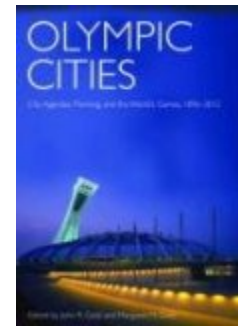


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Urban Planning and the Olympic Games

Olympic Cities, a volume of essays edited by John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold, makes an important contribution to a growing interdisciplinary interest into the Olympic Games. The authors use a historical approach to analyze the relationship between the Olympic Games and its host cities from the first modern Olympiad in Athens in 1896 through the early planning stages of London 2012, focusing mostly on the Summer Olympics. With contributions from experts on urban geography, planning, development, sociology, culture, and ecology, the chapters in the volume seek to understand both the impact of underlying “agendas” that host cities bring to organizing the games as well as the impact that hosting the games has had on the host city. The book also looks at the long-term effects and legacy of the games, with particular attention to the ways in which preparations to host the Olympic Games have increasingly become situated within larger urban planning and regeneration projects. The book contributes to the fields of urban history and global history as well as Olympic history and urban planning. The authors demonstrate that while no host city has fulfilled all of its goals, many have gained from hosting games, and many organizing committees have used the games successfully to fuel urban renewal, if not quite as dramatically as they may have hoped. The authors also caution that without adequate planning and realistic goals, hosting the games can result in substantial over costs, uneven development, and an ambivalent legacy for the host city. Hence, the games are not a magic bullet for urban regeneration, but

if planned well, especially with attention to post-games use, they can be a catalyst for economic growth, urban development, tourism, and city pride.

Chapter 2, written by the editors, provides a helpful overview of Olympic chronology, highlighting major themes in the changing relationship between the Olympic Games and its host cities and proposing a seven-stage evolution from the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 through the 2004 Summer Olympics held again in Athens. The first modern Olympics from 1896 through 1906 barely survived through attaching the games to world fairs. From 1908 through the Berlin Games of 1936, the Olympic Games became stand-alone events to which host cities devoted more resources to building stadia and other sports facilities. By 1936, the games had adopted a set of ritual and festival elements, such as the torch relay, that remained a consistent part of the games while giving each city latitude for molding the spectacle according to its specific goals and requirements. The games were cancelled during the Second World War, and the early postwar games of 1948, 1952, and 1956 were scaled back in keeping with the austerity of these years of rebuilding. During the fourth phase, 1960-76, host cities began to see the Olympic Games as an opportunity to launch large infrastructural projects, such as improved roads and bridges, telephone and telegraph lines, and expanded hotel and other tourist accommodations, in an attempt to use the Olympics as the keystone

in modernizing the city. During this phase, the games became larger and more elaborate and expensive at the same time that the sale of television rights opened up new avenues for financing the games. The 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal, taking place during a world recession with tremendous over costs due to poor planning, construction delays, and labor issues, marked the end of this phase and served as a warning for future hosts. Gold and Gold consider the 1980 and 1984 Summer Olympics as the “ideological games” hosted by the two Cold War superpowers respectively and each marked by boycotts led by the opposing camp. The phase from 1988 through the 1996 Atlanta Games was marked by commercialism as business leaders and local, regional, and national governments saw the Olympic Games as an opportunity for launching large-scale urban regeneration projects, with increased attention on the future use of Olympic facilities and on opportunities for future economic growth, transforming host cities for the new global economy and providing a global platform for cities to advertise themselves. The current phase from the Sydney Games of 2000 to the present finds “cities actively competing to host a festival designed to leave a perceptible but sustainable physical legacy” (p. 19).

The volume is divided into three parts, with the first four essays providing general trends in the evolution of the Olympic host city in the Summer Olympic Games, the Winter Olympic Games from 1924 to 2002, the Cultural Olympiads that accompanied the Olympic Games, and the Paralympic Games. Part 2 takes a thematic approach with chapters on financing the Olympics, the efforts of urban promotion of the Olympic cities, and the challenges for cities in hosting a spectacle that has grown larger and more elaborate over time. The final chapter in part 2 discusses the use of the games to spark urban regeneration and renewal and discusses the mixed legacies of the games. Part 3 provides case studies for the Berlin Olympics of 1926, the Mexico City Games in 1968, Montreal 1976, Barcelona 1992, Sydney 2000, Athens 2004, and Beijing 2008. The final case study discusses the organization of the London Games scheduled for 2012 and offers predictions for the future of the games.

The book’s strengths are many. The historical approach recognizes changing circumstances, including different ideas about what makes a good Olympic Games, while focusing on the relationship between the city and the Olympics. Scholars of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Olympic movement will welcome the subtle criticism of the organization and what they require of potential hosts. The IOC calls on potential

hosts to consider urban regeneration projects, environmental impact, potential economic growth, and future use of Olympic facilities. At the same time, host cities must conform to established rules about sponsorship and copyright of the Olympic brand: minimum requirements for sports facilities, the Olympic Village, IOC personnel accommodations, and press centers; and the opening and closing ceremonies and other cultural traditions of the games, all of which place limits and expectations on the host which do not always lend themselves to sober and reasoned plans for urban regeneration and future use or economy. The IOC promotes the Olympics as a way to revive host cities while the games themselves are increasingly out of the reach to all but those cities that already have the resources, profile, and economic base to organize the games without risking bankruptcy.

The case studies are especially valuable in comparing the experience of different cities with very different problems, opportunities, and agendas. The case studies highlight the difficulties inherent in using a mega-event like the Olympic Games which have become a standard, global cultural phenomenon to address problems specific to each urban environment. As cities use the games as an opportunity to rebrand themselves and transform their urban environment, the study of the impact on city planning of hosting the games is key to understanding that relationship.

The final section discusses the problem of sustainability after the games. In his chapter on London 2012, Graeme Evans predicts that London will experience post-games regeneration that is uneven and not beneficial to the local community, citing previous regeneration efforts that were incomplete and the millennium Dome that remained unused for years. He also argues that “unless the Olympics moves toward a less costly, less cumbersome Olympics and Olympics that would be more viable for developing countries instead of the mega-events designed to put the host city on the map of the global commercial, consumer economy, then there needs to be a body to keep tabs and ensure that the games live up to their regeneration promises” (p. 316). By analyzing the relationship between hosting the Olympic Games and urban regeneration, the authors demonstrate the tension between modern, cosmopolitan consumer culture necessary to attract investment in the modern global economy and the obligation of governments to address the needs of the urban citizenry. The tendency often has been to focus on the international audience and the interests of business and political stakeholders over those of the average urban resident. The authors demonstrate that while

the games can generate enthusiasm from the people of the city and a sense of urban unity, the games can also exacerbate tensions.

Evans's prediction highlights the problem of assessing the impact of the games in nonphysical terms. Several authors note that in the bid process it is common to overestimate the long-term "other benefits" that accompany hosting the games, but none of the authors completely answers the question of whether the Olympics are worthwhile for cities in the long run. This demonstrates the need for further research on the experience of cities years and decades after hosting the games. This is a welcome volume in that sense because it suggests several avenues for addressing that issue, including economics, marketing, and urban renewal. However, the intangibles are perhaps the most interesting to the historian, and the volume could have included more discussion about the intangible legacy of hosting the games. Some questions that the volume raises but does not answer include: How do you measure city or national pride? How do you measure international prestige? Certainly economic indexes of foreign investment, tourism, etc. provide important insights into these questions, but how do you measure growth of unity and patriotism within the city or the nation? What has happened to the legacy of previous Olympic Games in light of the recent global recession? Did the Olympics contribute to changes in city planning priorities, or was it a byproduct of other trends in globalization? And more broadly, how are sports important to the urban space? The authors could also have given more attention to the changes in attitudes about what urban culture should be and the perceived needs of the urban populations. Regional differences and the diverse needs, challenges, and opportunities for large ver-

sus small cities could also have received more attention.

This reviewer would also have liked to see a more thorough treatment of the 1980 games in Moscow. As a socialist economy, the Moscow experience could offer a key contrast to the other case studies included in the volume. Because of the Cold War politics involved, the authors gloss over the urban-planning impact of hosting the games on Moscow. The focus on economic infrastructure and urban regeneration downplays the importance of other types of games-related construction to a closed country with a planned economy, such as the building of restaurants, cafes, hotels, and other tourist facilities. Many of Moscow's hotels today, though renovated to bring them up to Western standards, were built for the 1980 Olympic Games. Similarly, the 1980 games required an overhaul of the Soviet Union's currency exchange systems and modernization of telecommunications, which both allowed and encouraged investment by Western firms. While the percentage of financing by private firms may have been modest by the standards of other Olympic hosts, the impact of that financing on the Soviet Communist economy was dramatic. Further research on the legacy of 1980 for Moscow and the Soviet Union would help to put these issues into a broader comparative framework.

The book is definitely of interest across fields and contributes significantly to the study of the Olympic Games by considering the political, social, economic, cultural, and planning impact of the games on the host city. It is an important resource for scholars researching the influence of mega-events on the urban landscape, the Olympic Games, and/or any of the specific cities covered in the volume.

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