

THE 2012 LONDON GAMES: CAN OLYMPIC LEGACIES BE SUSTAINABLE?

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Abstract

Mega-events, from the Olympics to the World Cups, are often regarded as catalysts for the overall redevelopment of a city. Mega-events have driven the urban transformation of cities like Barcelona or Beijing, but while the prospect of economic growth is the leading force for hosting them, the legacies that follow their staging, especially regarding sustainable development, are difficult to design and quantify. The research draws an investigation into the impact of mega sports events on the built environment, focusing on the analysis of the 2012 London Olympic Games. The aim of this study is to assess of the real legacies of the 2012 Olympics in London in terms of sustainable urbanism, with particular regard to the public open spaces created (Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and the Olympic Village). The case of London was selected, among other Olympic cities, because the British capital was the first Olympic city with a comprehensive legacy plan and a sustainability strategy already in execution before the hosting of the Games. More, the case of London offers a wide variety of legacies that can be analysed. Future research will focus on the development of a comprehensive framework for appraising legacies of mega sports events, focusing on their long-term self-sustained impacts, which means an analysis of the economic, social, environmental, but cultural and governance-related legacies.

1 Introduction

It is acknowledged that in the last three decades the relationship between mega events and strategic interventions of urban planning have gradually assumed more and more importance for the sustainable development of cities (among others: Liao and Pitts, 2006; Smith, 2012). In a sense, the event adds some elements of advantage and disadvantage to the urban planning processes. On one hand, thanks to the availability of special funding and deadlines usually unavoidable, the implementation of interventions enjoys a sort of guarantee on the result; but at the same time, the event needs to be strongly planned and managed, if the aim is to give the city new sustainable areas in terms of quality of services and functions. It is also important to clarify that a mega-event itself is not a sufficient element of effective and sustainable urban renewal. Pursuing the redevelopment of the city only through extraordinary events can be a risky approach, as the speed and acceleration given by mega-events are not necessarily synonymous with good and sustainable planning (Essex S. and Chalkley B., 1998; Preuss, 2007). In any case, the relationship between sustainable urban development and major events is becoming stronger and stronger, and it may create opportunities for urban transformation, construction of sports facilities and infrastructure, conversion of open spaces and places in economic and social decline. Major events cannot obviously be considered all at the same level, but some common elements are found. Among these, firstly, the problematic relationship with land use planning and environmental issues, and the legacies concerning urban transformation, of tangible and intangible infrastructure, and permanent cultural changes (Musco, 2012).

Within this context, the paper draws an investigation into the impact of mega sports events on the built environment, focusing specifically on a single case study: the analysis of the 2012 London Olympic Games. The aim of this study is the assessment of the real legacies of the 2012 Olympics in London in terms of sustainable urbanism, with particular regard to the public open spaces created (the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, and the Olympic Village). The case of London was selected, among other Olympic cities, because the British capital was the first Olympic city with a comprehensive legacy plan already in execution before the hosting of the Games. More, the case of London offers a wide variety of legacies that can be analysed. A broad amount of literature is available on the 2012 Olympics; however, the majority of it discusses legacies before the staging of the Games (before 2012), while very few research works attempt to carry out an evaluation after the conclusion of the Games. More, despite the promises, legacies tend to be negative, especially when considering the post-event usage of the major events sites and sports venues. Usually, sports facilities become white elephants, and event sites turn into non-places or abandoned islands within

cities. However, the case of London offers useful insights that revert this negative trend, especially when considering the legacy plan and its accordance with the London master plan, and the integration of East London where the Games took place with the rest of the city that resulted from the stage of the Olympics.

The paper is structured as following: the next section will explain the research design and the methods adopted for the data collection and analysis, with the most relevant methods consisting of interviews with experts and site visits. Then, the paper will briefly present an analysis of the main data collected and results, that can be summarized into four main topics: first, a strong political leadership and vision is needed to achieve positive legacies; secondly, it is essential to plan ahead instead of retrofit, and a legacy plan already in execution before the stage of the event it is a must. The legacy plan needs also to consider local needs and specificity. Third, events' expenditures are one of the main issues when dealing with mega-events, as the final costs for the planning, management, and construction are always at least the double of what estimated. Finally, the main stadium always represents the most sophisticated facility to be planned, and even in the best scenarios, its management leads to inefficiencies and high expenditures for its reconversion, management, and maintenance.

2 Methodology

The methodology adopted to investigate the case of London is multi-layered and composed of a mix of different methods. The case of London, and more specifically the Queen Elisabeth Olympic Park, which constitutes the main legacy after the stage of the 2012 Olympic games, was analysed according to a threefold data collection. Firstly, an analysis of the official documentation, and, in particular, the bid book, the post-event report, and the London Plan, which is the city master plan, was conducted. This process allowed identifying the sustainable legacy goals and real achievements. Then, empirical methodologies, and, in particular: behavioural studies, walking through analysis and direct observations were performed. In particular, a set of ten observation points were selected among the main areas of the park, and a series of site visits were conducted between February and September 2015 (Figure 1). The visits were performed on different days of the week and different time, to obtain more reliable data, and each session lasted around three hours, with a ten-minute observation in each point. These techniques allowed collecting data with particular reference to people visiting the park and more generally the area, with measurements on flows, activities, demographics, ethnicity, and the built environment, with reference to safety and security, comfort, accessibility, attractiveness and pleasantness. Finally, between September and November 2015, a set of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with experts was conducted. Ten experts involved in the planning of the event legacies were chosen within the following fields: academia, local politicians and people belonging to the local Organising Committees, professionals and practitioners. The list of questions covered three main areas: a personal definition of legacy, with particular reference to time and beneficiaries; personal experience on the 2012 Games, with the identification of best and worst practices, principal pitfalls and achievements; and a personal opinion on how different hosting cities (i.e. developing vs. developed cities) and different sport events (i.e. Olympics vs. World Cup) can achieve/promote beneficial long-lasting and sustained legacies.



Figure 1 The map of the London Olympic Park and the ten observation points selected.

3 Data Collection, Analysis, and Results

3.1 An overview on the 2012 Olympics

In 2005, London was awarded the 2012 Summer Olympics, becoming the first city ever to host three editions of the Games. The 2012 Olympics were planned to use a mix of new venues, and existing or temporary facilities, some of them in well-known locations such as Horse Guards Parade or Hyde Park. To avoid some of the problems that plagued previous events and facilities in the city, the intention was to prevent the proliferation of white elephants after the Games (Queen Elisabeth Olympic Park, 2015). Some of the new facilities were planned to be reused in their original form while others were designed to be reduced in size or dismantled. The main goal was to contribute to the regeneration of Stratford in East London, the site of the Olympic Park, and of the surrounding areas. Stratford is located in the borough of Newham, which is situated 8 km east of the centre of London, and is north of the River Thames. According to 2010 estimates (Greater London Authority, 2004), Newham had one of the highest ethnic minority populations of all the districts in the country, and its regeneration would have helped in the process of convergence identified by the local master plan (the London plan), providing East London with the same opportunities of the wealthy West London. However, the selection of Stratford led to the compulsory purchase of some businesses that caused some controversy, with some of the company owners claiming that the compensation offered was inadequate. The acquired buildings were destroyed to make space for Olympic facilities and infrastructure improvements, giving birth to the new Queen Elisabeth Olympic Park.

3.2 Interviews with experts

Ten interviews with experts involved in the planning of the sustainable legacies of the 2012 Games were performed in London between September and November 2015. The interviewees included academics, local politicians, architects and planners, and local governance and organising committees' members. The interviews showed a general satisfaction regarding the positive legacies achieved after the stage of the Games. The majority of the interviewees agreed that the positive outcomes are a direct consequence of the mix of strong leadership, good time management, and design of a legacy plan that take into account the real local needs and specificity. One of the strengths was the harmony between the local master plan and the legacy plan designed for the Games. In fact, the 2004 London Plan identified Stratford and East London as an opportunity area of intervention in the city. The redevelopment of these neighbourhoods was already planned, and the Olympics accelerated the process, with a catalyst effect that made these plans quicker to be achieved. More, three master plans were designed for the area: one for the stage of the Games, one for the transition period, and one for the final legacy mode. This strategy allowed identifying the needs for each phase, and to design the right mix of permanent and temporary facilities, and other infrastructure needed. Finally, a successful time management is another important factor to consider: all the venues were ready one year ahead the Games. This allowed developing the legacy plan with the right pace and focusing on the post-event usage of space and the venues.

3.3 Site visits

With the aim of mapping the built and natural environment, but also, the flows of people in the park, a series of site visits were performed along 2015. A set of ten observation points were selected among the main areas of the park (Figure 1), with measurements on flows of people that utilized the park, their activities, demographics, ethnicity, but also with an assessment of the built environment, with reference to safety and security, comfort, accessibility, attractiveness and pleasantness. A checklist and a plan of each point selected were utilized for the mapping.

The overall appraisal showed that the park is easily accessible and integrated into the city centre, being one of the most connected places in London, thanks to the presence of two metro lines, several over ground trains and DHL, a bus station, and a high-speed railway station. More, the area offers a variety of functions and uses. First, the Olympic Village nearby was reconverted to host almost 3,000 apartments, with a new school and health centre. More, Newham is home to Westfield Stratford City, which is considered the largest shopping mall in the European continent, which provides commercial activities and shops. Finally, universities as UCL (University College of London) and Loughborough, and other cultural institutions are planning to open a branch there.

More specifically, coming to the evaluation of the park, the assessment showed that the sports facilities, with the exclusion of the Olympic stadium, are partially or fully utilized by Londoners. This was made possible thanks to a careful planning of the venues. All the facilities that were considered non-necessary for the local community were dismantled after the Games, and only four major infrastructures were left (an aquatic centre, a multipurpose arena, a tennis and hockey complex, and the stadium). The park offers a wide area of green spaces and is fully utilized by local residents, especially during the summer and the warmer periods of the year, when residents go for a walk, a picnic, or to attend one of the many events that take place in the park.

Young families and children, along with sportsmen, are the main utilizers of the space. The area is overall well maintained and secure; however, two main issues threaten the success of the sustainable legacies of the space: the maintenance costs, and the management of the stadium. The park is a vast space of almost 230 hectares, and in the long run, the high expenditures for its maintenance will force the city of London either to find external or private sources of funding, with a privatization of the space, or to close part of the park, to reduce the expenditures. Finally, at the time of writing, the stadium is the only infrastructure that is still closed and under transformation. The 80,000-seat Olympic Stadium was firstly planned to be reduced to a 25,000-seat multi-purpose facility to be utilized for athletics events, with the aim of becoming the most important hub in the East London for sports activities. However, later on, its destination changed, and it is now undergoing transformation to be converted into a 54,000-seater stadium, for use by West Ham United FC, alongside athletics in the summer months and entertainment. This change caused delays in the re-opening, and an increase of costs, because it was necessary to make substantial changes to the initial project, and make the athletics track retractable to allow the dual use of the stadium: as venues hosting football matches and athletics events.

4 Conclusions

Cities compete to bid and host mega-events, but, according to the literature, results in terms of sustained/sustainable long-term legacies are normally negative. The overall aim of this research was to understand how to make a proper use of mega sports events, by promoting, implementing, and delivering long-term sustainable legacies. More specifically, the primary goal was the assessment of the real legacies of the 2012 Olympics in London, three years after the hosting of the event, with particular regards to the public open spaces created. Within this context, this research attempted at appraising the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in East London, measuring its sustainable outcomes. The analysis showed that the city of London, although with some limitations, succeeded in creating an open space, the Queen Elizabeth Park, which is truly integrated into the city, easily accessible, and utilized by a broad range of residents. This was made possible thanks to the integration of the local master plan and the legacy plan implemented for the event. The main limitations of the space regard the overall costs that widely exceed the proposed budget in the bid book, including the expenditure relating to the maintenance of the park and surrounding areas. A second issue involves the management of the Olympic stadium, the only facility still closed after the full reopening of the park, due to a change in its final use.

To conclude, future work will attempt at defining a framework for appraising and evaluating the outcomes (legacies) of mega sports events, focusing on their impacts concerning sustainability, which means an analysis of the economic, social, environmental impacts, but also an investigation of the cultural and governance-related repercussions.

5 References

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