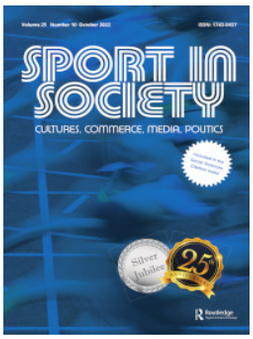

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The urban and economic impacts of mega-events: mechanisms of change in global games

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ABSTRACT

Mega-events are global affairs with profound effects across a variety of scales, and are the focus of a large and growing body of academic inquiry. This special section in Sports in Society centers on the urban and economic impacts of mega-events on the societies that host them, offering an examination of individual cases and emerging patterns. The authors explore different dimensions of the recent mega-event experience from around the world, proposing novel ways of theorizing these outsized expressions of transnational sport, politics, commerce, and culture. Combined, these contributions unpack how socio-economic and cultural contexts shape the organization of events and impact hosts in variegated and contingent ways in the Global North, South, and East. This introduction offers a brief overview of the landscape of the existing research before summarizing each contribution and placing them in context within the broader literature. All told, the articles in this special section explore how the Olympics, the FIFA Men's World Cup and the Commonwealth Games deploy different mechanisms to transform urban space, and offer innovative means of understanding what mega-events can do to the people and places that host them.

KEYWORDS

Mega-events; urban development; urban regeneration; public space; Olympic Games

Introduction: from mega-events to giga-events

With great fanfare, a man pulls a card from an envelope and reveals the name of a host: 'The winner is…'. Some people in the audience – and around the world – leap from their seats, cheering in triumph. Others applaud politely or are crestfallen. Transnational business plans worth billions of dollars in construction, broadcast media, and sponsorships start heating up. Elsewhere, the newly christened host begins preparations through costly, sometimes controversial, and transformative urban development plans. And within that host city, in a growing hailstorm of media attention, residents pursue their daily lives in the context of these changes. Some of them anticipate the celebrations, catching the waves of increasing excitement. Others ignore it or profess not to care, while still others plan acts of protest and resistance. Nonetheless, excited or not, all these people will be affected to a certain extent. These are patterns seen worldwide when conducting the Olympics, the

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Football World Cup, the World's Fair (also known as Expo), and a multitude of other mega-events with sometimes smaller sports or media profiles but significant urban, economic, environmental, and social impacts.

Mega-events are massive commercial and cultural undertakings with effects on multiple scales, from the global to the local, and have inspired a rapidly growing body of academic inquiry (Roche 2002, 2017). According to one definition, 'mega-events are ambulatory occasions of a fixed duration that attract a large number of visitors, have large mediated reach, come with large costs and have large impacts on the built environment and the population' (Müller 2015, 3). But mega-events are not just large, they are growing still further (Chappelet 2014). Both Summer and Winter Olympic Games have seen profound growth: the number of accredited media representatives more than doubled from 129,185 in Barcelona 1992 to more than 300,000 by Rio de Janeiro 2016, the income from international sponsorship ballooned from $172 million USD (1992) to $649 million USD (2018), and the revenue from broadcasting increased almost fivefold, from $292 million USD in 1992 to 1.4 billion USD by 2018 (International Olympic Committee 2020). The largest of these events – the Summer Olympic Games and the Men's Football World Cup – have reached a size that puts them in a class of their own: into giga-events (Müller 2015).

Events of such extraordinary size are not just sports events. They are just as much, or even more, urban and economic events. For all the contributions in this special section the entry point comes from the understanding that mega-events 'are deemed to have significant consequences for the host city' (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006, 2). These consequences can take the shape of excessive costs, as preparations for the mega-event routinely run into the billions of dollars and often saddle host societies with debt, as well as leaving oversized infrastructures that must be adapted for efficient post-event use (Baade and Matheson 2004, 2016; Preuss 2004; Preuss, Andreff, and Weitzmann 2019; Zimbalist 2016). At the same time, these consequences can also impact urban space, as organizers and other elites commonly attempt to leverage the mega-event to engage a variety of fast-tracked urban regeneration schemes, with variegated and often unequal results (Gaffney, Wolfe, and Müller 2018; Gogishvili 2021; Müller and Gaffney 2018; Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013).

This special section of Sport in Society concentrates on the urban and economic impacts engendered by mega-events on the societies that host them, offering an examination of individual cases and emerging patterns. The papers focus on different dimensions of the mega-event experience from various corners of the world, and they all explore the ways in which these gigantic expressions of transnational sport – functioning at global, regional, and local scales – engender outsized and long-lasting impacts on the host cities. Overall, this collection of articles proposes novel ways of theorizing mega-events, working through the different mechanisms deployed to transform urban space, offering innovative means of understanding what mega-events can do to the people and places that host them.

Put together, these contributions cover a broad geography of mega-event hosts from Global North and South, but also the Global East. This rich representation of cases reflects the new geography of mega-events that have emerged within the last two decades and has reached cities and counties beyond traditional mega-event hosts located in the Global North (Cornelissen 2010; Gruneau and Horne 2015; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2016; Müller and Pickles 2015; Poynter and Viehoff 2016). Events such as the Football World Cup 2010 in South Africa and 2014 in Brazil and the Olympic Games 2008 in Beijing, 2014 in Sochi, 2016 in Rio de Janeiro and 2018 in PyeongChang have driven home the message that

mega-events are not the prerogative of a few rich countries. The contributions in this special section study emerging trends and patterns that enrich the scholarship on mega-events with cases from the Global South, East, and North, acknowledging the ways in which socio-economic and cultural contexts shape how the mega-events unfold and impact their hosts in variegated and contingent ways. In the remainder of this introduction, we place the contributions of this special section in context by discussing how they are situated within the broader literature.

Selling image

As mega-events are inextricably linked to the cities that host them (and as the character of those host cities changes), each edition brings another opportunity to investigate the mechanisms by which mega-events transform urban space. Further, as mega-event hosting moves increasingly into new territories outside of the Global North, these mechanisms have come to transform urban space in similar ways across the globe, though contingent on local factors (Cornelissen 2010; Graeff 2019; Müller and Gaffney 2018). For instance, mega-events are often realized through the temporary suspension of judicial laws, or through an imposition of exceptional regulations (Gray and Porter 2015; Gogishvili 2018; Gogishvili and Harris-Brandts 2020). This exceptionalism has led to diverse gentrifications in host cities (Gaffney 2016), as well as to the introduction of high-tech security regimes, often curtailing civil rights and benefiting elite business interests (Giulianotti and Klauser 2010; 2011; Klauser 2008; 2017).

One of the key aspects of this process is the production and distribution of a sanitized image of the host city, manufactured for consumption by a global tourist and broadcast audience. Gaffney (2021, in this issue) explores this dynamic through the notion of geoporn, demonstrating how authorities – both independently and in concert with directives from mega-event owners – produce a curated and sexualized presentation of the city to mask the violence of mega-event driven capital accumulation. Grounded in Rio de Janeiro in and around the 2016 Summer Olympics, Gaffney unpacks the mediatized presentation of the host city – one that obscures and elides the living city – and reveals structural violences ignored by authorities at municipal and international scales. Using this conceptual apparatus, Gaffney draws parallels between pornographic narratives and mega-event preparations in the urban environment, working from the foreplay of seductive presentation to celebratory climax and the resultant exclusions. In this way, he grounds the analysis of these global happenings in the materiality of the human body, taking stock of mega-event driven international real-estate speculation, municipal-level gentrification pressures in Rio de Janeiro, and the impacts of these developments on the bodies of the residents themselves.

The concept of geoporn is a means to enter and begin to understand the heterogenous and relational sociomateriality of a city that is disrupted, reoriented, and reassembled during a mega-event, typically for the advantage of elites and to the detriment of residents. In his attention to image, Gaffney contributes to a strand of mega-events literature that focuses on 'staged cities', or the superficial representation of host cities where poverty is concealed and a constructed image of so-called development is the at the fore (Broudehoux 2015; Greene 2003). This includes work on place branding and the interconnected invisibility of those ignored by elite-led strategies (Vanolo 2017) and the processes of clearing urban environments of 'undesirable elements' in the run-up to a mega-event (Kennelly 2015;

Kennelly and Watt 2011; Broudehoux 2017; Schausteck de Almeida et al. 2015; Taylor and Toohey 2011).

Constructing superficiality

Moving away from Gaffney's empirical focus in the Global South, the processes of staging cities for global consumption are also visible in mega-event host cities in the Global East (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2016; Poynter and Viehoff 2016). Following this, Wolfe (in this issue, 2020) examines the articulation of the 2018 Men's Football World Cup in Russia, looking specifically at the peripheral city of Volgograd. From here, Wolfe continues the theoretical focus on superficiality, introduced in Gaffney (2021, in this issue) contribution, using as an entry point the Russian national state's urban development and modernization plans to prepare for hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

Similar to the ways in which geoporn starts from the presentation of image, Wolfe begins with an attention to Potemkinism, or the construction of a false but seemingly perfect surface that conceals a problematic interior reality (Broudehoux 2017). He deploys this conceptual apparatus to make sense of the ways in which the Russian state employed neoliberal rhetoric to legitimize World Cup-related urban development. Neoliberal notions of place branding, interurban competition, and the primacy of urban regions over the national state are some of the traditional means of analyzing the motivations for hosting mega-events (Brenner 2004; Hall 2006; Lauermann and Davidson 2013). At first, the Russian World Cup appears to adhere to this pattern, but a closer examination exposes a superficial presentation of neoliberal rhetoric that masked a state-led spatial development strategy. Advancing the notion of Potemkin Neoliberalism, Wolfe explores beneath the superficial surface to reveal not only the ways in which the World Cup represented a retrenchment of the nation state in regional development, but also the resultant inequalities propagated beneath the Potemkin surface.

Commodifying public space

The reconstruction and active utilization of urban space for staging mega-events is also at the center of Smith and McGillivray (2020, in this issue) as they critically explore and discuss the long-term repercussions of the ongoing trend of using public space for event venues. The 'urbanization' of mega-events, referring to the spread beyond traditional event-venues into the urban public space, was highlighted already on work regarding the EURO 2008 in Zurich (Hagemann 2010). This trend has been particularly visible with the introduction of Fan Zones, Fan Parks, Live Sites, and other similar open-air event spaces that provided coordinated crowd entertainment outside official sport facilities (McGillivray and Frew 2015). This increased commercialization of public spaces through mega-events produces branded, enclosed, and exclusive urban spaces in host cities worldwide, undermining the idea of public space as a territory for free expression, accessible to all (Coaffee 2015; Gogishvili 2018; Smith 2015).

In this contribution, Smith and McGillivray offer a systematic discussion on the long-term effects that mega-events have on urban public space used for their staging. Their comparative study is based on research conducted over the past 10 years in London and

Glasgow, mostly focusing on the 2012 Summer Olympics and the 2014 Commonwealth Games. In so doing, they outline how mega-events are used as a 'Trojan Horse' mechanism that allow urban governments to discreetly establish new practices for managing public space, such as creating multi-agency units composed of public and private actors to fast-track decisions related to using public space for mega-events. These practices are first implemented temporarily, under cover of the mega-event, often framed by governments as being of national importance. After the event, these procedures and technologies are retained in public space, furthering the commercial use and increased securitization of public parks and squares both in London and Glasgow. Mega-events in both cities created a precedent for large collective spaces such as squares, parks, and even streets to be opened to the possibility of hosting private events, which normalizes such use for future occasions.

While most of the mega-event related changes in public space are presented as temporary measures, Smith and McGillivray demonstrate that these processes can engender lasting effects. They also note, however, that mega-events could result in more positive effects, based on the potential to reimagine the ways public spaces are designed, used, and managed. Mega-events could be a mechanism of a positive re-imagining of public space, highlighting its potential as a place for socializing, be it through the closure of streets to cars or the introduction of street events initially linked with mega-events and aimed at promoting sustainable forms of mobility and health. These actions could help to 'reimagine the city's street as active, festive, sociable and accessible spaces' (in this volume, Smith and McGillivray 2020, 12), instead of seeing them merely as space for automobiles or commercial facilities.

Conclusion: mega-events and urban change in the age of COVID

Taken together, the contributions to this special section explore a variety of dimensions on some of the impacts of hosting mega-events in different cities around the globe. Focusing on processes of urban change within specific contexts, the papers reveal the mechanisms by which host cities are packaged and presented to global audiences, by which transformations are enacted through a focus on superficiality rather than substance, and by which hosting can change urban public spaces. Geoporn is a concept introduced to unpack the myriad mechanisms used by organizers to produce seductive images of the host city that mask the violences engendered by mega-event preparations (in this issue, Gaffney 2021). Along similar lines, Potemkin Neoliberalism is a notion that explains how organizers – while advocating that the mega-event will better position the host city within global flows of tourists, images, and capital – actually concern themselves more with presentation rather than with substantial interventions that may benefit the host city population over the long term (in this issue, Wolfe 2020). And finally, a view towards urban public spaces reveals how mega-events provide a mandate and a precedent for reimagining how those spaces might be used, all at once normalizing controversial appropriations of formerly untouchable public spaces, while providing the potential for new, creative, and beneficial transformations (in this issue, Smith and McGillivray 2020). Covering host cities in the Global East, South, and North, the papers in this special section propose new ways of theorizing mega-events, focusing on the ways that hosting can impact cities – their economies, their urban spaces, and the people who live there.

And yet, all of these impacts require mega-events to occur in the first place, something that can no longer be taken for granted. Just as the COVID-19 pandemic has upended

business and personal lives all around the globe, so too has it disrupted the planning and execution of mega-events. As of the time of this writing, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics have been postponed for a year (BBC 2020), and though officials from the International Olympic Committee and the Tokyo Organizing Committee assure international audiences that the 2020 Games will take place in 2021, reports indicate that a cancellation may be inevitable (Bruton 2021). Some national sports have taken place in limited fashion, such as basketball in the USA (Reynolds 2021) and football across Europe (Reuters 2020) but conditions are far from ideal. Players might live in quarantined bubbles and play without live audiences, but despite precautions, further cancellations are common. Thus, in many sports, viewership is trending down, despite global lockdowns spiking demand for entertainment (Strauss 2020). And though bidding continues for future Olympic Games and World Cups, it is not clear whether the mega-event industry can continue in its current form, particularly if the virus continues to mutate and conditions worsen. In short, the pandemic has struck at the heart of mega-events as they currently exist. At the same time, a quick glance at hosting histories will remind that the Olympics were cancelled during both World Wars in the 20th century, before resuming once peace had returned. In a similar vein, mega-events might return as before once the epidemiological situation normalizes. If they do, and if they remain unchanged, then it will be just as vital as before to identify the mechanisms by which mega-events are marketed and managed, altering urban spaces and societies in host-cities around the globe.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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