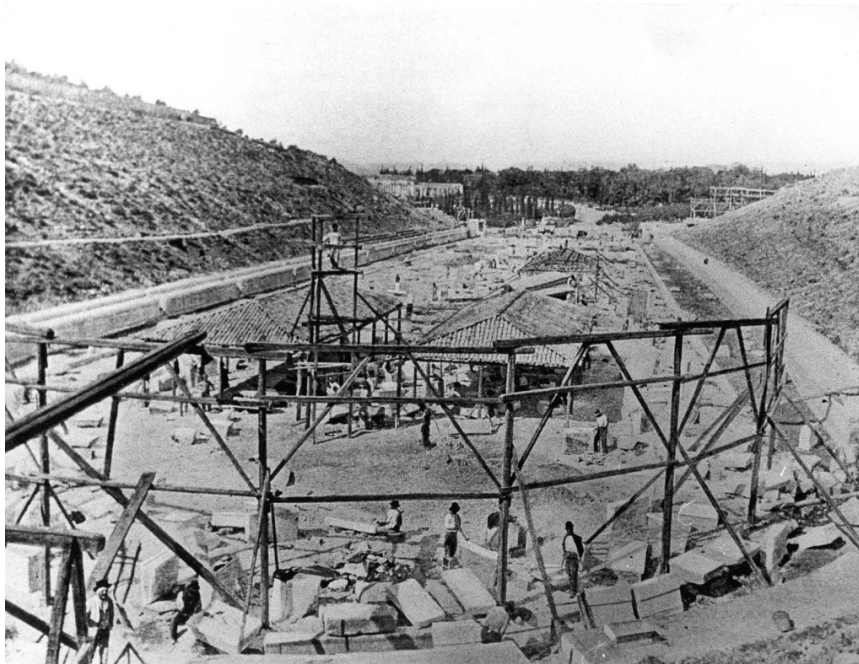


Olympic limits: the sporting mega event comes to town

11 JUNE 2024 | BY SVEN DANIEL WOLFE | ESSAYS



The Olympic city continues to grow beyond planetary boundaries

This year, for the first time, the opening ceremony of the Olympic and Paralympic Games is planned to take place not in a stadium, but in a fleet of boats sailing down the Seine in Paris. This break with tradition was announced as a democratisation of the event, allowing many more people to witness the opening from free stands on the riverbank. Yet, as the starting date drew closer, the original ambitions were scaled back. Now a smaller number of guests will be accommodated, tickets will be required, and though they are free, they will be distributed by invitation only. Nor is

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it likely that the Seine will be clean enough for swimming, as organisers promised.

Aside from the opening ceremony, Paris 2024 has pledged to break new ground in terms of sustainability. Proudly proclaiming the Paris Games as ‘the greenest in history’, organisers promise a carbon-neutral event through efforts varying in ambition, from powering the Olympic Village with geothermal and solar energy, to using recycled materials in the construction of the athletes’ beds. A major part of these plans is also the use of predominantly existing venues, reducing or eliminating the oversized and underused facilities that haunted previous mega-events. This alone is crucial progress in creating more sustainable Games.



For the first time, sports events will be predominantly held in temporary or existing venues as part of this year’s Games in Paris
Credit: dpa picture alliance / Alamy

Yet if the definition of sustainability is expanded beyond ecology to include social and economic dimensions, then this tripartite conceptualisation reveals a more nuanced and problematic Paris 2024. From this perspective, and despite the heavy usage of existing venues, these Olympics are expensive and engender adverse impacts on segments of the population. Notably, the preparations evicted approximately 2,000 students from their housing to make way for incoming athletes. These students reportedly received compensation of only €100 and were left unhoused, all during exam season. This is combined with severe limitations on personal mobility during the Games, restricting resident movement only to certain areas, to facilitate freedom of movement for Olympic athletes, VIPs and visitors. Furthermore, transit prices are set to increase markedly, with no guarantee that they will fall after the Games. In the poorer northern areas that will also host events, gentrification pressures are already evident, and a controversial new highway interchange in Pleyel exposes several hundred schoolchildren to unacceptable levels of air pollution and noise.

In our era of polycrisis, the Olympic Games may seem something of an anachronism. How can we purport to have a global festival of sport at the service of peace and humanity during the climate emergency, debilitating economic inequality, the erosion of democratic functioning, and a variety of wars around the world? How can anyone celebrate sport in times like these? But it is a mistake to think that the Olympics are only about sport. Beyond the drama of elite athletic competition, and behind the spectacle of the opening and closing ceremonies, the Olympics are urban mega-projects that have profound impacts on host cities and societies. They are also inescapably political, despite the oft-repeated pleas from organisers and authorities that sports and politics should not mix. They always have and always will.

‘The Olympics are inescapably political. They always have been and always will be’

The so-called ‘Olympic city’ is subject to a predictable array of potential benefits and risks that occur, to greater or lesser degrees, in every edition of every Games, everywhere around the world: accelerating urban development and clearing local political logjams, but also concentrating wealth in the hands of a privileged minority in the process. Despite the risks, the public love for mega-events is so enduring – and the sports-business-politics juggernaut so powerful – that they persist. Part of the reason for this is the powerful double punch of Olympic urbanism combined with a platform of incomparable global reach; authorities historically wanted to host the Games because it helped unlock the funding and political will to refashion the city, while also accruing soft power for international and domestic audiences alike.



The opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics, held in London and directed by Danny Boyle, began with scenes of the UK's 'green and pleasant land', an idealised vision of pre-industrialisation.

Credit: PA Images / Alamy

Take the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Despite the economic turmoil of the Great Depression and the global crises that would lead to the Second World War, these Games transformed the city from a dusty periphery into a world capital of commerce, style and culture. They infused the Olympics with Hollywood glamour, turning what had been a rather staid and aristocratic European affair into a mega-event – the most spectacular and prestigious on Earth. Los Angeles 1932 also introduced a number of innovations into the planning and organisation of the Games that we take for granted today, such as the notion of bidding for hosting rights, and constructing a purpose-built Olympic Village to house athletes. After 1932, politicians and business leaders began to compete fiercely to become the host, submitting ever more ambitious bids to the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Their goals have remained consistent: to present their sparkling version of a modern city, to access new circuits of tourism and capital, and to demonstrate to both international and domestic audiences that they belong to the league of great nations.

There is more to the story than this. With precious few exceptions, the history of Olympic host cities shows a pattern of generating wealth for a selected few, sparking joy and pride for a swathe of the population, and causing misery for the disenfranchised. As John Rennie Short wrote in *Global Metropolitan* in 2004, ‘While an already rich minority benefit a great deal, and most benefit some, the poor and marginal tend to become poorer and more marginal.’ This tendency remains as true today as it was in 1932.



Elsewhere, stadiums have yielded to vegetation due to abandonment, rather than as an artistic statement; a stadium built for the 2004 Olympics in Athens has already been reclaimed by nature
Credit: Media Drum World / Alamy

In Los Angeles, for instance, the combined Hollywood and Olympic glow obscured serious social and economic injustices for the host population. Following the city’s racial exclusions, only white residents were allowed to attend the Games. Similarly, the Olympic real-estate boom continued the problematic legacy of racist housing covenants and redlining districts, whereby minority residents were barred from owning or renting in the city’s most desirable areas. This pattern held fast when Los Angeles

hosted again in 1984, over half a century later. Though tickets for those Games were available to all, and everyone could technically live where they pleased, the legacies of the city's socio-spatial segregation meant that Black and Latinx residents were still largely concentrated in the poorest areas. Simultaneously, a newly militarised Los Angeles Police Department swept the poor and unhoused out of sight of the world's television cameras.

These problematic histories linger. They still inform developments in Los Angeles today as preparations begin for hosting in 2028. In 2018, then-mayor Eric Garcetti promised: 'I'm confident that by the time the Olympics come, we can end homelessness on the streets of LA.' However, the number of unhoused residents has only increased. People living in tents and makeshift shelters were swept away from the SoFi Stadium - where the 2028 opening ceremony will be held - in preparation for the Super Bowl in 2022. Although concrete plans do not yet exist, it is reasonable to expect that similar strategies will be employed during the Olympics, particularly given the history of sweeps from the 1984 Games.

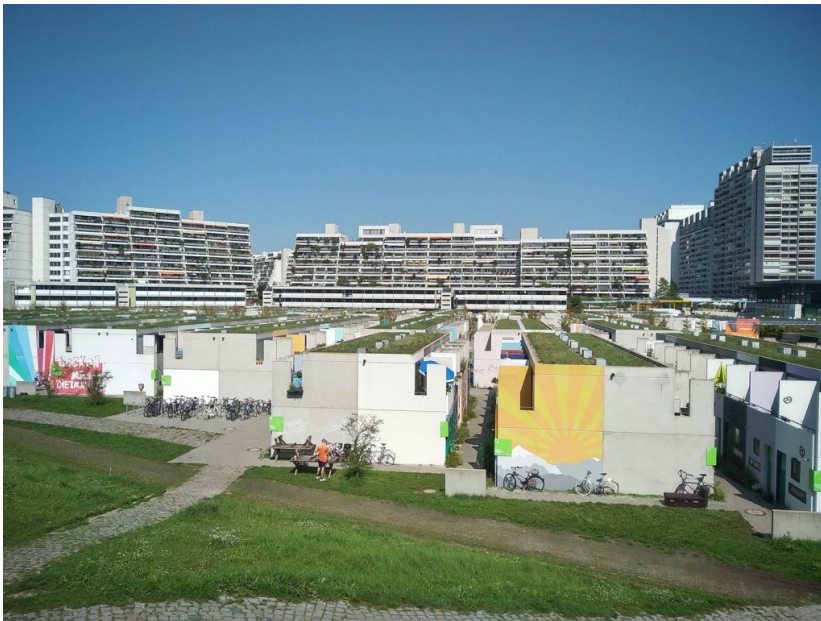


**A temporary Olympic Village was built to house the 1,836 male athletes competing in the 1932 Games in LA - the 126 female competitors were housed in a hotel.
Credit: World History Archive / Alamy**

Though the Olympics have been hosted mostly by nations of the west (of the 57 Summer and Winter Olympics since 1896, only 11 have taken place outside Europe or the Americas), similar variations of the same mega-event story can be found wherever in the world they take place. For instance, Tokyo 1964 was a marriage of global political-economic ambition and massive urban development; organisers aspired to present Japan as a new democracy - distinct from the wartime foe of the Allies - and eager to participate in global commerce. The Games introduced the Shinkansen high-speed railway network to the world, alongside widespread renovations of the Tokyo airport and new hotels, all specifically aimed at foreign visitors. Tokyo 1964 also showcased Japan's technological prowess and helped launch their famous electronics and automotive innovations. While this brought Japan unprecedented wealth and global prestige, there were negative impacts as well: residents near the National Stadium were evicted

to make room for construction; the new network of elevated highways destroyed the neighbourhoods over which they passed; and the heavy construction polluted local waterways.

Japanese organisers later attempted to mimic the glories of 1964, but with less success. A Shinkansen line was extended to Nagano in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics, but by then the effect of high-speed travel was a peculiar form of uneven development whereby local services withered when a city was connected to the system, and it became easier to travel to the capital than to a neighbouring city. By the time of Tokyo 2020 – delayed to 2021 because of the Covid-19 pandemic – the majority of Japanese people did not want to host, refuting the government’s narrative of the ‘recovery Games’ to demonstrate resilience after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. Instead, these latest Olympics were better understood as exercises in corruption and overspending, with the now-familiar sights of resident eviction to boot. In one case that almost beggars belief, a man named Kohei Jinno was evicted by the Tokyo Olympics twice – first in 1964 when his family home was razed to build the National Stadium, and then again in preparation for 2020/2021 when the same stadium was demolished and a new one – upgraded to satisfy modern requirements – constructed. (The stadium was originally planned to designs by Zaha Hadid Architects, then by Kengo Kuma & Associates following budget concerns and public outcry; the stadium finally opened in 2019 at the cost of US\$1.4 billion.)



After the Games, the huts were sold for US\$140 (\$215 furnished) and sent to customers around the world. In Munich, on the other hand, the Women’s Olympic Village built for the 1972 Games is now a self-governed student community, comprising two-storey terraces as well as taller blocks
Credit: Giulia Riccio

Other controversies included greenwashing; while it is laudable that the podiums were made from recycled plastic, for example, it is problematic that suppliers were required only to submit sustainability plans, rather than demonstrate actual results. And despite the organisers’ pledge to use sustainably sourced wood, the Rainforest Action Network traced large

quantities of tropical plywood from the construction of an Olympic stadium to endangered rainforests in Indonesia. Similarly, the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics – the so-called ‘Games in Harmony with Nature’ – destroyed endangered flora, killed all life in the Mzymta river, and polluted the Black Sea so heavily that local hospitals were overflowing with tourists who fell ill from swimming. In a foreshadowing of the political closures that now dominate Russia, authorities monitored and persecuted environmental activists who worked to catalogue the ecological devastation. Under the guise of protecting the Games as a matter of national interest, the security services likewise repressed political activists who worked to document and protest against the outsized corruption and theft that marked Olympic preparations. Many of those who worked on those anti-corruption and transparency efforts are now living abroad, imprisoned or dead.

Yet the 2014 Olympic development plan also transformed the Sochi region into a national economic powerhouse and a model for development that other Russian cities aspired to follow. Instead of the white elephants predicted by many, the region’s hotels and tourist facilities were packed year-round following the Olympics, as authorities successfully turned the seaside resort into both a summer and winter destination. Drawn by the fine weather and job opportunities, people from all over the country moved to Sochi and sparked a red-hot housing market and construction boom.

‘The Olympics are unlikely to ever be authentically sustainable until we separate the profit motive from the equation’

In the international sphere, however, the hard power aspirations of the Russian state destroyed any potential soft power gains. At the outset, Sochi 2014 promised to introduce a free and democratic Russia to the world, much in the same way as Tokyo 1964. The bid books presented a nation recovered from the Soviet collapse and the chaos of the post-Soviet years, ready to welcome the world and participate fully in international business, politics and tourism. The words ‘Russia – Great, New, Open’ were even emblazoned in English and Russian at the entry to the coastal cluster of Olympic venues. What happened instead was a re-entrenchment of authoritarian and then totalitarian state power, abetted by the surveillance and security systems installed for the Olympics, and legitimised by the narratives of a traditional great power rising from its knees. Hosting the Olympics is imagined to be a process of welcoming the world in peaceful sporting competition, but what happened instead was the reintroduction of empire. What was destroyed in Sochi 2014 was both the irreplaceable natural environment and the dreams of a peaceful and democratic Russia. In a move reminiscent of the Cold War, Russian officials – incensed by international bans on Russian athletes following the invasion of Ukraine – launched their own event to compete with the Olympics. The so-called

World Friendship Games will be hosted in Moscow and Ekaterinburg in 2024.



Preparations for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles are already well under way. Local residents voiced their concerns about the priorities of the city government in protests in 2020.

Credit: Kemal Cilengir / NOlympics LA

Little has changed in the creation of Olympic cities since Los Angeles 1932, though the world has grown markedly more fragile. In this light, and framed by the demonstrable risks and costs of hosting, a number of potential cities began to refuse to bid for the Games. In response to the growing global crises and to address the declining popularity of hosting, the IOC embarked on a series of organisational reforms in 2014. The idea was to place sustainability at the heart of the Olympic movement and to conduct business ethically and transparently, all in line with their stated values enshrined in the Olympic Charter. In short, these reforms aimed to reorient the Games to the unique development trajectory of the host city, rather than imposing a series of external infrastructural requirements insensitive to local context. This speaks to the growing awareness of the tension between planning for the long-term needs of the city as opposed to the short-term needs of the event. In the post-reform era, host cities are no longer expected to stage the event within a circumscribed area, nor to construct new venues specific to the Games. This opens up the potential for new dimensions of hosting in more dispersed geographies, and hopefully spells the end of the oversized and underused infrastructures that plague so many previous hosts.

Paris 2024 has been almost entirely planned and delivered under the aegis of the reforms. This could be seen as the peak of the 'sustainable era' in mega-events, in which an ecological sensibility appeared in the 1990s, and then 'sustainability' was formalised as one of the fundamental pillars of Olympic reform in 2014, and again as part of the Agenda 2020 reforms. While these moves have diminished some of the deleterious effects of hosting, the Olympics are unlikely to ever be authentically sustainable for both natural and human communities alike, until we separate the profit motive from the equation. Hosting should not lead to the overuse of resources, in excess of planetary boundaries, any more than it should

damage the social foundation below which no communities should be permitted to fall.



The same year, the SoFi Stadium opened in LA, named after a San Francisco-based personal finance company. The stadium hosted the Super Bowl in 2022 and is planned to stage World Cup matches in 2026 as well as the opening ceremony of the 2028 Olympics
Credit: Sipa USA / Alamy

Regardless of reform, Paris 2024 already confirms that the next chapter of the mega-event story remains similar to what was seen in Los Angeles 1932. Over the heads of marginalised residents, there is the Potemkin presentation of a spectacular city that will enchant the world. Huge numbers of local residents will feel a pride and love for their city that will – at least temporarily – erase the memory of the disruptions. Some people will make an awful lot of money. Perhaps this is the key problem: the failure to achieve authentic sustainability, and the consistent distance between promises and outcomes, ultimately comes down simply to the profit motive. Sport – with all its potential for universality and peaceful connection – is not put at the service of humanity, nor aimed at resolving the climate emergency, but rather sacrificed on the altar of the dollar.

Lead image: The Panathenaic Stadium was built in Athens around 144 CE, and was the site of the athletic events of the Panathenaic Games. Built entirely of marble, the stadium was recreated on the same site in 1896, and hosted the opening and closing ceremonies of the first modern Olympic Games the same year (incidentally making the modern Olympics and the AR the same age). Credit: Historical Photographic Archive of the Hellenic Olympic Committee



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