractions from the real issues facing a city, and perhaps even provide escapes from the routine or the negative, they also have the potential of providing the vehicle for a city to make a statement about itself and its people to the world on the other hand. Thus, the impact can be two directional: the impact of the event on the city, and the impact the city itself wants to make through the event. The case of Calgary is particularly interesting because the timing of the Olympics paralleled important socio-economic changes which the city had undergone. It is for this reason that the focus of this paper is on contextual factors (cf. Runyan and Wu, 1979) that explain why support was so high for the hosting of this event.

Visibility and image

Hallmark athletic events are short term high profile events which in themselves essentially involve relatively few persons as participants and immediate spectators. But in a media-conscious age, it is not only the athletes and their supporters who participate but the millions of persons who never buy a ticket, and indeed, never personally visit the site who broaden the base of interest in the event. The pre-event printed media build up sometimes even appears greater than the event itself. Some events are not even conducive to large on-site crowds (e.g. cross country skiing, yachting) but television brings the event almost better to the non-ticket holder many miles away. Other events held in big stadiums may seat thousands but these numbers are still negligible compared to the prospectively larger television audience. Most residents at the location of the event cannot personally become spectators of the event though the media make them very conscious of its existence. Tickets are usually in short supply and may sell at a premium. As a result, it is possible to say that the sporting event in its totality has an influence both on public interest and mobilisation to those who participate or who attend from the host city or region.

Perhaps the most compelling reason that communities support the hosting of hallmark events is due to its economic impact. The construction of highly desirable new facilities generates employment, the event itself supports short term ancillary services, and the exposure which the event provides is not only during the event but for many years thereafter. Nevertheless, even here the impact is normally rather limited, touching only a segment of the local community and its economy.

In addition to the economic costs and benefits, urban communities may generate internal support for hosting the event because of its socio-political impact. The event takes the city to the world and can create for the urban resident the perception of being, at least for a time, at the centre of the universe. This sense of collective urban importance is particularly valued by young cities and small cities that aspire to a greater level of development. The event then appeals to civic pride as a justification for support because the event is a media event (as evidenced by the fact that in Calgary, media people will far outnumber athletes). Therefore, the impact of the Olympics, from a civic point of view, is not just the Games sites but general opportunities, impressions, ambience, and additional facilities which serve as the basis for what the media takes to the world. The backdrop to the event becomes just as important as the event itself to civic pride so that the event is a media event (it holds the media people will far outnumber athletes). Therefore, the impact of the Olympics, from a civic point of view, is not just the Games sites but general opportunities and image.

The emphasis on image is not meant to suggest that a false construction of reality is established but that the media transforms the sporting event into an urban ‘happening’ by exposing their audiences to numerous other facets of the city’s non-sporting life, from cultural life to culinary activities and unique landmarks and tourist attractions of the city’s heritage. Perhaps the only global name recognition but suggests that the success or failure of the event itself reflects on the city [1]. So there is much at stake for the city in ensuring both the success of the Games and the creation of the right urban atmosphere so that the city will project a positive international image. It is this visibility factor which has an impact on at least some urban residents and which can be mobilised.
by event organisers and the local media to generate even larger support in the urban community. Civic pride and boosterism, then, serves as both cause and effect of the event’s impact and enhances the economic impact of the event as an objective for which the city eagerly competed.

The thrust of this paper is to show how a hallmark sporting event of fourteen days duration scheduled for February, 1988 became a vehicle of cause and effect of the event’s impact and enhances the economic impact of the event as an objective for which the city eagerly competed.

The politics of facilities construction

Clearly, one of the justifications for hosting the Olympics was to provide the occasion to upgrade existing sporting facilities and to construct new ones. The anticipation was that the world class facilities that were needed for the event itself could be used by later generations of athletes for training and for competitions. Therefore, it became very important for the short term event usage to be justified by more long term objectives warranting the infusion of large amounts of capital. While the Olympic organisations have their own facilities standards, it was important for these facilities to be seen to conform to local community usage to avoid the construction of ‘white elephants’. On the other hand, the world class standards of the Olympics became the pretext for local planners to spend larger amounts of public funds.
of money and to build more extravagantly. The primary argument made was that the Olympic legacy should be a first class legacy and, in addition, the global exposure required that the facilities indeed be considered world class.

In order to avoid public criticism for the infusion of public monies that would not ordinarily be available for such construction, organizers needed to show that the facilities were needed anyway and perhaps design or locate them in such a way to ensure their continuing usage. It was argued that Olympic facilities were even touted as having multiple uses beyond the specific event for which they were designed in order to reduce the tension between Olympic standards and local uses that planners were able to extract large funds to construct facilities that were to become major public symbols for the city.

The largest capital cost facility in Calgary was the construction of the 20,000 seat Olympic Saddledome at a cost of $97 million. It is difficult to say that no coliseum would have been built in Calgary without the Olympics for a professional ice hockey team began to operate in Calgary in 1980 in anticipation of a major coliseum facility. Yet it was the impetus of the pending Olympic bid decision that speeded construction of the facility ('It must be under construction to show the Olympic people that we are serious') and provided an additional rationale for the infusion of funding from both the federal government and the province. A fast track method of construction was used to support the Olympic bid which led to a cost overrun of $16.5 million (6).

It was long felt that a city of more than half a million people needed a large indoor facility for seating large audiences not only for hockey but for other sport, music, cultural events, and conventions. While several alternative locations were considered for the facility, there was relatively little debate, and a location was chosen adjacent to rapid transit and close to downtown rather than more suburban locations of comparative size. While community and public enthusiasm was a significant landmark in the city because of its innovative reverse hyperbolic design, and its siting in relation to rapid transit was particularly fortuitous for Olympic transportation.

Another new facility was the $36.8 million speedskating oval with funding provided by the federal government. As one of only two enclosed Olympic sized speedskating tracks in the world, this oval is a clear spanned structure of precast concrete arches encompassing 26,000 square meters. As might be expected with a building this large requiring an oval track, there would be considerable 'waste' space inside the building which would be available for other uses, in addition to off-season uses for the building which were possible through the laying of artificial turf for other games and gatherings. It was decided to build this facility on the campus of the University of Calgary where it could be tied into existing sport programs and where its multiple uses could be intensified. The decision to build an indoor speedskating track at a much greater cost than outdoors was based in part on the trade-offs for each option. Without the Olympics, though it could be argued that Calgary's warm chinook winters almost made it a necessity.

Many event facilities were located in the mountains up to one hour's travelling time out of the city, but one outdoor facility called Canada Olympic Park was sited at the city's western outskirts. Paid for by the federal government ($60 million), this facility included a group of bobsled track and ski jumping towers, all with refrigeration and snow making capacity. The fact that luge, bobsled, and ski jumping are hardly popular participation sports was somehow lost in the rationale that the primary legacy of the facility was to provide a major winter recreation park with easy access for urban dwellers. However, in addition to the new major athletic facilities noted above, upgrades of two other city arenas took place for Olympic demonstration events (e.g. curling) which had broader community usage.

An interesting illustration of the effect of perceptions of long term usage on construction decisions was the expansion of McMahon Stadium where the opening and closing ceremonies were held (7). The existing stadium had a maximum capacity of 34,000 people and it was determined that 60,000 seats were needed for the Olympics. Since the main tenant of the stadium had been floundering and failed to draw large crowds over a number of years. Therefore, the need for more permanent seating was considered minimal and, while some seats were added and the amenities upgraded, it was decided to avoid a large construction project by installing temporary seating to accommodate Olympic needs. While a large permanent stadium expansion would appear to have been a likely outcome given the size of most North American stadiums (e.g. Montreal's elaborate 60,000 seat stadium constructed for the 1967 Summer Olympics), the lack of perceived continuing need as well as the construction of the Saddledome as the major commemorative large capacity Olympic facility precluded such action.

Olympic housing needs represented another major concern for the city, i.e. housing for the athletes and for the media. The Athletes Village was planned to be located on the University campus to make use of existing residences and to add additional low rise housing complexes. This need was easily accommodated by the provincial government with the rational that the University needed more on-campus student housing. But an Athletes Village is more than housing; it is a gymnasium, shops, movie theatre, meeting rooms, and medical and training clinics. Consequently, the neighbouring campus physical education facilities experienced a $30 million addition which the Faculty of Physical Education claimed had been necessary for a long time. In addition, the Student Union Building was enlarged and adapted to accommodate a food fair, and faculty and staff clubs. The University clearly became a major beneficiary of the Olympics with facilities for which there was a demonstrated need (except perhaps for the speedskating oval), but whose timing and design in construction was prompted by the Olympics.

Media housing was a much more difficult problem. It was originally thought that high rise buildings would be constructed which could later be converted to low cost housing. When the housing market went soft in Calgary, the lack of demand forced Olympic organizers to consider private enterprise developments which could be constructed in time for the Olympics, rented for the duration of the Olympics, and then returned to their owners. One proposal by ATCO Industries involved building moveable modular housing on city property for 2,600 persons which could later be sold to government agencies for low cost housing (8). The other proposal was for the construction of a low rise townhouse complex housing 1,100 persons on Broadcast Hill which would be priced to move quickly and sold for profit. However, there was no apparent need to be innovative responses to a major housing problem. Some negative reaction was received from media people who preferred a downtown location close to shops and restaurants, and a more hotel like environment, but this was a significant solution to specialised housing needs for a large group whose no long term usage could be found for other more preferable alternatives.

The last category of construction projects is referred to as the Olympic Capital Improvement Program which committed both OCO and the City to provide $10 million each for local improvements. This involved
highway widening and landscaping to and from major sites such as the airport to downtown, the Athlete Village to Canada Olympic Park, and the downtown core to the Saddledome through an older area of dilapidated housing stock known as Victoria Park. This latter objective was the most interesting because the original proposal to construct the Saddledome in the Victoria Park area had met with some community resistance (9). The primary fears of residents concerned potential parking and traffic problems (compare Soutar and McLeod, Chapter 8, this volume) and many of the low income earners living in the area anticipated loss of their residential community as it would then be more likely to be targeted for redevelopment. Concerns were raised again when the street linking the Saddledome area with the downtown through Victoria Park was slated for modernisation and renaming as Olympic Way to make it attractive and aesthetically pleasing which could have essentially split the community into two geographic segments. Initial ambitious georganised areas which were ultimately downscaled and, in general, the Area Development Plan accepted by City Council in 1984 resisted purely office and commercial development for this transitional area, insisting on a mix of housing and commercial development for the future. While the immediate anxieties of the rather powerless group of residents were assuaged, the high percentage of absentee ownership in the area suggests redevelopment will eventually occur anyway.

Perhaps the most significant non-athletic local improvement was the construction of an outdoor Olympic Plaza downtown across from the new municipal building with a stage, gathering area, water fountains and ice surface (in season), and greenery constructed at a cost of $5.2 million. This plaza was used for the medal ceremonies during the Olympics and provides an excellent park-like setting for the downtown core where old dilapidated buildings once stood. City Council resisted a strong proposal from a big developer for a major shopping mall on the site, which some office tenants feared would disfigure the community and a compromise solution was eventually found. As an opportunity for greater citizen participation, residents were asked to donate $18.88 to have a brick inscribed with their name or a message on it which would become part of the plaza surface forever. The plaza enhanced the sight lines toward the City Hall and the Centre for the Performing Arts and, above all, provided a people place where average citizens could participate in the Olympic spirit through the nightly ceremonies, whether they held event tickets or not. The Olympic Plaza has also demonstrated that it is a popular gathering place for concerts and other forms of celebration throughout the year.

The last capital project of note related to the Olympics was the northwest leg of the light rail rapid transit system (LRT) from downtown to the University. The LRT system is a medium capacity, moderate speed train that operates at grade (except at key points) on an exclusive right of way. In 1977, City Council endorsed the first line to the south of downtown and declared that the northwest line was to follow. After noting that the northwest line would be controversial because it had to cross established communities which was not an issue for the proposed northeast line, Council decided to proceed with the northeast leg first (10). As the Olympics approached, impending deadline for construction of the northeast line was a worry to city hall and the Athletes Village were viewed as crucial to solving Olympic transportation problems. The issue was how to route the LRT through an older community known as Hillhurst Sunnyside which several years earlier had experienced considerable redevelopment pressure, but because of its location across the river from the downtown core was a desirable residential community. The LRT could both divide and disfigure the community and a compromise solution was eventually found to place the tracks down a side street rather than a main street. The approaching Olympics served both as a wedge to obtain government financial aid when existing funds were exhausted, as well as to require a shorter time line whereby controversial routing decisions had to be made through the resisting communities (compare Thorne and Munro-Clark’s study of the Sydney monorail, Chapter 13 in this volume).

The Olympics hastened decision making and funding for an extension of the LRT which would have been built anyway but perhaps with different timing. The Olympics provided the occasion to mount other projects which may not have been undertaken when they were or may not have been undertaken at all (e.g. Speedskating Oval). The hallmark event proved to be the legitimacy of the monorail, not only for the Olympic functions themselves but as a way for the country, the province, and above all the city to enhance its image. The overarching compelling rationale of preparation for the Olympics in general tended to minimise opposition and controversy thereby supporting large capital cost expenditures.

The response of urban residents

It has been the general thesis of this paper that a hallmark event such as the Winter Olympics was welcomed by Calgary residents because of the ‘showcase effect’ which the event had on the global image of the city. It has also been argued that as a developing and expanding city, the selection of Calgary as an Olympic site was not only an important decision in itself but also provided a significant opportunity for collective urban assertiveness, particularly by upwardly mobile urban residents who wanted to project the new image of the city internationally through the Olympics. To this extent, the Olympics were even more symbolic to Calgarians than they were to the world.

In three annual surveys of community sentiment (1983, 1984 and 1985) (11), support for Calgary hosting the Olympics varied between 84.7 per cent to 87.6 per cent. When asked in 1983 what benefits they expected to accrue to the city, 58.2 per cent mentioned increased awareness and recognition of Calgary as a more important benefit. Almost 50 per cent mentioned economic or financial returns, and 27 per cent pointed out the benefits of new facilities. Only 26.6 per cent, on the negative side, mentioned high ticket prices as a problem. In 1984, 76.3 per cent of the respondents claimed to have a ‘High’ or ‘Very High’ personal interest in the Games.

Preparation for the Olympics in themselves, as opposed to the bid phase, took place in an economic environment quite the opposite of the years before the Games. In 1978-81, dynamism and boom in Calgary, the years following were years of recession and outmigration due to the collapse of oil prices. The unemployment rate increased from 3.7 in 1980 to 12.3 in 1984 (12), and the downtown construction boom ended.

In this new milieu, the Olympics became very important for two reasons. First, Olympic preparation had a psycho-social impact in providing a collective positive focus during a time of urban social and economic malaise. It is very difficult to prove this point except to say that Olympic activity (e.g. announcements of construction plans, corporate sponsorships, visits of foreign dignitaries, etc.) was in the news daily. Second, capital project construction and other Olympic
preparations (e.g., event planning and uniform manufacturing for thousands of volunteers) provided considerable employment opportunities. One study concluded that the staging of the Winter Games would contribute approximately $1.3 billion (1985-86 dollars) in new activity, including 27,400 person-years of employment to Canada, of which seventy percent would accrue to Alberta (13). It can be assumed that Calgary was the primary beneficiary of this activity. Another study estimated the direct impact within Alberta to be $234.3 million in household income and 9,500 person-years of employment, and indirect and induced impacts of $419.0 million in household income and 18,800 person-years of employment (14). While these are only estimates, it is important to note that they reflect a significant impact in the midst of recession.

In a tangible way, then, apprehension about the enormous capital expenditures for the Olympics were offset by clear evidence of the event as a stimulus to the economy. Government officials also emphasized the short term and long term impact in strengthening the tourism industry on a year round basis. Olympic sites were expected to become visitor attractions throughout the year (e.g., a spectacular panoramic view exists in a restaurant on the ninety metre ski jump tower at Canada Olympic Park), and the facilities themselves could attract both athletes and spectators for future training and competitive events. No impact estimates have been made of these long term tourist effects, but tourism is clearly viewed as a growth industry, especially in view of the recession in the energy and agricultural sectors. The view that the Olympics are an "unprecedented bargain" to city/tourism’s and the new facility’s share by all (15), but clearly reflects the perception of the spinoff and multiplier effects which the Olympics were expected to have in the post-Games phase. The least tangible impacts of the Games are the psycho-social ones (see Mueller and Fenton, Chapter 23, this volume). Two phrases that have been frequently utilised to describe them are the "enhancement of civic pride" and the "growth of civic involvement." Clearly, urban residents with national and/or international reference groups would be most impressed by global exposure, and there are perhaps some residual effects experienced by others. Arnold, Fisher, Hatch and Paix (Chapter 15, this volume), for example, have argued that the economic benefits of the 1985 Adelaide Grand Prix were marginal and that the main benefits were psychic of residents’ sense of excitement and feeling good. But with the high cost of Olympic tickets and limitations on availability, an emotive high or civic pride for most people could only come through media exposure rather than through attendance at Games events. Thus the civic pride argument expressed the view that this involvement would help Calgarians develop community cohesiveness by working together on a common project after several years of heavy in-migration (16). While the preparation phase would more accurately be described as a period of out-migration as a consequence of the recession, civic support is evidenced by the large number of residents who volunteered to assist with the preparations and the logistics of the games themselves. Literally thousands applied to become volunteers and 9,400 volunteers were selected to serve. In view of the fact specific skills were needed, and a flexible employer was required, it is probable that a class bias existed in volunteer availability (i.e., fewer working class persons would likely be released from their jobs) which prevented such participation from being a truly grassroots affair in spite of the image projected. Nevertheless, this high level of civic involvement contributed to making it a greater community event than sporting events usually are.

One last aspect of community impact was the cultural festival which was to be held concurrently with the Games themselves. This festival was to be a "grassroots affair in spite of the image projected. Nevertheless, this high level of civic involvement contributed to making it a greater community event than sporting events usually are.

Ticket order forms for Olympic events were distributed on September 30, 1986 and local ticket demand for the major events far exceeded supply. Large blocks of tickets were reserved for sponsors, contributors, officials, and others considered part of the Olympic family. Local unhappiness with this outcome was sustained, and considerable public pressure was placed on Olympic officials, who had little formal accountability to the public, to change their policies. It might be said that the image of public participation and community support which local organizers engendered, eventually came back to haunt them as they were unable to accommodate all the interest.

The showcase thesis

Because the Winter Olympic Games was only a two week affair with limited seating available for all events, the tourism impact of the Games themselves was constrained. Even though all available housing was completely booked, it was estimated that only about 11,000 Olympic family visitors would be in attendance, and perhaps up to another 36,000 visitors from outside Canada (17). While this impact is significant, it is much reduced and more short term than a hallmark event such as the recent Expo in Vancouver which ran for about five months and attracted millions of visitors to its fairground atmosphere. Consequently, the impact of the Olympics on Calgary must emphasise the longer term effects of pre-Game construction and planning, the preview competitions, post-Game competitions, and the legacy of the facilities themselves.

However, the main argument of this paper is that the more dominant urban impact of the Olympics is not contained in the Games themselves or in the facilities constructed but in the attempt by the city to redefine itself on the world stage. Given the city’s relativley brief history, its recent economic and demographic growth, and a sense of regional inferiority due to the dominance of central Canadian urban centres, large numbers of Calgary’s own urban residents supported the event because of the opportunity to showcase a city with a new image and identity.

The showcase thesis takes on greater plausibility in an era of large television audiences. The fact that high intensity coverage in a concentrated time exposure, combined with images of Olympic events interspersed with vignettes of urban scenes (in addition to the pre-event media buildup with its character sketches
of the city and its preparations) that are carried world wide, a new dimension is added to the meaning of hosting a hallmark event. The irony of it all is that while television was the medium to carry the message, for Calgary, it was television that also ensured that costs that ordinarily might have been borne by the city itself were paid for out of television revenues.

It is not insignificant that the largest single source of revenue to OCO came from an American television network. Whereas ABC Television paid $91.5 million (US) for the television rights to the last Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo, they agreed to a record $309 million (US) for the Calgary Games. Thus, the medium that took Calgary to the world was also the medium that financially assisted the city to present its best image through the funds it provided to OCO which were then dispersed to urban projects.

The showcase effect was particularly important to Calgary because the heightened visibility was thought to enhance the city's future tourism and investment attractiveness. But it was also important for the immediate gratification urban residents received. For example, an educational kit was used in all city schools to prepare children for the Olympics which further enhanced the sense of excitement and support. The hype of the civic boosters tended to drown the voices of the skeptics, and the opposition was strangely quiet primarily because the global exposure theme was indeed acceptable and compelling.

The thesis developed here is clearly more relevant to younger and smaller cities such as Calgary and Perth than it is for larger cities such as New York or Los Angeles. But its power is perhaps best illustrated by cities such as Toronto and Melbourne to make its statement to the world by also bidding to host hallmark events. And in a media conscious era, we should not expect otherwise.

Notes

[1] 'It is important for us to realize that what we do and how we do it will affect the way the world regards us, and responds to us, for many years to come.' Mayor's Message, Spirit of '88, Vol. 1, No. 6, December 1986.
[5] 'Thirty years ago, a small group of Calgary sportsmen had a vision... They saw the Games as an opportunity to introduce Calgary to the world...' CODA 1985 Annual Report.
[8] Even this innovative proposal by a Calgary based multinational company was acknowledged to be a response to the recession which they were experiencing. Calgary Herald, March 27, 1985.

References

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