Planning mega-events: entrepreneurial, regulatory and neopatrimonial models

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Abstract

Despite their cyclical and predictable nature within established operational and contractual frameworks, planning approaches to mega-events vary considerably across host cities. Drawing on an extensive literature review of the Olympic Games, this paper contributes to the existing literature by conceptualising three planning models of mega-events: entrepreneurial, regulatory, and neo-patrimonial. These models are categorised according to their principal goals, funding schemes, key actors, delivery agents, and governance modes. We argue that the processes and outcomes of mega-event planning must be contextualised within the normative and political-economic contexts of host cities. The relevance of this study is further underscored by declining appeal of hosting megaevents among cities – as evidenced by the bidding processes for the 2024 and 2028 Games. This shift has reignited debate on how the Games should be adapted to fit the host city and its local communities, rather than requiring cities to conform to the demands of the event. The proposed models may support policymakers in aligning mega-events with local public policy objectives. They also offer a useful framework for future research into the planning dimensions of organising both large-scale and smaller, first- and second-tier events.

Keywords

cities, mega-events, Olympic Games, planning, political-economic dynamics and sport

Introduction

Mega-events are colossal, temporary, and expensive gatherings that focus the attention of billions of people around the world and induce profound physical, social, and economic changes in host cities or countries (Gold and Gold, 2024; Horne, 2007; Malfas et al., 2004). The Olympic Games and the Football World Cup are the world's most expensive mega-events and the most viewed by global audiences (Baade and Matheson, 2016; Flyvbjerg et al., 2021; Roche, 2000). Mega-events, regardless of location, are highly standardised in terms of contractual frameworks and operational requirements. However, their planning and organisation reflect the unique political, social, and economic contexts of the host cities and countries, which affects their articulation across space and time. This study highlights the influence of these contexts on planning mega-events. We focus on how planning models are formed by adapting to national and local regulatory frameworks, how resources such as funding, infrastructure, and human capital are planned and allocated, and how cultural and social norms shape modes of planning and governance. These contexts may also require enhanced monitoring mechanisms, not only through the Host City Contract (HCC) with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) but also by independent organisations, particularly in potential host countries with poor integrity records or unsustainable planning and development practices.

Based on an extensive literature review of mega-event scholarship, this paper identifies three planning models of mega-events: entrepreneurial, regulatory, and neopatrimonial, with each displaying characteristics that have implications on both the event and the host cities and societies. Despite their cyclical and mostly predictable nature, event organisers typically learn poorly from previous Olympic Games, even in the presence of best practices and knowledge-sharing documents published by the IOC. Indeed, mega-event planning suffers from what Müller (2015) termed the mega-event syndrome, characterised by a set of symptoms that consistently affect the planning process. This term encompasses common mega-event planning failures such as exaggerated promises of benefits (Baade and Matheson, 2016), underestimation of costs (Flyvbjerg et al., 2021), alteration of urban planning priorities to suit the event (Sánchez and Broudehoux, 2013), allocation of public resources for private gain (Watt, 2013), and the suspension of normal legal regulations (Bin, 2017; Crout, 2018). However, these studies lack a comprehensive understanding of the key features in mega-event planning processes and mainly focus on individual cases of Olympic cities. In contrast, this paper conceptualises the criteria for mega-event planning models and identifies

their prevailing features through an analysis of multiple host cities. The state plays a pivotal role as a reference point and key driver behind the proposed models. This work contributes to the literature by offering a holistic, conceptual framework for understanding variations in planning practices and outcomes observed across global host cities and countries. The proposed framework may serve as a template for future research. The three models—entrepreneurial, regulatory, and neo-patrimonial—help to illuminate the underlying mechanisms of mega-event planning, offering explanations for the impacts on host cities across diverse political-economic contexts. By abstracting and simplifying the complex realities of hosting mega-events, these models make such processes more comprehensible and analysable across a wide range of global cases.

The principles of planning mega-events: a theoretical framework

The organisation of mega-events is widely perceived as a strategy for accelerating urban change through extensive investment in infrastructure (Burbank et al., 2002; Essex and Chalkley, 1998). Therefore, host cities set a principal urban aim, which is essential as it determines the scope of urban intervention. This varies across host cities based on factors such as the state of existing sports and non-sports infrastructure, or simply an ambition to establish a presence on the international stage through soft power strategies (Grix et al., 2015). In the best-case scenario, city authorities should identify development gaps and align mega-event organisation with existing long-term urban development policies. This approach, now strongly recommended by the IOC, suggests that the Games should adapt to the needs of host cities rather than the other way around. Alternatively, host cities can leverage mega-events to enhance urban competitiveness—a city's ability to attract investments, businesses as well as foster entrepreneurship at both global and local scales (C. M. Hall, 2006; Hayduk, 2019).

Hosting a mega-event requires establishing a principal funding scheme. The three most common options are fully public, private, or a combination of public and private financial resources in varying proportions. The choice of financial strategy is primarily shaped by event's concept and vision, the motives and goals of key actors, the scope of planning, and the legacy agenda. An event-led urban regeneration policy requires substantial public funding that comes from taxes. Conversely, when event organisation is driven by private individuals and groups, the budget relies primarily on private financing, emphasising economic balance and fiscal conservatism, with public funding kept to a minimum. The budgeting approach must account for different

types of expenditures, including the operational budget for the Games and separate budgets for the development of sports infrastructure (e.g., venues) and general infrastructure (e.g., roads, transportation improvements) (IOC, 2018, p. 7). Establishing a clear matrix of financial and operational responsibilities for all entities is essential for cost control. However, this approach has largely failed in recent decades, leading to enormous cost overruns (Flyvbjerg et al., 2021).

Subsequently, the role of key stakeholders in the planning process must be established, specifically the state, the principal actors, and the delivery agent(s). Their involvement is determined by their interests and motivations for hosting the mega-event, as they influence both the distribution of power among stakeholders and the financial commitment made. This is achieved through governance structures that oversee the planning process and ensure its effective execution. Essentially, the governance transcends traditional "markets" versus "states" and "public" versus "private" dichotomies (Aligica, 2019), encompassing political and public administration processes that extend beyond or operate outside state- or government-centred structures. Accordingly, three primary governance models can be identified: market governance, stakeholder networks (also referred to as heterarchy), and hierarchical governance. The main distinction among these governance models lies in the nature and structure of relationships between actors, which are embedded in socio-political and economic systems. Market governance is coordinated through mechanisms such as supply and demand, price signals, and competition. The market is seen as a policy arena in which the economic actors cooperate to address shared challenges (C. M. Hall, 2011), where interactions between transaction parties determine resource allocation and decision-making, with minimal state intervention. Stakeholder network governance facilitates wide-ranging collaborations among the public sector, private sector, and civil society, with each actor functioning as a node within the collaborative network (Mohan and Parthasarathy, 2016). By contrast, hierarchical governance refers to a structure in which decision-making authority and power are organised in a graded system. In this mode, decisions and policies are typically made at the highest levels, with lower levels having less autonomy. The centralised organisational structures manage relationships among relatively dependent actors and enforce rules through command and authority (Barnett et al., 2021, p. 5). The unicentric system of state rule contrasts with the pluricentric networking mode of governance and the multicentric system of market competition (Kersbergen and Waarden, 2004).

The governance structures encompass multiple dimensions, including planning, stakeholder interaction models, financial schemes, decision-making across various domains, oversight of preparations, and business and marketing integration. Taken together, these dimensions define the underlying logic of mega-events planning, prioritising cost or delivery efficiency in market-led economies and rent distribution in state-led economies.

Planning and governance frameworks in mega-events: key examples

When examining the Olympics, most research before London 2012 primarily focused on the preparatory and event phases, often neglecting the legacy aspect in the context of urban development and renewal (Poynter and MacRury, 2009). Notably, the ability of planning and governance frameworks to adapt and endure beyond the Games has been inconsistent. In identifying best practices, a key consideration is the extent to which governance structures enable a city to achieve long-term benefits, particularly transformative socio-economic development. MacRury and Poynter (2009, pp. 84–86) proposed three governance models for the legacy outcomes achieved by the following host cities: network (Barcelona 1992, Sydney 2000, Vancouver 2010, London 2012), public-private partnership/PPP (Atlanta 1996, Rio 2016), and state-centred (Athens 2004, Beijing 2008, Sochi 2014). As presented, the models adopted by the host cities usually reflect the institutional, economic and political system in the country. In practice, however, the boundaries between these models are vague.

The complexities of governance associated with mega-event delivery are examined in the literature on organisational strategies and learning processes. Grabher and Thiel (2014) explore the heterarchical organisational structure adopted during the London 2012 Olympics, highlighting how ambiguity, redundancy, and loose coupling contributed to enhancing organisational adaptability. Their findings suggest that these principles allowed the "project ecology" to manage the dynamic challenges of the event. This notion foregrounds the context of institutions, corporate ties and personal networks from which organisations draw legitimisation, finance, expertise and control. In a separate study, the London 2012 Olympics are examined as a platform for professional and organisational learning, emphasising the significance of knowledge mobilisation, stakeholder engagement, and professional growth in contributing to the event's success (Grabher and Thiel, 2015). London 2012 has been also investigated as a field-configuring event, with a focus on its broader impacts across various sectors. The findings indicate that the Olympics fostered cross-

boundary collaboration, producing lasting effects on urban development, influencing urban planning, policymaking, and organisational practices (Thiel and Grabher, 2015).

The governance practices implemented for the London 2012 Olympics led to the development of output-based project management frameworks, which prioritised tangible outcomes over traditional democratic processes. This approach resulted in measurable outputs, institutionalised private sector involvement, and a transferable governance model (Raco, 2013). Furthermore, the Olympic model prioritised delivery over representative democracy by converting democratic imperatives into contractual requirements, positioning state-led privatisation as a more effective mode of governance. Additionally, it emphasised sustainable city-building through output-driven private sector involvement, aligning public objectives with private sector capabilities (Raco, 2014).

Focusing on the Paris 2024 Olympics, the event is highlighted as a catalyst for metropolitan transformation in the Île-de-France region, accentuating the integration of local and regional governance strategies with Olympic ambitions (Geffroy et al., 2021). Often praised as exemplars of delivering sustainable Games, both London 2012 and Paris 2024 have revisited historical planning principles to advance sustainability goals. London 2012 transformed east London through green infrastructure and sustainable transport, serving as a catalyst for urban regeneration. Paris 2024 built on these lessons by placing urban transformation at its core and emphasising carbon reduction and inclusive design (Doustaly and Zembri-Mary, 2024). Further research highlights that Paris 2024 adopted a more integrated strategy for cultural policy and local economic development, enhancing the Games' overall sustainability (Doustaly, 2023). Hosting the Olympics often necessitates substantial amendments to urban planning legislation, preferably in a way that balances legal flexibility with the preservation of urban integrity. Comparative research on Paris 2024, London 2012, and Athens 2004 illuminates the complex interplay between innovation and critique in Olympic-driven urban regeneration, emphasising the importance of long-term infrastructure sustainability, effective governance, and meaningful public participation (Zembri-Mary and Engrand-Linder, 2023).

Shifting focus to the Winter Olympics, Raco and Di Vita (2024) examine Milan-Cortina 2026, highlighting a transition from traditional place-based development to flexible, space-based strategies shaped by evolving socio-economic conditions and regulatory frameworks. The study emphasises the increasing relevance of innovative governance models in contemporary urban

development. The evolution of governance practices in these cases reflects a shift towards more innovative and adaptable approaches, which are significantly shaped by broader institutional contexts at both local and national levels, as well as by the IOC.

The greater part of the mega-event planning literature focuses on event-led urban planning, where mega-events like the Olympics and Football World Cup are frequently used as catalysts for urban regeneration and development (Chalkley and Essex, 1999; Kassens-Noor et al., 2015; Sánchez and Broudehoux, 2013), but they also often result in adverse outcomes, including exaggerated benefit claims, underestimated costs, and the reconfiguration of urban priorities (Müller, 2015). To address these issues, researchers advocate for more participatory mega-event planning approaches that involve local stakeholders and city planners, identify local legacies, and ensure transparency regarding costs (Kassens-Noor and Lauermann, 2017), and prioritise long-term urban development over short-term event-driven requirements (Smith, 2014).

Effective mega-event planning requires confronting "uncomfortable knowledge"—information that challenges prevailing narratives and generates wicked problems, which cannot be easily resolved—thus balancing diverse stakeholder interests (Stewart and Rayner, 2016). Mega-event planning and hosting, driven by competition and discourses of legacy and sustainability, can significantly undermine long-term urban planning in host cities (Gaffney, 2013). Accordingly, in cases like Athens 2004, Sochi 2014, and Rio 2016, the mega-event hosting model proved unsustainable for host cities. Despite the implementation of Olympic Agenda 2020 and the New Norm—reforms aimed at ensuring the Games fit the city, rather than the city being reshaped to fit the Games—further adjustments are still needed in how these events are planned and executed. Paris 2024 is the first event to be fully delivered under these reforms and may serve as a benchmark for future host cities.

Despite the expanding literature on the strategies and outcomes of mega-event planning, notable gaps persist in this area of research. To our knowledge, no study has yet provided a holistic and conceptual approach for understanding the variations of mega-event planning processes observed across host cities and countries, grounded in the analysis of key actors, guiding principles, and governance structures within institutional contexts. Most existing studies concentrate on planning strategies designed to secure a long-term legacy (cf. MacRury and Poynter, 2009), whereas our study contributes by analysing the mechanisms and decision-making processes across the bidding, delivery, and legacy phases. Accordingly, we propose explanations for each model to justify

its application within specific Olympic editions and contribute to the ongoing debate on current and future frameworks for Olympic Games planning by integrating insights from past editions.

Identifying three models of mega-event planning

Research design

This paper employs an extensive literature review (Snyder, 2019), focusing on themes or patterns of planning processes across a range of scholarly literature. This approach enables the synthesis of diverse findings from multiple contexts and methodological approaches, highlighting key insights into mega-event planning. We follow Flyvbjerg's (2006, 2011) information-oriented case selection strategy, treating mega-events as units of analysis that simultaneously represent both extreme and maximum variation cases. Extreme cases "often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied", while maximum variation cases provide insights into "the significance of various circumstances for case process and outcome" (2006, p. 230). Our central focus is on the following editions: Los Angeles 1984 and 2028, Atlanta 1996, Salt Lake City 2002, Beijing 2008/2022, London 2012, Sochi 2014, Rio 2016, Tokyo 2020(1), and Paris 2024.

The research process, illustrated in Figure 1, is organised into three distinct phases. To select host cities as extreme cases, we conducted a thorough literature review, initially considering all Olympic editions since 1984 before narrowing the scope. This selection ensures diversity and maximises the potential to uncover a broad range of planning practices and attributes. Next, drawing on established scholarship, we identify the most salient and recurrent themes related to planning practices across host cities. This step enabled us to establish criteria for conceptualising three models, which represent our primary contribution to the existing body of knowledge. In the final phase, we further develop the key characteristics of each model, building upon the analytical foundations laid in the previous stages.

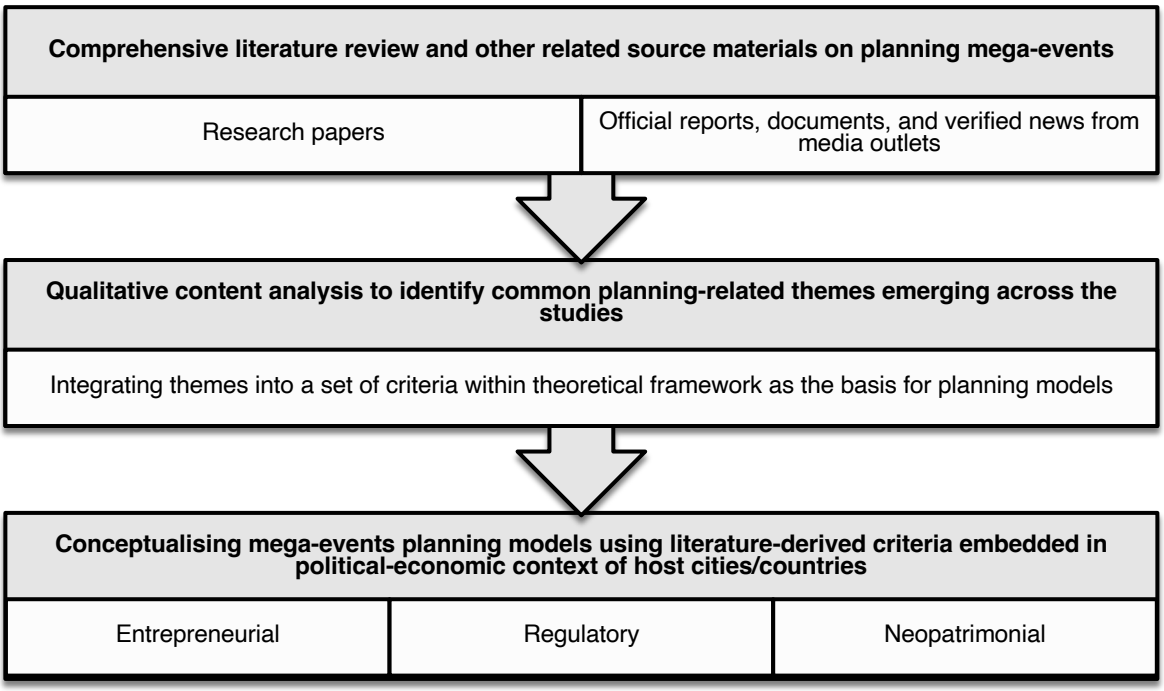

Figure 1. Research design illustrating the three-phase analytical process used to construct the typology of mega-event planning models

Source: own elaboration.

We conceptualise our mega-event planning models using the following criteria, as outlined in the theoretical framework section: principal urban aim, principal funding scheme, role of the state, principal actors, delivery agent(s), underlying logic, and governance. Table 1 presents the criteria derived from the supporting literature, highlighting their relevance to the conceptualisation of planning models. The selection of these criteria is justified by the complex nature of planning megaprojects like the Olympic Games, which involve key, interrelated dimensions. Their significance within the conceptual framework is reinforced by two key factors: first, an extensive body of literature examining these criteria from diverse planning perspectives; and second, the principles outlined in the Host City Contract (HCC), along with the operational requirements and strategic recommendations established by mega-event owners—specifically, the IOC—in the domains of organisation and planning.

Table 1. Conceptualising planning models: criteria, their significance, and supporting literature

Criterion	Relevance	Supporting literature
Principal urban aim	Reflects the overarching strategic objective that guides the planning and implementation of the mega-event in host city.	(Chalkley and Essex, 1999; Kassens-Noor et al., 2015; Smith, 2014)
Principal funding scheme	Highlights the extent of public and private financial participation, indicating how financial risk is distributed.	(Baade and Matheson, 2016; Watt, 2013; Zimbalist, 2016)
Role of the state	Determines the position of the state within governance structures and clarifies its role among key actors, illustrating how state authority is distributed.	(Müller and Pickles, 2015)
Principal actors	Highlights the key public and private stakeholders involved and delineates the distribution of responsibilities and decision-making authority.	(Chappelet, 2023; MacRury and Poynter, 2009)
Delivery agent	Refers to the main entity(-ies) responsible for delivering event-related infrastructure projects.	(C. M. Hall, 2011; Raco, 2013)
Underlying logic	Captures the rationale behind planning mega-event, the shaping of priorities, and the objectives guiding resource allocation.	(Raco, 2013; 2014)
Governance	Describes the nature and structure of relationships between actors within the planning process.	(Grabher and Thiel, 2014; 2015)

Source: own elaboration.

By using literature-derived criteria as the foundation for our models, we ensure that the conceptual framework is grounded in current research and reflects the most salient aspects of planning approaches identified across multiple studies. These models, detailed in Table 2, are positioned along a spectrum corresponding to the economic and political characteristics of host countries, as well as the spatial contexts of host cities. Although it is important to note that these do not represent discrete strategies consciously pursued by the respective Organising Committees of the Olympic Games (OCOGs). This paper contributes to the existing literature by presenting a comprehensive conceptual framework that examines the variations in mega-event planning practices and outcomes across host cities. In the following sections, we elaborate on each model in detail, drawing on a research sample of Olympic host cities as reference points.

Table 2. Mega-event planning models

	Entrepreneurial model	Regulatory model	Neopatrimonial model
Principal urban aim	Competitiveness	Redevelopment	New construction/development
Principal funding scheme	Private/PPP	Public/PPP	Public
Role of the state	Minimal: state is one actor among many	Substantial: state governs network of stakeholders	Commanding/Administrative: state controls all actors
Principal actors	Private individuals and groups (business elite)	State agencies/network of stakeholders from public and private sector	Nation-state, patron, and networked elites
Delivery agent	Private enterprise/corporation	Quango/Statutory corporation	State-owned enterprises
Underlying logic	Cost efficiency	Delivery efficiency	Rent distribution
Governance	Market	Network/heterarchy	Hierarchy
Examples	Los Angeles 1984 and 2028, Atlanta 1996 and Salt Lake City 2002	London 2012, Tokyo 2020, Paris 2024	Sochi 2014, Beijing 2008/2022

Source: own elaboration.

The entrepreneurial model

The entrepreneurial model refers to the core principles of entrepreneurship theory, describing the dynamics, processes, and outcomes of entrepreneurial activities. It provides a framework for understanding how entrepreneurs identify opportunities, secure resources, innovate, manage risks, and create value. The profit-driven initiative is one of the cores of a market economy; therefore, in this planning model, the most frequent scenario is that a private citizen or group launches the bid, as opposed to a national organising committee or a city or national government (Brenner, 2004; Brenner and Theodore, 2003). When private enterprise drives the mega-event, government is relegated to the role of facilitating private activity rather than initiating developments itself. This fits into the theoretical framework of urban entrepreneurialism, where government is conceptualised as one entity among many operating within a competitive marketplace (T. Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Harvey, 1989). Private organisers legitimise their bid by promising cost-efficiency through limited public-sector involvement. Consequently, public oversight of mega-event preparations—and spending—becomes more difficult (Andranovich et al., 2001; Orueta and Fainstein, 2008).

The United States economy traditionally embodies a capitalist system driven by the free market and private initiative, with major cities playing a pivotal role in fostering national prosperity. Therefore, the American bidders have historically pursued a pro-growth, consumption-based agenda for local economic and urban development (Andranovich et al., 2001). The U.S. Olympic host cities are argued as the typical representation of entrepreneurial approach to planning and delivering this global mega-event. Summarising the U.S. cities experience as mega-event hosts[3], Lauermann (2022) coined the term "LA model" to describe their entrepreneurial approach, which prioritises fiscal conservatism, private investment, and the reuse of existing infrastructure. This model seeks to minimise financial risks while strategically leveraging sports mega-events to stimulate urban development and strengthen city branding.

The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics is widely regarded as the first successful sports mega-event driven by the private sector, marking the rise of neoliberalism and establishing hosting as a new business opportunity for private enterprises. The LA84 Organising Committee clearly adhered to free market principles by minimising cost, maximising profit, and ensuring the event would be at no cost to taxpayers. They accomplished this by pioneering profit-driven agreements with corporate sponsors, using existing venues and housing resources, pursuing an advertising and broadcast revenue strategy, and investing very little in new construction or infrastructure upgrades (Gruneau and Neubauer, 2012; S. R. Wenn, 2015). Despite some criticism about over-commercialisation, and clever obfuscation of public costs, this funding strategy grew popular, caught the public imagination with its financially responsible "can-do" attitude, and was used extensively by President Reagan in his 1984 re-election campaign as a demonstration of the success of neoliberalism and private sector initiative (Tomlinson, 2006; Wolfe and Robertson, 2024). Ultimately, the LA84 Organising Committee announced a surplus of 232.5 USD million, more than all previous Games combined (Essex and Chalkley, 1998; S. R. Wenn, 2015). With this financial success, Los Angeles set a new standard for staging mega-events and reinvigorated global interest in hosting.

[3] The 2002 Winter Olympics held in Salt Lake City were mainly driven by private initiative with support from local authorities. Putting aside the level of sport competition and achievements gained by athletes, this event is notably known for its corruption scandal in the host city selection process and heightened security concerns post-9/11 (Hamilton, 2010; S. Wenn et al., 2021). This scandal led the IOC to implement reforms to improve transparency (MacAloon, 2011), though irregularities in host city selection persisted (Dichter, 2016). Notably, the Olympic Agenda 2020 reforms have since significantly restructured the bidding process.

The 1996 Olympics in Atlanta aimed to adopt a similar privately managed approach. However, unlike Los Angeles, Atlanta lacked sufficient existing infrastructure to host the mega-event without significant new construction (Liao and Pitts, 2006; Newman, 1999; Rutheiser, 1997). This led to public financing of needed infrastructure projects and, controversially, to public funds being managed by the private, unaccountable Organising Committee (Burbank et al., 2000; French and Disher, 1997). Furthermore, representatives of the private sector dominated decision-making within organisational structures, despite the presence of officials from public authorities and local municipal government. In their post-event analysis, French and Disher (1997) argued that Atlanta's reliance on private funding and its fragmented organisational structure were major factors that hindered the city's ability to leverage the Olympics for redevelopment. In this light, it becomes clear that the entrepreneurial model of mega-event planning relies on the pre-existence of sufficient facilities; without this key ingredient, private enterprise must fill the funding gaps, or else public money will be put at risk.

The Summer Olympics return to Los Angeles in 2028 (LA28), and the Organising Committee aspires to repeat the successes of the LA84 through the commercialisation of the Games, introduction of new sources of revenue from global broadcasters, and marketing – all of which aim to cover the ever-increasing costs (Kassens-Noor, 2020, p. 53). LA28 officials built the city's bid story around the successful Olympics in 1984, which played an important role in preparing the bid documents. But unlike the 1984 Olympic Games, based on cost-efficiency and profit maximalisation, the reinvigorated vision for LA 2028 highlights its commitment to host the Games with a sustainable approach to planning strategy, benefiting local communities, encouraging social inclusion and participation, delivering the highest quality experience for athletes, and improving public transportation. Bid leaders argued for bringing the Games to Los Angeles by, again, using almost exclusively existing and temporary venues and private sector funding, simultaneously making a commitment to "fiscal responsibility and sustainability". As the entrepreneurial approach is also focused on value creation and audience engagement, in the lead-up to the event, the organises promotes an experimental marketing and brand building through various LA28 emblems to represent the vibrancy and multicultural spirit of the Games and the city. Moreover, a commercial joint venture between the LA28 Organising Committee and the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee has been established to lead "the most innovative and ambitious commercial program", thereby confirming the innovation-driven mindset and a focus on revenue generation (LA28, 2024).

In the entrepreneurial model, private parties initiate and lead the bid for mega-events, with minimal state involvement. The Games Agreement of the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games signed in November 2021 between the LA28 Organising Committee and the City of Los Angeles (Games Agreement…, 2021) may exemplify this, with the city acting as the state's representative and functioning as one actor among many. This Agreement was supposed to describe the initial roles, responsibilities, commitments, and obligations between the private sector and the state. Some media outlets enumerate a lack of specifics on procurement, workplace standards, hiring workers from underserved communities, and housing or protection policy against displacement (NOlympics LA, 2021; Wharton and Smith, 2021). Finally, agreements of this kind are burdened with a considerable level of uncertainty regarding political, economic, health, and environmental issues. Therefore, the final price tag is subject to change and can lead to a deficit (Müller et al., 2022). Despite promises to fund the Games almost entirely from private sources, the city and state agreed to serve as a financial safeguard in case of cost overrun. In such a scenario, the state often steps in as the funder of last resort. Practically, this is stipulated in the *Host City Contract (HCC) – Principles. Games of the XXXIV Olympiad in 2028*, Section I: *General Responsibilities of the Parties*, specifically in Section 4: *Joint and several liability of the Host City, the NOC (Host National Olympic Committee) and the OCOG* (IOC, 2017). Paragraph 4.1 of this document explicitly states that these three parties shall be "jointly and severally liable for all their obligations, guarantees, representations and other commitments under the HCC, whether entered into individually or collectively. The joint and several liabilities of the Host City, the Host NOC and the OCOG shall, in particular, apply in respect of all damages, costs and liabilities of any nature, direct or indirect, which may result from their breach of any provision of the HCC, including pursuant to §37.1" (p. 11). Several representatives of government-level institutions are key stakeholders within this network and, consequently—whether directly or indirectly through other parties—underwrite the potential budget shortfalls. Therefore, this is one of the ways that the entrepreneurial model can "fail" or fall short of what has been assumed at the outset of planning and delivering the Games.

The regulatory model

The regulatory planning model integrates free-market principles with state oversight and control. In this model, the host delegates responsibility through a cascading chain of organisations, using public money to support semi-autonomous private groups, and stimulate private investment,

while retaining a regulatory capacity (Raco, 2014). This system of public-private partnerships (PPPs) represents relationships between independent entities characterised by intricate, circular linkages rather than hierarchical ones. It represents a heterarchical governance model, where networks of actors enhance flexibility and autonomy during preparations, enabling mega-events to stay on schedule, if not on budget, despite unpredictable circumstances (Grabher and Thiel, 2014).

The 2012 London Olympics are an example of using PPPs in a regulatory model. This planning framework incorporated the private sector and corporations, which realised their arrangements through public funds redistributed via procurement processes. During the preparations for the 2012 Olympics, the London Organising Committee (LOCOG) delivered a wide-scale urban regeneration project by contracting work to expert multinational firms in regulated relationships. In the context of austerity, this represented a privatisation policy of urban development, insulating private delivery agents from public demands, and resulting in a high-cost event that was both hailed as a model for other hosts to follow, and yet decried for marginalising the local population with gentrification and displacement effects (Raco, 2012, 2013; Smith, 2014; Watt, 2013). Shortly after the London 2012 Games, one of the first independent evaluations claimed that the legacy policy to deliver affordable housing was insufficient and inappropriate (Bernstock, 2014). Similarly, Watt and Bernstock (2017) observed that the 2012 Games' housing legacy is high on hyperbole but low in genuinely addressing east London's manifold housing problems, with Bernstock (2020) further questioning the effectiveness of planning gain in achieving an inclusive housing legacy. The outcomes in this area of the Olympic legacy are mixed (UCL, 2022). The conversion of the Olympic Village added significant housing units, but the delivery of affordable housing fell short of targets, raising accessibility concerns for low-income residents. While urban regeneration brought economic benefits and improved infrastructure, it also led to gentrification and the displacement of long-term residents. Nonetheless, housing projects met high sustainability standards, emphasising green spaces and energy efficiency. The need for long-term planning and transparent governance is underscored as essential for achieving inclusive housing legacies in large-scale urban regeneration projects.

The LOCOG did attempt to fulfil the legacy promise of social inclusion by addressing local community needs using PPPs, but the public was still excluded from key decision-making processes. This strategy disregarded evidence on inequality and marginalisation (Vanwynsberghe et al., 2013; Watt, 2013). In this way, organisers partnered with global multinationals to pursue a

broad urban development agenda while transferring risk to the public sector (Raco, 2012; Scherer, 2011). Furthermore, the reliance on high-profile international experts drove up costs, as only a handful of multinational firms possess the expertise and experience to deliver at the level required for such a prestigious event (Raco, 2013, 2014).

From the outset, the London 2012 bid envisioned a large-scale urban redevelopment of east London, with a focus on the Lower Lea Valley. This strategy was aligned with The London Plan 2004—a spatial development strategy for Greater London, so the mayor, the government, and the British Olympics Association (BOA) spearheaded the bid and were broadly represented in the delivery structures from the outset (Mayor of London, 2004). Furthermore, the government demonstrated a far-sightedness in legacy planning and reporting standards. For that purpose, a state-appointed London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) advanced the commitments made in the bid, focusing on the physical and socioeconomic regeneration of the Lower Lea Valley and adjacent areas. Since its establishment in April 2012 as the first mayoral development corporation, the LLDC has operated as a Local Planning Authority (LPA) of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP) and the core neighbourhoods. Since December 2024, the LLDC's planning powers returned to the four local boroughs of Newham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest (LLDC, 2024).

Similar to London, the legacy framework for Tokyo 2020(1) was overseen by the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee (The Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, 2021a, 2021b) and Tokyo Metropolitan Government (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023). The unprecedented postponement caused by the coronavirus pandemic reinforced the role of state actors, heightening the importance of local, regional, and national governments in governance structures (Chappelet, 2023). This is also exemplified by the establishment of the Joint Steering Committee composed of the IOC, the state, and the Organising Committee to oversee the process of Games delivery.

The Paris 2024 Board of Directors unified representatives from the sporting movement, civil society, and the public sector, highlighting the multi-level, diverse stakeholders involved in delivering the Games. Within the regulatory model, it is standard practice to establish delivery authorities with clearly defined responsibilities, such as preparing sites for the construction of new venues, the Olympic Village, and other essential infrastructure. These delivery authorities typically take the form of quangos (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation) or statutory

corporations—entities established by the government to address matters of public importance while maintaining operational independence. For London 2012, this role was fulfilled by the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA), whereas for Paris 2024, it was undertaken by the Société de Livraison des Ouvrages Olympiques (SOLIDEO). Both institutions were established and overseen by the appropriate governmental departments. The state assumes a predominant regulatory role, while the delivery of the Games relied on a multi-level governance model involving stakeholders from the private sector, non-governmental organisations, local communities, and other formal and informal actors. In the case of Paris 2024, this network of stakeholders has leveraged the Olympic Games to benefit regions and residents through public policies and governance. The event has been also anticipated to accelerate existing public policy objectives (Gignon, 2023). However, the complexity of this stakeholder network can hinder cross-institutional consensus, as the involvement of numerous actors complicates decision-making processes (MacRury and Poynter, 2009). Moreover, the mere inclusion of stakeholders—particularly those representing local communities and third parties—does not necessarily translate into meaningful and effective participation in decision-making.

In summary, the regulatory model for planning the Games centres on state leadership while closely cooperating with public and private stakeholders. It aims to link the Games to privatisation strategies through contracts and transactions between state and private representatives. However, this model has also drawbacks and may not fulfilled its ambitious plans to use the Games as a complex urban regeneration policy. As mentioned above, too many actors involved in planning may diminish responsibility, especially among those from private sector. In this case, similarly to potential failure of entrepreneurial approach, the state often acts as the guarantor when the budget is insufficient to meet exceeding costs. Another issue is how to balance long-term public needs and private interests oriented to immediate profit. This exemplifies how the regulatory model can also be unable to fulfil the initial assumptions made during the planning and delivery of the Games.

The neopatrimonial model

Whether striving for political legitimacy on the world stage or attempting to modernise their economies, emerging nations tend to host mega-events for different reasons than advanced economies (Bolsmann and Brewster, 2009; Cornelissen, 2010; Wolfe, 2021, 2024). Moreover, some of them feature neopatrimonial characteristics that further influence mega-event

development. The term neopatrimonial refers here to a state built on a legal-rational bureaucratic structure interwoven with a system of patron-client political relationships that is reliant on personal connections, favours, and obligations (Erdmann and Engel, 2007). In the neopatrimonial model, a mega-event is deployed not just as a tool for urban development or to signal international stature, but also as a mechanism to secure political loyalty by redistributing public resources among networks of related subordinates.

In neopatrimonial states, the national government or organising committee typically initiates the mega-event bid and remains heavily involved in all stages of preparation. The role of non-state institutions is limited, making private initiatives often imperceptible. Authority is concentrated at the top of a hierarchical command structure that channels public money for the mega-event through corporations that are either run by allies of the state or owned by the state outright. As elites engage in rent distribution, the logic of informal relationships permeates the planning decisions and shapes the project development, breaking budgets for construction that is ultimately unnecessary (Wolfe and Müller, 2018). This can result in inappropriate and underutilised infrastructure, as seen in the preparations for Sochi 2014, which produced an oversized train station (Müller, 2014), or the new road and rail between the coastal and mountain clusters of Olympic venues – at the time, the most expensive infrastructure construction project in the world (Wolfe, 2020). Unnecessary and oversized construction is common in mega-events, but these tendencies are amplified under a neopatrimonial model, especially when regional elites compete for public funds in interurban rivalry.

The neopatrimonial model is mostly observed in hosts with non-free political systems or flawed democracies, making the planning process particularly susceptible to corruption and illegal rent-seeking. Participation from entities other than public authorities is limited or even non-existent. Sochi 2014 is often cited as an event with record high costs, whose overwhelming drivers were attributed to different forms of nepotism and corruption. These resulted from rent-seeking behaviours on a systemic scale. Using publicly available information, the Anti-Corruption Foundation, led by Alexei Navalny, analysed the construction of sports venues and infrastructure in Sochi during the preparations for the Games, tracing their financing and costs. The investigation revealed several improprieties: a lack of transparency in procurement processes or selection of builders and contractors; overpriced infrastructure facilities; contracts awarded to companies with close political ties to state officials; and state budget subsidies to state-owned enterprises to

compensate losses (Fund for the Fight Against Corruption, 2014, p. 4). Similarly, Orttung and Zhemukhov (2014, 2017) highlight the links between megaproject corruption, elite rent distribution in exchange for regime loyalty, and cost overruns.

Undoubtedly, the oligarchic structure of the Russian economy enabled business elites and politicians to conduct corrupt practices through the governance structures of the Games (Golubchikov, 2016, p. 186). The post-socialist and neopatrimonial political-economic system with weak, inefficient state institutions (Müller, 2017; Müller and Pickles, 2015) created favourable conditions for capturing mega-events as a source of illegal economic and political rents. Through the rhetoric of capitalist boosterism, the Russian government developed Sochi 2014 for populist action and rent-seeking (Trubina, 2014). A similar pattern of Potemkin neoliberalism was seen in the preparations for the 2018 Men's Football World Cup (Wolfe, 2022).

China, along with Russia, represents an extreme case of the neopatrimonial approach to planning mega-events. The preparation processes for the 2008 Summer and 2022 Winter Games in Beijing reflected a strong drive and ambition to assert its presence on the international stage and position itself as a key player in shaping the global economic and political order. China achieved unprecedented economic growth alongside a significant construction boom and inflow of foreign capital into fixed assets investments. For Chinese authorities, the events served primarily to showcase the nation's advancements in infrastructure, transportation, and its growing role as an influential political actor and global trade hub. Notably, China's ambitious policy reforms led to substantial poverty reduction, guiding many citizens toward prosperity. However, this success came with a cost. Politically, the Communist Party of China further consolidated its power and bolstered the legitimacy of its authoritarian regime. The last two decades saw an intensification of civil surveillance and restrictive policies that limited personal freedoms and, consequently, violated human rights. The 2008 and 2022 Olympics in Beijing transformed the city through megaprojectification, shifting from megacity growth discourse in case of the Summer Olympics in 2008 to a post-growth discourse in the Winter ones, including plans to develop a new city (Xiong'an) to decentralise the capital region (Hu, 2024). Despite this change in urban planning goals, in both editions the planning process and its execution assumed a predominant role of state in governance and delivery scheme via political and business elites and state-owned enterprises. The combination of state-led capitalism and flawed institutional system, represented by extractive political and economic institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2013), has caused several irregularities, induced inequalities,

and rent-seeking behaviours such as corruption, mass forced evictions and acquiring land under Olympic-related construction below market value (Broudehoux, 2007a, 2007b). Taking into account the similarities with Sochi 2014, such planning model design seems endemic to neopatrimonial, and simultaneously, authoritarian states or even democracies with a commanding role of state.

Like Russia and China, Brazil also pursued a series of hosting mega-events, including the 2014 Men's Football World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics. At the time of bidding, Brazil's economy was booming, but longstanding social and economic inequalities, crime, corruption, and political instability meant that this prosperity was directed toward narrowing disparities. However, the economic crisis of 2014–16 exacerbated the political and economic turmoil, leading to massive protests during preparations for the FIFA and IOC flagship events. Known for its socio-economic contrasts, the city displays a stark juxtaposition between affluent neighbourhoods and impoverished and crime-tarnished areas. Rio de Janeiro exemplifies these inequalities, into which mega-event development was thrust. The planning for Rio 2016 centred on an urban policy that combined the redevelopment of certain key areas with the construction of new venues and infrastructures, all meant to display the nation's modernity to a global audience. This is common approach for emerging nations who host mega-events (Cornelissen, 2010), using these occasions as an important platform of advancing soft power strategy (Grix et al., 2015).

This was the case with Rio 2016, where the planning model reflected both neopatrimonial and regulatory characteristics, illustrating a hybrid model. Leveraging the event as a platform to advance its soft power strategy, the organisers implemented a public-private partnership model for both the planning, funding, delivery, and management of both sports venues and ancillary facilities. Amid stark socioeconomic inequalities, mega-events are presented as a tool for social inclusion and urban development, but Aaron Richmond and Garmany (2016) assert that such policy in Rio de Janeiro led to contradictory effects. Rio became a testing ground for neoliberal governance approaches, where policies were experimentally applied to transform the city (C. T. Gaffney, 2014). Mega-events have driven a process of "creative destruction" that disrupts urban frameworks, institutional structures, and social norms (Ribeiro and Santos Junior, 2017). Described as a neoliberal "shock doctrine", this phenomenon has led to a permanent reshaping of Rio's socio-spatial landscape (Gaffney, 2010). The Olympics also served as instruments for local political and economic elites, who exploit the sense of urgency and mobilisation associated with these events to remake the city in a way that aligns with their interests, further aggravating socio-spatial

segregation, inequality, and social conflicts (Sánchez and Broudehoux, 2013). Examples of Olympic-driven social exclusion include the displacement of tens of thousands of Rio residents, forced evictions, widespread militarisation, and the militarised "pacification" of favelas (Crout, 2018; Reboucas, 2018). These studies conclude that Brazil's flawed institutions, elite-driven Olympic projects, and complex socio-economic background contributed to numerous adverse impacts, characteristic of a neopatrimonial planning and delivery model.

Conclusion

Mega-events are standardised undertakings governed by requirements stipulated in host contracts, but host cities interpret and implement these organisational frameworks according to their own planning strategies, which are shaped by their political and economic contexts. This dual nature of mega-event planning highlights the challenge of balancing the promises made in bid books to address public needs with private interests. It also necessitates an understanding of the interactions among the principal actors within governance structures. Therefore, the effectiveness of planning models for mega-events should be measured by evaluating social, economic, and environmental impacts while considering the duality of the planning process. Drawing on an extensive literature review, this paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge by conceptualising three planning models for mega-events: entrepreneurial, regulatory, and neopatrimonial. This typology brings conceptual clarity to often opaque processes by categorising strategies and identifying development tendencies across diverse contexts. It aims to avoid generalisations about mega-event planning, its processes and outcomes—as exemplified, for instance, by Müller (2015). While mega-events are global in terms of participation, management, and economics, their planning remains subject to significant contextual variation (see Müller and Pickles, 2015).

Our typology expands on previous models, such as Raco's (2014) "London Olympic Games" model, which emphasised delivery-focused, state-led privatisation. While Raco's model was derived from a single case, our framework synthesises a broader range of empirical and theoretical insights, offering a more comparative and transferable tool for analysing mega-event planning across time and space.

The original contribution of this study lies in the ability to differentiate planning logics and governance modes in a way that is both theoretically grounded and practically relevant. This is particularly timely given the declining appeal of mega-events, evidenced by the limited interest in

hosting the 2022 Winter and 2024/2028 Summer Olympic Games (Lauermann, 2022). Our typology provides a lens through which policymakers can assess the comparability of mega-event planning with local development goals, democratic accountability, and long-term urban regeneration strategies.

This study also responds to the growing need for future-oriented research. While the Olympic Games have dominated scholarly attention, other mega-events—such as the Winter Olympics, the FIFA Men's and Women's World Cups, the UEFA European Football Championships, and numerous second-tier events whose impacts may be no less profound than their more visible cousins—remain underexplored. Recent controversial host countries—Russia 2018, Qatar 2022, and the future host Saudi Arabia 2034—due to their non-democratic political regimes and strategic use of mega-events as soft power tools, present significant research potential for analysing their planning practices. The 2026 FIFA World Cup, jointly hosted by Mexico, the United States, and Canada, along with UEFA EURO 2020(1) (held across 11 countries), exemplifies the emergence of multi-host, transnational, and experimental formats. These formats raise new questions regarding coordination, sustainability, legacy planning, and spatial governance—issues that our typology could help address, albeit with necessary adaptations. We propose that future research examine how hybrid or networked planning models operate in such contexts, and how they reshape the political economy of mega-events.

Finally, we call for more comparative and longitudinal studies that move beyond single-event case studies, including those that do not centre on sport like the EXPO. There is a pressing need to develop a broader understanding of how mega-events are interconnected across time and space. Limited research exists on the circulation of actors involved in successive mega-events, or on how mega-event policies mobilise and mutate between events.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the scope was restricted to the Olympic Games. This choice is justified by the fact that the majority of scholarly literature focuses on this type of mega-event, making it the most representative and analytically robust case for examining planning dynamics. Moreover, it is argued that, due to their size, the Olympics crystallise many of the relevant criteria and planning models particularly well, as they cut across a wide spectrum of planning-related issues. Smaller events, by contrast, tend to reflect these dynamics to a lesser extent or in more fragmented ways, making it more challenging to identify underlying models.

This study provides a comprehensive insight into the political and economic contexts underlying each planning model ("what"), the rationale behind their key features ("why"), and the processes and dynamics within them ("how"). Furthermore, these planning models help explain the extent of state involvement as a driving factor behind the motivations and objectives of both the bid and then the event itself. Addressing these research gaps would contribute to understanding why different mega-events in distant places look so similar, or conversely, help explain why similar mega-events can be so different.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

In the late stages of this work, ChatGPT 4.0 by OpenAI and Microsoft 365 Copilot were used in order to improve the readability of certain parts of the manuscript. After using these tools, the author team reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content. In no cases was AI used for idea generation.