

Sport megaevents and the city

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Sport megaevents have become global occasions of enormous importance and implication. In a world of flows and mass media, megaevents mark particular points in time and space, acting as ‘collectors’ of worldwide popular attention and as mediators of transient forms of macrocollectivity. The events’ iconographic prowess finds material expression in emblematic architectural and infrastructural projects, such as Beijing’s Bird’s Nest and London’s Olympic stadium.

Spectacular in appearance, sport megaevents are also fundamentally political and economic in purpose. The megaevent world of superlatives raises major expectations with regard to the legacies they leave to host cities and nations. These range from political and cultural agendas—such as strengthening and reinventing national identities and reasserting political aspirations—to locally bounded infrastructure and gentrification projects and increased employment and tourism revenues. In line with broader neoliberal dynamics of city marketing and ‘brandscapeing’, there are extensive studies arguing that sport megaevents enable host cities and nations to project themselves as festival locations, aiming to plug into diverse circuits of global capital.

However, sport megaevents not only raise major business and policy opportunities but also evoke increased local, national, and international security concern. Certainly, since the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, the strongest realm of megaevent expansion, in terms of cost and personnel, has centered on security and risk management. Megaevents today condense and exemplify both the opportunities *and* the vulnerabilities of globalization.

Engaging with the contemporary politics of the event

Academic attention to issues related to sporting and cultural megaevents has increased significantly in recent years, undoubtedly in recognition of the important role that these events play in a host of realms (geopolitics, urban renewal, commerce). There is now a well-established body of work dealing with and assessing the benefits of sport megaevents, as well as critically challenging the underpinning interests, inherent modalities, and produced outcomes. For example, recent literatures have highlighted event-induced clearings of urban spaces, problematized the infringed minority rights and civil liberties of local populations, and questioned the dominance of corporate interests and state-driven political ideologies in the staging of sport megaevents.

Much of this research into the problems and opportunities of megaevents has been influenced by European and North American studies, elucidating the ‘politics of the event’ as one powerful indication of the ways in which postindustrial cities mobilize cultural fields to induce sociopolitical dynamics and to establish economic growth. Adding to this, in more recent years a growing international body of work has explored the functions, logics, and implications of sport megaevents in nations of the Global South, such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. This research agenda has great momentum and huge potential for future years.

The present virtual theme issue, published by the four *Environment and Planning* journals, adds historical, empirical, and conceptual depth to this literature. It brings together eight papers that focus on sport megaevents and two papers concerned with major cultural festivals in urban settings, all published in *Environment and Planning A, C, and D* over the last two decades. In the light of recent developments towards the staging of music and cultural

festivals in ‘fan zones’ across the host cities of sport megaevents, it seems particularly fitting to bring these papers together into one issue.

The catalyst of this theme issue lies in the imminent 2012 London Olympic Games. Yet the ambition pursued is much broader: the issue provides critical accounts of the complex conditions, logics, and impacts of megaevents in a range of urban settings. In so doing, the papers also allow for an understanding of sport megaevents as a symptomatic expression of a broader cluster of developments in contemporary politics, culture, and society, touching on issues such as risk, globalization, mass popular culture, and power dynamics in world politics. More specifically, in reading the different papers, a range of cross-cutting concerns and observations becomes apparent, which speaks to the ambivalent logics and outcomes of sport megaevents. By way of introduction, it is worth highlighting three key themes here.

The first theme that is evident across many of the papers relates to the often contested legacies of sport megaevents. Paul Foley, for example, develops a predominantly economically oriented impact analysis of the 1991 World Student Games in Sheffield. Yet he also demonstrates the need to consider wider event impacts in terms of image promotion and sociocultural dynamics. These themes are rounded up by at least two of the other papers. Paul Benneworth and Hugh Dauncey draw attention to the role of megaevents as catalysts for governance capacity building, while Evangelia Apostolopoulou and John Panis focus on the impact of high-visibility events on local policy issues (discussed through the example of policy controversies relating to ecological conservation). Taken as a whole, the implicit question that is raised here also concerns the very possibility of assessing and identifying the manifold and multifaceted legacies of megaevents.

A related second theme across many of the papers centers on the ‘cultural politics of the event’. Meg Holden, Julia MacKenzie, and Robert VanWynsberghe highlight in particular the ‘language of sustainability’ involved in promoting and channeling the bidding and building-up processes leading up to the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. From a more general perspective, Mark Boyle explores a variety of conceptual approaches in theorizing institutional understandings of what he calls ‘urban propaganda projects’. The key message—that different groups and institutions associate different meanings with the same event—is further developed by Paul Kingsbury, with a view to the popular understanding and ‘consumption’ of megaevents. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian concept of the ‘national thing’, Kingsbury’s intriguing question is: why are nationalist sport spectacles so emotive for so many people? In many ways Francisco Klauser’s investigation pursues a similar problematic. Building on Peter Sloterdijk’s work on ‘spheres’, the paper focuses in particular on fan festivals as highly secured and commercialized spheres of emotion and togetherness which exemplify the role of sport megaevents as mediators of contemporary, volatile forms of ‘community’ building.

The third area of concern across a number of the papers here is the need to investigate the organizational structures and processes underpinning sport megaevents. Two key issues stand out: firstly, the complex coalitions of authority and interactions of expertise involving public and private, local, national, and transnational actors that contribute to the staging of sport megaevents. In addressing this issue, Emmanuel Négrier highlights the increasing professionalization of cultural festivals in France. The paper by Martin Müller, focusing on the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, also explores the modes of governing of megaevents, albeit in a completely different sociopolitical context, which favors state dirigisme rather than entrepreneurial governance. Secondly, many of the papers here touch on issues of policy learning, related to the circulation of best practices between events. This is most explicit in the commentary by Maria-Dolors Garcia-Ramon and Abel Albet, which deconstructs and questions the much-coveted ‘Barcelona model’ in event organization.

Together, the papers in this collection provide a wealth of insight into the world of sport megaevents, yet they also reiterate powerfully that much more research is needed to substantiate our understanding of the logics and implications, problems, and opportunities underpinning the contemporary politics of the event.

In sum, the following papers are grouped in this theme issue:

“The impact of the World Student Games on Sheffield”

Paul Foley

Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy 1991 **9** 65–78

“The professionalization of urban cultural policies in France: the case of festivals”

Emmanuel Négrier

Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy 1996 **14** 515–529

“Civic boosterism in the politics of local economic development – ‘institutional positions’ and ‘strategic orientations’ in the consumption of hallmark events”

Mark Boyle

Environment and Planning A 1997 **29** 1975–1997

“Pre-Olympic and post-Olympic Barcelona, a ‘model’ for urban regeneration today?”

Maria-Dolors Garcia-Ramon, Abel Albet

Environment and Planning A 2000 **32** 1331–1334

“Vancouver’s promise of the world’s first sustainable Olympic Games”

Meg Holden, Julia MacKenzie, Robert VanWynsberghe

Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy 2008 **26** 882–905

“Splintering spheres of security: Peter Sloterdijk and the contemporary fortress city”

Francisco Klauser

Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 2010 **28** 326–340

“Development plans versus conservation: explanation of emergent conflicts and state political handling”

Evangelia Apostolopoulou, John D Pantis

Environment and Planning A 2010 **42** 982–1000

“International urban festivals as a catalyst for governance capacity building”

Paul Benneworth, Hugh Dauncey

Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy 2010 **28** 1083–1100

“State dirigisme in megaprojects: governing the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi”

Martin Müller

Environment and Planning A 2011 **43** 2091–2108

“The World Cup and the national Thing on Commercial Drive, Vancouver”

Paul Kingsbury

Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 2011 **29** 716–737

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