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# The juggernaut endures: protest, Potemkinism, and Olympic reform

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## ABSTRACT

Mega-events like the Olympics and the Football World Cup routinely harm host cities and societies, largely due to their linkages with ambitious urban development agendas. Concurrently, resident protest has had only limited success in mitigating mega-event-related damages, notwithstanding the growth of resistance networks at local, national, and transnational scales. Contextualised within the broader processes of the Agenda 2020 and New Norm Olympic reforms, this paper explores the tactics of protest against the Summer Olympics in Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028. In so doing, the paper demonstrates how the reforms have moderated some of the more egregious aspects of mega-event harm, while nevertheless preserving some fundamental problems with hosting, albeit in more diffuse or disguised forms. The paper makes sense of these processes through the notion of Potemkinism, conceptualised as a dynamic between the superficial and the substantive, and predicated on obfuscation or concealment. The paper also presents a taxonomy of tactics adopted by host city residents to counter the problems that persist in these processes of Potemkin reform.

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## Introduction: persistent problems and reform

Mega-events – the perennially popular spectacles of sport – have long been linked to ambitious political and urban development projects, and consistently cause damage to host cities and societies around the globe (Burbank et al., 2002; Müller, 2015; Roche, 2017). Though beloved by billions, the Olympic Games have been criticised for their negative impacts, particularly in terms of exorbitant costs, white elephant infrastructures, ecological damage, and harm to local populations (Flyvbjerg et al., 2021; Horne & Whannel, 2020; Karamichas, 2012; Müller et al., 2021). There exist a variety of explanations for these trends, ranging from systemic corruption within states and governing bodies, to the nature of large-scale urban regeneration projects, to the variegated neoliberalisms inherent in globalised capitalism (Hall, 2006; Jennings, 2012; Smith, 2012). Public pressure sometimes mitigates mega-event damage, generally by forcing the withdrawal of bids before hosting rights are won, but also by protesting egregious development plans (Andranovich & Burbank, 2021; Dart & Wagg, 2016; Hayes & Karamichas, 2011). Nonetheless, mega-events like the Olympics too often suffer from issues of non-transparency, unaccountability, and a non-democratic politics (Gaffney, 2013; Horne, 2017; Oliver, 2017). Subsequently, increasingly fewer cities have been willing to shoulder the costs and risks of bidding and hosting (Lauermann, 2022; MacAloon, 2016).

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In response to this hosting crisis, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) enacted widespread organisational reforms, restructuring Olympic planning, delivery, and aftermath. Working under the three reports known as Agenda 2020, The New Norm, and Agenda 2020 + 5, these reforms aimed to reduce or eliminate negative outcomes (International Olympic Committee, 2014; 2018; 2021). To accomplish this, the IOC rethought fundamental aspects of Olympic bidding, preparation, and hosting, with a focus on human rights (International Olympic Committee, 2022). This aspect of the reforms reveals the ontological divergence between the IOC and grassroots activists in the host cities, as the former's technocratic strategies contrasted with the latter's more discursive approach to the rights of the vulnerable (Talbot, 2023). This ontological divide is also visible in one of the most important Olympic reforms: the attempt to improve alignment between Games requirements and the long-term needs of the host city (Wolfe, 2022a). Concretely, this took shape as institutional efforts to improve event governance, reduce the creation of new infrastructures, and increase transparency in regards to decision-making and development. The IOC credits these reforms in creating more sustainable outcomes for host city and Games alike, but a view from host city inhabitants reveals that deleterious impacts are still taking place.

At the same time, reforms at this scale are not new: the modern Olympics have been beset by periodic crises – corruption and bribery scandals, for instance. In the aftermath of these scandals, officials enacted reforms that make good headlines, but in actuality represent marginal progress in resolving problems (Jennings & Sambrook, 2000; Mason et al., 2006; Zimbalist, 2016). It is therefore vital not to take claims of progress at face value, but rather to investigate the actual effects of this most recent round of reforms. Further, given the tendency of mega-events to marginalise already-vulnerable populations (Short, 2004, p. 107), this paper highlights host city residents and activists, given that they are well-positioned to understand inequalities at local scales. Within this framing, the paper investigates the implications of the latest round of Olympic reform for Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028, and explores the effects of Olympic preparations on host city residents and protest movements.

It is important to note that the reforms have reduced the construction of oversized and under-used white elephant infrastructures. This alone is progress towards better outcomes, as white elephants cause severe damage to mega-events cities and societies (Müller, 2015). Yet the preparations for Paris and Los Angeles demonstrate that deleterious impacts are still taking place. Thus, one perspective reveals that the IOC has reduced damages, while a ground-level view questions the overall efficacy of reform, given that Olympic-related harm still occurs. The paper engages the concept of Potemkinism (Broudehous, 2017; Wolfe, 2022b) to make sense of these dynamics, unpacking how the reforms made important – though ultimately superficial – changes while leaving fundamental problems intact.

Further, the reforms have complicated the issues of attribution, one of the most difficult aspects of mega-events research (Vanwynsberghe, 2015). With better alignment between Games and city, it is not necessarily clear how developments can be associated with Olympic hosting as opposed to the city's own development trajectory. This has important implications on resident reaction and protest, as well as on research. Thus, the paper suggests that it is less useful in the post-reform period to attempt to link the Games to specific outcomes. Instead, since hosting has become less of an external imposition and more a part of the city's overall plan, developments should be explored more contextually. In this light, the grounded view presented here relies on resident perspectives, since these can confirm, rebut, or simply bring nuance to the claims of organisers. This is necessary in order to puncture the Potemkin façade that too often employs spectacle to obscure uneven outcomes.

In this way, and with an accent on the role of protest, the paper investigates the reforms via the preparations for the Olympics in 2024 and 2028. It traces the strategies of reform through three prongs – governance, infrastructures, and transparency – as articulated in Paris and Los Angeles. This is set alongside a typology of tactics engaged by residents to protest event-related urban development projects that endanger local communities, regardless of the notable – though incomplete – successes of Olympic reform.

## Methodology

The foundational documents for this research were sourced from public repositories at the International Olympic Committee, including Agenda 2020 (a roadmap for future development) and The New Norm (a set of concrete policy changes designed to make bidding for and hosting the Olympics more flexible, cost efficient, and sustainable). These documents were complemented with Agenda 2020 + 5 (essentially a progress update and refinement) and the Olympic Games Framework (an introduction for candidate hosts to the reforms). Other relevant documents were also consulted, including the Candidature Files or Bid Books for Paris and Los Angeles, the hosting contracts, and city general plans such as the Paris Region Master Plan 2030 and the Los Angeles General Plan 2035.

In addition to these documents, this paper uses data from individuals in the International Olympic Committee, the organising committees for Paris and Los Angeles, municipal administrations, and Olympic delivery organisations. These include semi-structured interviews and conversations, but also workshops, seminars, public statements, and press releases. Finally, in order to compare and corroborate information from the foundational documents and organiser interviews, the paper also sources materials from fieldwork visits to Paris and Los Angeles. This fieldwork comprised site visits, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and conversations with individuals from protest groups. Interactions with local activists were organised not just during protest actions, but also during the conduct of quotidian life, so as to witness the ways in which residents navigate the controlled spaces dictated to them by the powerful (de Certeau, 2011, p. 34).

All interviews were anonymised and no direct quotations or identifiable information appears in this text. There are two reasons for this. First, a few of the interviews with authority figures were conducted off the record, and some respondents expressed concern about candid thoughts being shared verbatim. Similarly, some host city residents worried about reprisal for their statements and preferred anonymity. Second, one of the goals of this paper is to zoom out of individual experience and explore developments at larger scales. Rather than relaying interviewee quotations, then, the argumentation here is based on a synthesis of responses and dedicates more time to systemic analysis.

When permission was granted, interviews and conversations were recorded, transcribed, and coded in atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. When permission was not forthcoming, interviewer notes were coded instead. The foundational documents were also coded and compared with the interview material. Qualitative content analysis was employed to make sense of the coded data, establishing a flexible coding frame and moving systematically through the material to extract meaning through a process of iterative refinement (Schreier, 2014). This method allowed for the inductive emergence of patterns and themes regarding the implications of Olympic reform in Paris and Los Angeles. On this basis, this paper proceeds with an exploration of the three prongs of Olympic reform (governance, infrastructures, and transparency), paired with resident reactions to Olympic-related developments in their cities.

## Potemkinism

At heart, Potemkinism is the notion that a superficial covering can conceal unpleasant realities. The concept originates from the era of Russian Empress Catherine the Great when the statesman and soldier Grigory Potemkin ordered the construction of façades along the river Dnieper in order to show the Empress how villages would look in the newly-conquered territory (O'malley, 2007). The term *Potemkin Village* entered common parlance in reference to the likely apocryphal notion that these façades were intended to fool the Empress, rather than as models (Panchenko, 1999). Nevertheless, Potemkinism remains a potent concept to describe a condition that appears successful and whole, but in actuality disguises something missing, unpleasant, or broken. It is shorthand for managed artifice, obfuscation, or deceit.

Potemkinism as a concept is well-suited to exploring the tendency in hosting mega-events whereby realities unsuitable for global broadcast – such as poverty and urban decay – are rendered invisible, via the projection of an unproblematic but superficial image (Broudehoux, 2015). Within the extant literature, Potemkinism in mega-events has been used to explore how the presentation to a global audience of a wholesome national or city image is privileged over authentic improvements that might legitimately benefit host city residents (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004; Broudehoux, 2017). As it is traditionally used, Potemkinism entails both an emphasis on visual aesthetics as well as a binary presentation of reality, where the surface displays one situation and the underside another.

In the context of mega-events, the Potemkin emphasis on the superficial resonates with several important strands of scholarship. Guy Debord's foundational work on spectacle seems a natural fit, given the similar focus on image and representation (Debord, 2016). Similarly, Boorstin's pseudo-events could be brought into productive dialogue because of his attention to the fabrication of reality through image and illusion (Boorstin, 1992). Both theorists have a scope that is too large for this paper, however: Debord explores social alienation in the context of the capitalist mode of production, while Boorstin unpacks the extravagant expectations of mediatised modernity. In contrast, Potemkinism here is employed to make sense of the particular situation when Olympic reforms appear to make social and material progress, while deleterious impacts nevertheless occur.

Anne-Marie Broudehoux moves beyond the visual dimension of Potemkinism by focusing also on the practices engaged to create a controlled and artificial mega-event reality (Broudehoux, 2015). Many of these practices reinforce the binary between surface and substance, attempting to conceal 'undesirable' populations or tumbledown infrastructures by forced removals or the construction of high walls (Kennelly & Watt, 2011; Kennelly, 2015; Wolfe, 2022b). Indeed, the Potemkin binary is one of the fundamental characteristics of mega-events but, at the same time, this dichotomy can be too limiting. Sometimes, Potemkin binary thinking will miss how mega-events function within the blurriness between the superficial and the meaningful. For example, the spectacular Olympic opening ceremonies are easily understood through a Potemkin frame, as organisers present a sanitised version of national identity for superficial mass consumption (MacAloon, 1984; Tomlinson, 1996). These performances have real power, however, in constructing or reshaping the ideas of nationhood and belonging, which can have serious implications at multiple scales (Militz, 2019; Tomlinson & Young, 2012). These ceremonies highlight the limitations of binary thinking and demonstrate how the superficial and the substantial are not necessarily so divided. Potemkinism functions through the binary, but at the same time also transcends dualism, and therefore should also be understood as blended, interdependent, and messy.

The purpose here of emphasising the blended nature of mega-event Potemkinism is to think through the lack of clarity at play in the post-reform Olympics as articulated in Paris and Los Angeles. As the following sections demonstrate, while there are numerous examples of transparently dualistic Potemkinism on the ground, one of the characteristics of post-reform Games is how Olympic preparations are marked by the coexistence or clashing of multiple parallel sets of values, priorities, and understandings of success. On this foundation, this paper engages Potemkin blendedness to understand how the Agenda 2020 and New Norm reforms make selected improvements to the functioning of the Olympics, while masking or leaving certain fundamental inequalities intact.

### Strategies of reform and tactics of resistance

To unpack the processes of Olympic reform and their implications on the lives of host city residents, this paper engages another binary: the dichotomy of strategies and tactics as elaborated by Michel de Certeau (2011). Strategies belong to the strong. They are rooted in place, and conceptualised as rational, scientific, and militaristic. They are a calculation of power and they attempt to establish control over external realities (de Certeau, 2011, p. 36). Conversely, tactics are the tools of the weak. They are isolated and often improvised, existing in the moment, and defined by the absence of

power. As with Potemkinism, however, some developments in Paris and Los Angeles reveal moments that transcend this binary. Thus, the value of de Certeau is not constrained only to a simple categorisation: strategies in one box, tactics in another. Rather, the conceptual purchase here is revealed by combining the binary with de Certeau's emphasis on the practices of everyday life, enacted within the cracks of a framework established by power. In this way, strategies are legible as rationalising and ordering processes imposed upon society by the powerful, while tactics become visible as the ways in which unruly individuals resist, by reappropriating the fabricated substances of modernity.

Applied to mega-events, thinking through de Certeau helps make sense of the implications of Olympic reform on the ground, away from the level of rhetoric. De Certeau's conceptual vocabulary encourages the penetration of the Potemkin surface to investigate the less sanitised realities of the host cities, and in particular emphasises how residents make use of the mega-event situations imposed upon them by organising authorities (Wolfe, 2021). Building on this foundation, this paper proceeds with an exploration of the strategies of Olympic reform, paired with an analysis of resident tactics. In this way, the paper uncovers the construction of a Potemkin surface and then investigates what transpires underneath.

Overall, the goal of reform is to keep the Olympic movement relevant and valuable by inscribing sustainability into every aspect of the Games, from bidding and planning to delivery and legacy. This is envisioned holistically, enacted through a restructuring of institutional functioning, and oriented towards environmental protection, harmonious urban development, and an awareness of future effects (International Olympic Committee, 2014, p. 3). This restructuring has occurred in stages over multiple years, comprising general intentions, concrete implementation, evaluation of results, and further refinements. Broadly, this process began with Agenda 2020 and continued with the New Norm and Agenda 2020 + 5 (International Olympic Committee, 2014; 2018; 2021). Thinking with de Certeau, these reforms are clearly strategic: they are rationalised, presented with systematic and scientific discourse, and operate from a place of power.

The original Agenda 2020 contained 40 recommendations to launch the strategic redirection of the Olympic Games. Of these, six recommendations were selected for implementation in order to restructure the organisation of the Games, oriented on reducing costs and streamlining the entire process (International Olympic Committee, 2018, p. 3). The first three recommendations aimed at reforming the bidding stages: inviting bids from selected cities, evaluating those bids according to risks and opportunities, and reducing the costs of bidding overall. The next three directed a large-scale rethink of how the Games should be organised and deployed: including sustainability in all aspects of the Olympics, reducing cost and increasing flexibility, and maximising synergies with stakeholders. These six principles formed the basis of the New Norm reforms, taking shape as concrete reductions in cost and complexity, and aspiring to minimise risk and reduce waste (International Olympic Committee, 2018, p. 6).

In practice, the New Norm has realigned the requirements of the Games with the development trajectory of the host city. This is presented as a partnership between the International Olympic Committee and host city authorities, eschewing the sort of top-down imposition of planning requirements that was the hallmark of previous mega-events and that has resulted in the proliferation of oversized and underused white elephant infrastructures, among many other problems (Alm et al., 2016; Drummond & Cronje, 2019). Since hosts are chosen well in advance, and the Games will not be paused, this realignment has proceeded over a period of many years and has been put into effect only gradually. Thus, Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028 are the first Summer Games host cities to function almost entirely under the aegis of the reforms, while Milan-Cortina 2026 will be the first post-reform Winter Olympics (Bazzanella et al., 2022). There are three main thrusts of reform considered here: governance, infrastructures, and transparency. Each of them has had significant effects on the articulation of the Games, as well as on resident reaction and protest.

## Governance

One of the major changes enacted by the reforms is a shift in planning authority. Post-reform, the International Olympic Committee loosened event requirements so as to better integrate the Games with the specificities of the host city, ceding responsibility in many ways of how the mega-event takes shape on the ground. Simultaneously, however, the IOC assumed more power within local organising committees, guiding local authorities more actively than before, and steering operations towards pre-existing ‘turnkey solutions’ for a variety of Games elements (International Olympic Committee, 2018, p. 9). This is an implementation of the strategy of mastery through sight (de Certeau, 2011, p. 36), whereby the IOC attempts to enact a panoptic vision that observes, measures, and controls the articulation of the Games.

The first part of this equation entails the elimination or adaptation of Games requirements in order to minimise costs, risks, and potential harm. Concretely, this has meant introducing flexibility into the arrangements and allowing the Games to be delivered in ways that were previously unimaginable or forbidden. For instance, previously events had to be held within a circumscribed zone of proximity to the host city. Now, post-reform, some events for Paris 2024 will be held far from the metropole, with venues spanning the length and breadth of France, from Lille in the north to Marseille in the south, and from Lyon in the east to Bordeaux in the west (Paris 2024 Organizing Committee, 2022). The surfing venue dwarfs even these far-flung national locations, however, as it is sited in French Polynesia, in the village of Teahupo’o on the island of Tahiti, approximately 15,700 km (9,700mi) from Paris (Tulloch, 2022). To be sure, this distance throws into question organisers’ commitments to environmental sustainability, but it certainly represents a new phase of flexibility in regards to planning requirements.

Less dramatic examples of this flexibility include the myriad ways in which Paris organisers blend Olympic hosting with the city’s existing development trajectory. This model of collaboration between event and city represents an important departure from previous hosting arrangements. The assumption is that local authorities are better positioned to understand the city’s unique profile of capabilities, risks, and opportunities, and that eschewing a top-down imposition of the Games will result in more sustainable outcomes. For Paris, the 2024 Games are interwoven with the ambitions of the Grand Paris regional development project, blending the Olympics with the region’s plans for widespread urban transformation and integration (Geffroy et al., 2021). The problem is that local authorities do not necessarily practice inclusive planning, and instead have engaged a paternalistic model of development that excludes many residents from decision-making (Wolfe, 2022a). This pattern applies to Grand Paris and Olympic plans alike, and indeed the blended nature of developments makes the questions of event attribution less relevant than before the reforms.

Undeniably, there is social, economic, and environmental value in some of the blended developments tied to Grand Paris and the Olympics, for example the expansion and improvement of transit connections between the peripheries and the city centre. Concretely, there will be two new stations for the Grand Paris Express constructed near the future Olympic Media Cluster in the communes of La Courneuve, Le Bourget, and Dugny, all to the north of Paris in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis (Solideo, 2022b). During the Games this territory will host the Media Village as well as several Olympic venues, but afterwards it is slated to become part of an eco-friendly garden-city development that links the three communes with new housing, cleaned and rehabilitated natural areas, and the construction of new social and sporting infrastructures.

Though there is much to praise in these ambitions, the scope and character of the projects also raise concerns about greenwashing and sportswashing (Boykoff, 2022). Local activists responded by adopting specific tactics to counter aspects of the projects that they deem harmful. Since Olympic reforms have complicated the issues of attribution, in this situation activists employed a tactic of *focus*, zooming in on a single issue to disentangle it from wider developments in the city or region. In this way, activists highlight negative impacts separate from processes that may be more mixed or

beneficial in their outcomes. For instance, organisers announced that 13 hectares will be added to the George-Valbon Park in La Courneuve after they are cleaned of industrial and military pollution (Haxo, 2017). Organisers bundled this reclamation with the construction of the Media Cluster, and hailed it as an ecological victory.

Using the tactic of focus, activists from the anti-Olympics group Saccage 2024 highlighted the destruction and sleight-of-hand hidden behind the façade of ecologically-minded development. The park will indeed expand by 13 hectares, but this is not a straightforward calculation. Rather, activists discovered that organisers are adding only six new hectares to the park. At the same time, they are destroying seven hectares of existing park for construction associated with the future transit connections and Media Village. They will then rehabilitate seven hectares from the nearby polluted 'Terrain des Essences' ('Petrol Field') for the park. Activists protested this destruction of existing ecosystems and complained that organisers prioritise profits over the environment, because they are not building fresh on the rehabilitated Terrain des Essences. Thus, while the governance reforms allow Olympic hosting to be tied both discursively and materially to an ecologically-balanced local project, the actual effects are more mixed. Through the tactic of focus, activists drew attention to the Potemkinism at play in the advancement of the Olympic Media Cluster and eco-friendly garden-city developments.

## Infrastructures

The second thrust of Olympic reform deals with infrastructures. This is a key element underpinning the functioning of mega-events worldwide, and indeed much of the extant literature explores how mega-events are better understood not as sporting events but as major urban development projects with sports attached (Lauermaun, 2014; Müller, 2015; Wolfe et al., 2022). Due to the reforms, there is now a contractual obligation to maximise existing and already-planned venues, rather than building a new (International Olympic Committee, 2018, p. 15). This has significant implications on the built environment of the host city and indeed fulfils one of Müller's (2015) recommendations for decreasing the material damages too often associated with hosting. The infrastructure reforms also represent a strategy for the control of spatial relationships, conceptualised as the triumph of place over time (de Certeau, 2011, p. 36). Using existing facilities is an attempt to master the unpredictability of circumstance – a key factor in reducing the deleterious impacts of hosting.

The 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles reflect this emphasis on existing or already-planned infrastructures. In Los Angeles, organisers advanced a bid with no need for new facilities, instead concentrating on Games delivery that fit within the city's existing capacities and development trajectory (LA24 Bid Committee, 2017b, p. 4). Aside from using the city's existing portfolio of venues, this 'no-build' Olympics was aligned with three of the city's major development plans: a 30-year expansion of the public transportation network, a 20-year plan to transition the city towards environmental sustainability, and the city's 20-year General Plan, oriented around economic development and public health (LA24 Bid Committee, 2017a, p. 15). From one perspective, the alignment of hosting preparations with existing municipal plans means that the Games are less damaging. Similar to Paris, however, these blended post-reform dynamics mask deleterious impacts on the ground.

One of the clearest examples for LA28 is the newly-constructed SoFi stadium in Inglewood, Los Angeles County. The candidature files proposed an event where 97% of the facilities were already in existence, but SoFi stadium – listed then as 'LA Stadium at Hollywood Park' – represents the 3% of venues still under construction during the bidding phase (International Olympic Committee, 2017). This miniscule 3% figure hides the stadium's outsized cost: completed in 2020 at a price tag of over \$5 billion USD, SoFi would become the most expensive stadium in the world (Paris, 2020). SoFi was not built for the Olympics, however, but for American football. Nevertheless, it is tied indelibly to the Los Angeles Olympic project: its luxury and technological advancements featured prominently in the bidding documents, and it is scheduled to co-host the Opening and Closing ceremonies,

alongside the famed Memorial Coliseum (LA24 Bid Committee, 2017b, p. 4). It also is the epicentre of a wave of development and displacement in and beyond Inglewood. This is the foundation for the tactic of *grounding*, in which anti-Olympic protest is linked to local battles in order to build coalitions with wider appeal.

Using the tactic of grounding, activists from NOlympics LA married their campaigns against the 2028 Olympics with local struggles for social, economic, and spatial justice. Many members of NOlympics – the dominant anti-Olympic group in Los Angeles – have long-established connections with a variety of critical activist organisations (Boykoff, 2020). The group emphasised the importance of coalitions with other groups, and their website features partnership links and testimonials from thirty different activist organisations in and beyond Los Angeles (NOlympics LA, 2022a). Concretely, this approach has taken shape in campaigns that are locally relevant but connected to processes at global scales, sited in areas of the city implicated in the upcoming Olympics, such as SoFi stadium. In this context, NOlympics activists partnered with the Lennox-Inglewood Tenants Union, organising at the nexus of grassroots activism and a more global anti-Olympics movement. Together, they protested the illegal evictions and other displacement strategies levied against a community of working-class Angelenos who live across from SoFi stadium.

A similar housing justice campaign is *Homes Not Hotels*, an effort to work against short-term rentals like Airbnb (NOlympics LA, 2021). Los Angeles already suffers from a profound housing and homelessness crisis, and Airbnb is a driver of displacement, gentrification, and inequality worldwide (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021; Törnberg 2022; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). At first, these issues hardly seem related to the Olympics, but there are in fact connections that are both lucrative and problematic. Under the tagline ‘Host the World’, Airbnb and the IOC signed a nine-year, five-Games partnership; Airbnb joined the Olympic TOP sponsorship program; and the two organisations agreed to create new revenue streams via an Airbnb ‘Olympian Experience’ delivered through the short-term rental stock (International Olympic Committee, 2019). At the same time, there are at least 69,144 homeless people in Los Angeles County (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 2022), and there is a real danger that the Olympic partnership with Airbnb will exacerbate this situation.

Though the focus on using existing infrastructures represents real progress in ameliorating event-related damages, experiences on the ground in Los Angeles reveal a more complicated situation for residents. Through the tactic of grounding, activists highlight moments relevant for everyday life, such as the displacement pressures around SoFi stadium or the housing crisis worsened by Airbnb. This gives weight and meaning to anti-Olympic arguments that otherwise might remain too abstract to be effective. Situated at the intersection of global processes and local impacts, the tactic of grounding punctures the Potemkin surface of Olympic-related developments to highlight the implications of hosting on ordinary lives.

## Transparency

The third thrust of Olympic reform concerns issues of transparency in planning and implementation. This begins with a reformed candidature process that is based on open, non-committal dialogue between potential host cities and the IOC (International Olympic Committee, 2018, p. 14). The goal is to develop bids in a novel form of collaboration that better includes local stakeholders, resulting in more beneficial outcomes for host city and Olympic movement alike. The reformed process is streamlined, more cost-effective, and oriented on aligning Olympic requirements with the host city’s long-term development agenda. Notably, planning for the after-Games legacy period is prioritised throughout all phases, and Olympic authorities stress that long-term benefits should not be sacrificed to political pressure or to the short-term needs of the event (International Olympic Committee, 2018, p. 17). This is the strategy of defining the power of knowledge, or ‘the ability to transform the uncertainty of history into readable spaces’ (de Certeau, 2011, p. 36). In the context of Olympic reform, this refers to establishing new or refined terms of

engagement between parties, and thereby reducing the negative impacts that occurred in the paradigm of top-down implementation.

At first, these reforms appear to satisfy many of the longstanding calls for mega-events that are less damaging to host cities and societies, particularly given their stated commitment to local voices (Chalkley & Essex, 1999; Horne, 2007; Müller, 2015; Short, 2004). Yet a closer examination reveals that the changes to planning and delivery remain too superficial in many respects, and that serious problems persist – especially for vulnerable resident populations. The dynamics of these problems are demonstrated by the construction of an Olympic-related highway interchange and offramp in Pleyel, a quartier in the commune of Saint-Denis, north of Paris. Alongside the other communes of La Courneuve, Le Bourget, and Dugny, it has been selected for some of the heaviest interventions to the built environment, not just for the Olympics but also for the efforts to integrate Grand Paris.

Pleyel is distinguished by a single modernist skyscraper, said to be the tallest in the entire department of Seine-Saint-Denis. Completed in 1973, the plan was to construct four matching skyscrapers and position Pleyel as the business hub of northern Paris, replete with new and expanded access to the nearby highway. These plans did not come to pass and the Pleyel Tower was the only one of the four to come into existence. It fell into obsolescence by the late 2000s and was soon abandoned (Le Parisien, 2009). Rusted and empty, it has loomed over the neighbourhood ever since.

Once Paris won the rights to host the 2024 Olympics, however, a new Pleyel Tower project was born. Reignited by the development energies associated with Grand Paris and the Olympics both, the tower will be the heart of a massive new hotel, entertainment, wellness, and business complex (Paris Pleyel, 2022). Part of its appeal banks on the ease of future transit: the Grand Paris and Olympic infrastructure projects will leave the neighbourhood with vastly improved transport connections, including a new station for four intersecting metro lines, as well as the construction of the long-delayed highway interchange and onramp.

One problem with this plan is that the new onramp (now under construction and scheduled to open before the Olympics) runs directly alongside a school. Nearly 700 children ages 3–12 attend the Groupe Scolaire Anatole France in Pleyel, and they will face serious health risks due to increased air pollution. Majority-minority, poor, and from working-class and migrant backgrounds, these children will be exposed to a projected 10–30,000 passing cars each day – a local case so egregious that it attracted international attention from UNICEF (Goth, 2021). Pleyel residents claim that the project was imposed by authorities, and that public meetings were little more than a broadcasting of plans, rather than substantive discussions to take local needs into account. Another example of this paternalism is the fact that many projects were simply announced via webinar and podcast, where public discussion was disabled or impossible.

Pleyel residents have responded with a variety of tactics. Using the tactic of focus, they highlight the threat to public health, and in particular they underscore the danger to the schoolchildren. Concurrently, anti-Olympic groups employed the tactic of grounding in order to link this Pleyel battle to wider problems with mega-events not just in Paris but around the globe, including Los Angeles (NOlympics LA, 2022b). This anti-Olympic partnership is not always effective, however: the Olympics remain popular in France (Lefèvre, 2019), and some Pleyel residents emphasised that they were not protesting the Olympics, but rather were arguing against the ways in which the Olympics were being used to legitimise harmful projects. Thus, the goal of these Pleyel residents is not to argue against the Games but to mitigate local damage by reformatting this specific onramp project. Subsequently they have opted for the tactic of *appeal*. Without protesting the Olympics per se, they attempted to leverage the public spotlight in order to bring attention to the injustices unfolding in their neighbourhood and, ultimately, to address them within the legal system.

The tactic of appeal has generated periodic but only limited successes. Residents have won some legal injunctions and forced public inquiries in order to stop construction (Blanc, 2020), but the work has resumed without undue delay. Residents have also drawn enough attention to the onramp that authorities placed an air quality monitor in the Pleyel school (Airparif, 2022), though there are

complaints that the monitoring is insufficiently granular. Using the tactic of appeal, residents have climbed the legal ladder all the way to the European Court of Human Rights, but they have been stymied each time. In their words, many have come to realise that the project is unstoppable, both because the it is too important to the economic development of the region, and because too many elected officials will reap dividends themselves. Further, the blended nature of the projects serves as effective political cover: whenever resident tactics succeed in drawing public attention or pausing construction, authorities justify the work by the old strategy of invoking the time pressures of Olympic hosting. Indeed, organisers have stressed the importance of the Pleyel interchange project for smooth Games-time traffic, and SOLIDEO – the Paris 2024 Olympic Delivery Organization – is in fact the responsible party for this 95 million EUR highway construction project (Solideo, 2022a).

The governance reforms are predicated on notions of transparency and inclusivity that, in Paris at least, nevertheless perpetuate inequalities. When IOC reformers work to include local stakeholders, they evidently mean local authorities rather than impacted residents. These residents have been systematically excluded from planning processes that affect them, and damages are still occurring, regardless of reform. Despite their inability to stop or redirect the project via the tactic of appeal, however, the protests in Pleyel resulted in one very concrete development: authorities constructed a barrier between the school and the onramp construction site. Concrete blocks a metre high were set at intervals, running the length of the school. Tall iron beams were set into each block and then sheathed with corrugated sheet metal. A narrow walkway for the school remains in the shadow of the new facade, barely wide enough for two. The school and its children have all been hidden behind a Potemkin wall.

### Conclusion: Potemkin reform

In the context of the hosting crisis, the International Olympic Committee embarked on a wholesale program of reform (MacAloon, 2016). Despite some important indicators of progress, the reforms appear in other respects to be insufficient, and deleterious outcomes are still occurring on the ground in the host cities (VanWynsberghe et al., 2021). On this basis, the paper employs the notion of Potemkinism in order to make sense of the divergence between rhetoric and reality in the prolonged process of Olympic reform. Thinking through Potemkinism, the paper explores the strategies of reform and tactics of protest at play in Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028, and highlights the continued lack of meaningful progress despite the appearance of change.

For its part, the IOC has focused on the strategic reform of crucial aspects of the planning and articulation of the Olympics: governance, infrastructures, and transparency. One of the goals of the reforms is to improve alignment between the Games and the city's own development trajectory. This strategy functions under the assumption that empowering local authorities will ameliorate or eliminate the deleterious impacts of hosting. In Paris, this took the shape of a blended slew of projects that marry the Olympics to the longstanding plans for developing Grand Paris (APUR, 2017). In Los Angeles, organisers planned a Games almost exclusively around existing infrastructures, aiming towards delivering a new model of sustainability (LA24 Bid Committee, 2017a). In both, the reforms resulted in Games that take better account of the host's own development agenda, notably through more flexible requirements, avoiding the construction of new venues, and instituting new forms of collaboration.

At the same time, the reforms leave some fundamental problems intact, such as the tendency for mega-events to engender social and spatial inequalities as a result of the pursuit of capital accumulation (Müller, 2017). In Paris, hosting has acted as a catalyst for many existing-but-stalled urban projects. In Los Angeles, hosting is tied to exclusionary urban redevelopment schemes near the venues. As in too many other mega-event host cities around the globe, Parisian and Angeleno residents near the sites of intervention – generally poorer and majority-minority – risk ending up worse than they were before Olympic hosting rights were won. Far from improving these dynamics, the post-reform Olympics preserve them – albeit under a façade of local responsibility and care.

Local residents and activists have engaged a variety of tactics to protest these deleterious outcomes. Using the tactic of focus, they attempt to counteract the blendedness of developments by highlighting the harmful impacts of a specific project. Using the tactic of grounding, they try to bring local issues into conversation with broader processes in other host cities around the globe. Using the tactic of appeal, they endeavour to work within the system to stop damage to their neighbourhoods. These tactics have led to some successes, but only partially. Regardless of the ambitions of reform, the problematic dynamics of Olympic hosting remain, and it is likely that the Games in both Paris and Los Angeles will continue to cause harm, particularly to the vulnerable.

Though the Olympic reforms have made progress in important domains, this examination reveals how fundamental problems persist for host cities and societies. Contextualised within the larger sweep of Olympic reform, it becomes clear how these most recent attempts fit into a broader pattern of piecemeal improvements that mask serious damage. Hidden under the language of long-term legacy and environmental sustainability, homeless youth were swept out of sight in Vancouver 2010 and London 2012 (Kennelly & Watt, 2011), natural ecosystems were shattered and locals were excluded from the benefits of infrastructural development in Sochi 2014 (Wolfe, 2020), and residents suffered from gentrification, eviction, and the outright militarisation of urban space in Rio 2016 (Gaffney, 2016; Talbot, 2021). Looking forward, the reformed bidding and hosting processes for 2030 and 2032 are likely to follow the same pattern of partial improvements that leave some fundamental inequalities untouched. In this sense, these are Potemkin reforms: under the veneer of sustainability and improved local authority, Olympic-related damages continue; and while protest in Paris and Los Angeles has succeeded in ameliorating some of these enduring issues, residents overall remain unable to stop the harms of hosting. Ultimately, under the Potemkin surface of reform, the Olympic juggernaut endures.

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