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Sven Daniel Wolfe

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Abandoning legacy: towards conceptual clarity and better outcomes in mega-events research

Sven Daniel Wolfe

Institute of Geography, University of Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Mega-events research continues to flourish across a variety of disciplines, but despite this diversity, usage of the term *legacy* persists. Legacy refers to the period after the conclusion of a mega-event and is generally presented as beneficent or at least benign. It remains a key term for rights holders, organising committees, practitioners, city planners, political figures, media, and researchers. Closer examination, however, reveals the conceptual fragility of this term. Legacy is an overburdened concept, inconsistently theorised and incoherently applied. Employing it risks communicating a normative positive framing that deemphasises the well-documented harms of hosting. This paper argues that *legacy* has outlived its usefulness in planning, politics, and research. The paper is agnostic about replacement terminology, but suggests that adopting alternative framings is a necessary and overdue step to better identify and ameliorate the exclusions, inequalities, and other deleterious outcomes that too often result from hosting mega-events. These alternatives should be grounded in political neutrality, scientific independence, and data diversity, and be sensitive to micropolitical subjects, subjectivity, positionality, and time. The paper explores these dimensions with one potential light and transferable operationalisation to demonstrate how abandoning *legacy* provides more authentic representations of what mega-events actually do to cities and societies.

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Introduction: persistent problems

A spectre is haunting mega-events research – the spectre of legacy. The greatest powers in the worlds of sport and business use this term to describe the benefits of hosting mega-events. The term is used either descriptively and pragmatically, as in the creation of a 'legacy plan' or 'legacy fund' to account for post-event impacts (FIFA, 2025a, 2025b), or defined hagiographically, for instance as 'the long-term benefits that the Olympic Games create for the host city, its people, and the Olympic Movement before, during and long after the Olympic Games' (International Olympic Committee, 2025b). Global consultancies and governments are similar, engaging the term as part of global branding strategies, or aimed at a multitude long-term benefits, from urban regeneration to increasing

CONTACT Sven Daniel Wolfe sven.wolfe@unine.ch Institute of Geography, University of Neuchâtel, Espace Tilo-Frey 1, Neuchâtel 2000, Switzerland

participation in sport and improving wellbeing (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2012; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2023). Legacy is consistently presented as a beneficent force, as a sort of natural byproduct of hosting mega-events.

The term also features widely in scholarship across a variety of disciplines, contributing to what has been called *legacy research* (Annear, 2025; Thomson et al., 2019). Organisations and events for scholars and practitioners alike use the term, such as policy briefs and forums at the Centre for Events and Festivals, conferences and publications by Play the Game, or a series of talks entitled *The Future of Event Legacy* at the University of the West of Scotland (CCSE, 2026; CEF, 2025; Play the Game, 2026). To be sure, critical scholarship has long taken issue with the deleterious impacts of hosting, either in case studies of individual events or in more systematic examinations (see Breuer & Forrest, 2024; Duignan, 2025; Müller, 2015). But even in the more critical literature, the notion of *legacy* itself is too often elided, in exchange for a focus on mega-event harms (see Chalip, 2014; Stewart & Rayner, 2016; Talbot, 2021 for notable exceptions).

Where, in the commonplace usage of *legacy*, is an awareness of the totality of mega-event impacts, inclusive of benefits but also harms? Where is a fuller accounting of the plans to revitalise host cities, ameliorate social inequalities, increase the wellbeing of the host population, or the other panacea promises that recur every time mega-events come to town (Gold & Gold, 2024; Mansfield et al., 2020; Neal et al., 2024)? Where is the large-scale pushback against the continued and largely unquestioned usage of what is in effect a management term that obscures the full spectrum of what hosting does to cities and societies?

Two points result from these facts:

(I) *Legacy* conveys a normative positive framing that ultimately serves vested interests, concealing mega-event harms beneath a spectacular Potemkin surface.
(II) It is high time that all who wish for better hosting outcomes should abandon the uncritical usage of this spectre of *legacy*. Instead, scholars, civil society, and municipal authorities should lead practitioners, organisers, and rights-holders to adopt terminology and frameworks that provide more neutral, independent, and inclusive analyses of mega-event promises and problems.

To that end – and based on an extensive review of 20+ years of foundational contributions to the interdisciplinary mega-events literature – this paper proposes abandoning legacy and proceeding along alternative routes. Building on Lauermann (2019) and Stewart and Rayner (2016), it deconstructs *legacy* and demonstrates how the term subtly but consistently shapes how mega-events are understood, tilting the scales towards a presentation of hosting as automatically beneficial for cities and societies. It argues that the term has become inextricably bound to the processes of obscuring deleterious mega-event outcomes, and reproducing the social, urban, economic inequalities too commonly tied to hosting. With reference to Chalip (2006, 2014) and Ziakas (2015, 2022), the paper unpacks the inequalities engendered by mega-event hosting, critiquing *legacy* as a concept and arguing against the proliferation of further *legacy frameworks* by practitioners and academics alike.

The paper is agnostic about alternative terms to replace *legacy*. Numerous scholars in various disciplines have championed certain terms or approaches over others, each with

particular insights, oversights, advantages, and problems. This is all to the good, as diversity and non-orthodoxy are advantageous in explicating the hugely complicated interrelationships between mega-events and host cities and societies. Here, the point is less to champion any new terminology but rather finally to abandon the persistent usage of *legacy*, and to (re)focus attention towar micropolitical subjects, subjectivity, positionality, and time.

Finally, the paper offers a set of sensitivities to reorient research towards fuller and more balanced analyses, without engaging this irredeemable term. These sensitivities are demonstrated through a light and transferable operationalisation of what mega-events actually do to cities and societies, based on foundational work by Chappelet (2012) and Horne (2014). The value in this operationalisation lies in the differentiation between impacts that are tangible or intangible, and universal or selective. Again, this paper is not ideological about specific operationalisations – there are a dizzying number of frameworks, indicators, and assorted evaluations tools in the extant literature (e.g. Kassens-Noor et al., 2015; Mansfield et al., 2020; Preuss, 2019a; Rajagopal et al., 2025), and there is no purpose here in advocating for one approach over another. The particular framework demonstrated here was chosen for its simplicity and ease of application across disparate cases, aiming to demonstrate how working without *legacy* can convey a more accurate representation of the totality of the mega-event hosting experience on cities and societies. The goal is to encourage more inclusive assessments, sensitised to the selective, subjective, and uneven nature of the distribution of harms, benefits, and social and cultural value.

Deconstructing legacy

In order to make sense of what mega-events do to cities and societies, it is useful to think through the notion of the mega-event lifecycle. A lifecycle is an overall view of a product, process, or human activity from raw material to end of life (Curran, 2013). Assessing lifecycles begins with clear definitions, compilation of relevant material, evaluation, and interpretation. In this light, conceptualising the mega-event experience as a lifecycle is an attempt to make sense of its totality, from bidding to after the event. Further, mega-events are particular in that each event is a singularity when viewed from the perspective of the host city, but at the same time, that same event is part of a wider tapestry of other events (Grabher & Thiel, 2015). Mega-events are thus both linear occurrences with regular, recognisable features, but also cyclical, recurring at intervals in different contexts around the globe. The notion of a lifecycle helps make sense of these overlapping local/global dimensions.

The mega-event lifecycle can be understood in four distinct periods: bidding phase, preparatory phase, the event itself, and after the event – commonly known as the legacy phase. The lifecycle of each event overlaps with various periods from previous and subsequent events (see Figure 1). Each period is the subject of intense planning and organisational efforts from the side of authorities and, on the other side, critical analysis from scholarship and investigative media. These parties do not easily communicate outside of their silos, but rather create and sustain their own relatively distinct networks of narratives, practices, and data. Thus, organising authorities tend to operate from positions that view mega-events are beneficent for cities and societies, while some (but certainly not all) scholarly communities focus on deleterious impacts. This is

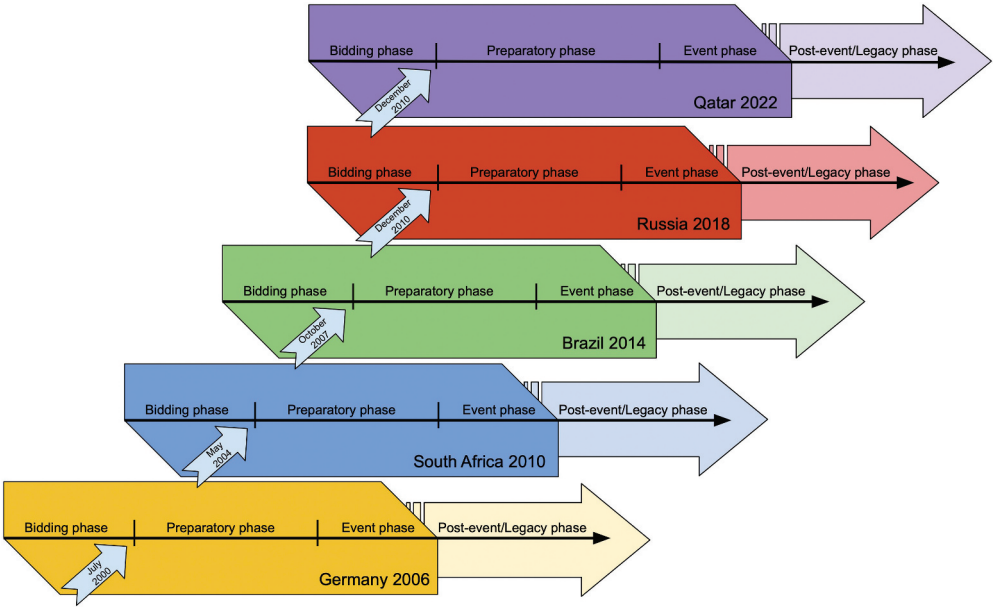

Figure 1. Timeline of mega-event phases overlapping from 2006 - 2022 for five men's Football World Cup host countries.

a particularly salient problem regarding the so-called legacy phase, which is when organisers promise that the positive impacts of hosting come to light. Instead of switching attention to the next mega-event on the list, it is crucial to explore and assess the actual outcomes of mega-event plans and promises on host city urban spaces, socio-spatial exclusions, economic development, and resident wellbeing.

Matters become more confusing with these assessments when different communities employ similar terminology to mean different things. These differences in framing can be vast or subtle, but overall, the usage of legacy is inextricably bound to power and the question of who has the capacity to create and reinforce dominant narratives (Mckenzie et al., 2024). Problematically, the legacy phase is also when most media and scholarly attention wanes, attracted by the next mega-event on the global list. Thus, many serious problems for cities and societies pass largely unnoticed by the worldwide audiences that celebrated the event not long before. Their overlapping nature means that the preparatory phase of the next mega-event is already underway, and the cycle repeats anew. All the while, organising authorities continue to use the legacy term largely unchallenged, and the myth of universally beneficent mega-events lives on.

Focusing on the final period of the mega-event lifecycle, there are three major difficulties in discussing legacy: duration, designation, and definition.

Duration refers to the length of the legacy phase. Put simply: when does legacy actually start, and how long after the event does legacy last? These seemingly simple questions are complicated by the fact that organisers and authorities now include legacy thinking into all phases of the lifecycle, changing planning practices to aim for better after-event venue usage, overall sustainability, public sport participation, and urban development (Stewart & Rayner, 2016; VanWynsberghe et al., 2021). This is reflected in the creation of legacy

teams and commissions in organising committees and rights holding institutions, as well as in countless plans, programmes, and other event documents (see the 'Legacy Forum' in Queensland Government, 2022; or the 'Legacy Starts Now' in; Shanks & Taylor, 2025).

On the other side of the timeline, it is not clear when legacy stops happening. Take the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, arguably the most famous and overused example of legacy, and the inspiration for the so-called 'Barcelona Model' of mega-event planning (Degen & García, 2012). While hosting is routinely credited for transforming the city into a global tourist centre, is Barcelona's overtourism crisis also part of their Olympic legacy (Tesfahuney & Ek, 2024)? Thus, confusingly, legacy can be said to start either at the conclusion of the event phase, at the beginning of the bidding phase, or indeed at any point in between – and it is equally unclear how long legacy lasts, stretching into the future for an indeterminate period after the event. Chappelet (2008, 2019a) has theorised the role of time in mega-event legacy research, but this sensitivity is not widespread. Nevertheless, time is a vital part of understanding the impacts of mega-events on cities and societies.

The second major difficulty when discussing legacy is the problem of designation. Designation refers to the question of impact attribution, where certain outcomes are claimed as the result of the mega-event. For instance, the urban regeneration of East London is credited as a legacy of the 2012 Olympics (Poynter et al., 2015). Indeed, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park – London's largest green space initiative in a century – stands as an unmissable material reminder of the potential long-term benefits of mega-event-related investment, coupled with effective planning.

At the same time, closer examination reveals the spatial unevenness and sociomaterial inequalities unleashed by mega-event development, replete with broken promises, shattered communities, local business closures, and new housing aimed not at locals in need but a gentrifying middle class (Wagg, 2015). Yet none of these deleterious effects are mentioned in the official Olympic representation of the legacy of London 2012, instead portraying the Games as transformative for East London in terms of economics, environment, and overall sustainability, even going so far as to claim the creation of a legacy blueprint for other hosts to follow (International Olympic Committee, 2025a). The only criticism in the official analysis is mild, admitting that sport participation did not meet the government's goals, even though significant progress was made. Even this modest critique is leavened by discussing how different surveys use different methodologies, and that ultimately the evidence is inconclusive. Contrast this with the analysis from scholars at University College London, presenting more of a balance between the benefits and burdens (Bernstock et al., 2022).

Aside from the concerns of vested interest and independent analysis, this also raises the question of the third difficulty in legacy: definition. At heart, the problem with legacy is the problem of the floating signifier, where multiple understandings of a term compete for hegemony in the discourse, ultimately resulting in the creation of community around a shared reality (Laclau et al., 1985). Indeed, there are dizzying numbers of competing definitions of legacy, with many serving as the basis for frameworks and models meant to measure this elusive and contested concept (Koenigstorfer et al., 2019). Preuss (2007, 2015, 2019a) has spent years defining and refining legacy, considering in detail *what* constitutes an event-related change, *who* might be affected, *how* these changes affect different populations, and *when* these occur – including how long they last and how constant they are over time. Thomson

et al. (2013) trace the development of legacy definitions over time, while Scheu et al. (2019) review the legacy literature and identify research gaps and biases. Leopkey and Parent (2012) focus on how the concept itself became institutionalised within the International Olympic Committee. Mangan and Dyreson (2013), Holt and Ruta (2015), and Preuss and Hong (2021) all organise collections boasting an impressive diversity of conceptual endeavours and case studies. Careers have been built on trying to conceptualise and operationalise this term.

Conversely, much institutional and governmental work treats legacy as self-explanatory and thus tends to avoid concrete terminology. However, most of the research featured here employs specific definitions, ranging from the hyper specific to the philosophically broad. For instance, there is the popular ' . . . all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible structures created for and by a sport event that remain longer than the event itself' (Preuss, 2007, p. 211). He later simplified this to 'Any outcomes that affect people and/or space caused by structural changes that stem from the Games' (Preuss, 2019b). Chappelet (2019b) went further with 'legacy is that which remains'.

With a few notable exceptions, there is a general lack of legacy research that focuses on the 'unplanned' and 'negative' aspects (Thomson et al., 2019). These exceptions form the conceptual foundation for the argument that it is time to abandon the term. Working on the deleterious outcomes of Rio2016, Talbot (2021) critiques the positive framing of legacy and argues that the term is used for political legitimisation, rather than working for actual positive change. That argument expands upon the notion of legacy as a 'magical' discourse within mega-event movements, where different managers within the Olympic movement use legacy to mean different things – especially in the spaces between different languages (MacAloon, 2008). The point here is not to focus on the specifics of semantic analysis but rather to note more broadly how the term has been fluid, flexible, and political from the outset. This is in line with other mega-event scholarship that focuses on the narratives, meanings, and framings of legacy, attempting to bring to light a more balanced and less hagiographic perspective on hosting (Mckenzie et al., 2024; Vanwynsberghe et al., 2013). For his part, Talbot argues against abandoning legacy, given its prevalence in the overall mega-event lexicon. There is value in this perspective, to be sure, following the idea that critical scholars might better engage with organisers, media, and the public if they employ common terminology. With respect to Talbot and others, this paper argues for the opposite. It submits that legacy is too laden with entrenched political agendas, and too bound to the overwhelming symbolic force of mega-event soft power, to ever be understood as anything neutral, impartial, realistic, inclusive, or fair.

Aside from the minority of work that highlights the problems with legacy as a concept, most critical work exists separately from the legacy literature. At the same time, too much legacy work highlights only the positive and beneficial. This speaks to one of the core disbalances in the floating signifier problem: in commonplace usage, 'legacy' refers to a bequest, whether money or property or some other value (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). It is usually, though not universally, regarded as a positive. In the context of mega-events, using *legacy* automatically engages the positive connotations of the commonplace definition, due to the almost irresistible 'feel-good effect' (Cornelissen & Maennig, 2010; Hiller & Wanner, 2015), combined with the dominance of narrative control wielded by organisers and authorities.

This imparts a normative positive framing that can tip the scales of the floating signifier towards less critical and more upbeat analyses. This normative positivity persists despite the periodic attempts to conceptualise deleterious outcomes via the generally oxymoronic term of 'negative legacies' (see Cornelissen et al., 2011; Lauermann, 2019; Preuss, 2015). Sacrificed in this move is a more accurate understanding of the wicked problems inherent in mega-event legacy delivery (Byers et al., 2020). Put simply, despite the attempts to bring balance to the term, using legacy risks serving vested interests while ignoring the fuller picture of what mega-events actually do to cities and societies. It contributes to the processes of sportswashing and consistently obscures the damages to host city residents around the world (Boykoff, 2022; Wolfe, 2025).

Aside from these complications, there are broader issues involving the frameworks and models built on these questionable definitions. First, there is a tendency to reify a binary between positive and negative outcomes (but see Dawson & Jöns, 2018 for an attempt to escape this dualist trap). Regardless of the tendency to focus on the positive, these attempts to frame outcomes within a positive or negative binary neglect crucial contextual factors such as positionality, subjectivity, intersectionality, and time. Second, the reliance on frameworks and models encourages an overreliance on indicators and quantitative data, which flattens the plurality of lived experience and reduces the complexity of mega-event impacts into a convenient but unrealistic package (Leonardsen, 2007). Models and frameworks also have the side effect of spawning a kind of arms race between researchers who compete to have the most accurate model (see Brittain et al., 2017; Chappelet, 2019a; Kassens-Noor et al., 2015). Building a fairer picture of mega-event impacts requires in-depth qualitative data and the complicated, messy realities they convey.

For example, consider the issue of mega-event-led resident and business displacement. Despite the glowing portrayal of legacy communicated by the International Olympic Committee, the preparations for London 2012 evicted at least 450 residents and 286 businesses from the area, attempting to refashion the East End (Davis & Bernstock, 2019; Smith, 2014). Previously, the preparations for Beijing 2008 displaced at least 1.25 million people, and probably more (COHRE, 2007). It follows that a standard model or framework would report that London 2012 had better legacies than Beijing 2008, and in terms of scale this is certainly true. At the same time, it is deeply reductive (to say nothing of insulting) to dismiss or diminish the 450+ residents and 286+ business displaced in London. Rather than losing perspective in the abstraction of indicators, it is crucial to remember that every eviction is a profound tragedy. This is best remembered and communicated by including the experiences and perspectives of those directly affected. Far too often, these dynamics are absent in the standard interpretations and applications of legacy. Instead, these damages are obscured by the glow and promise of this compromised and problematic term.

If not legacy, then what?

Appraising these tendencies and acknowledging the need to correct them, this paper argues that legacy has outlived its utility as a productive means to make sense of mega-events. There are too many problems with the concept. It is weighed down with fatal complications in terms of duration, designation, and definition, including problems with

vested interests, politics and power, floating signifiers, normative positive framing, the reification of binary thinking, the overreliance on quantitative indicators, and the relative neglect of qualitative data that can provide a fuller, more inclusive, and more equitable picture of what mega-events do.

On this basis, this paper calls for the abandonment of the concept of legacy, with the goal of working towards better research, communication, and outcomes. Understanding that vested interests logically prefer the normative positive framing imparted by the term, the paper argues that scholarship should lead this charge, alongside municipalities, non-governmental organisations, media, and any who strive for more inclusive and less damaging events. It is assumed that rights holders and organising authorities will resist this change, in which case their continued usage of the term should highlight their lack of objectivity.

This paper is agnostic about alternative terms. Clearly any terminology comes with baggage, and it is not prudent to engage in definitional bickering while real-world damages continue relatively unchecked. Any of the many terms engaged by mega-events scholars could suffice, including inter alia *impacts (*e.g. Fredline et al., 2003; Hiller, 1998; Vetitnev & Bobina, 2017; Wolfe et al., 2022) and *effects* (Cornelissen & Maennig, 2010; Elahi et al., 2021; Matheson, 2008). The key here is not to replace one term with another, but rather to abandon *legacy* and, in so doing, to engage a different set of sensitivities that can make better sense of mega-events overall.

It is worth stating clearly the goal of this endeavour: to steer mega-events towards better outcomes for more people, particularly for the most vulnerable populations of the host cities – those most likely to lose out (Short, 2004). Thus, aiming to ameliorate the most serious problems with the concept of legacy, the paper advances a number of sensitivities to reorient research and practice. Any term that seeks to replace legacy should be politically neutral, scientifically independent, and open to a diversity of data. Political neutrality in this context means striving to minimise bias – a particular challenge due to the emotional and affective power of mega-events and sport (Fullagar & Pavlidis, 2018; Militz, 2019). Scientific independence is equally important, especially given the prevalence of money and power, the demonstrated desire and ability to coopt, and the inevitable conflicts of interests that result (Kihl, 2017; Mecca et al., 2015). Finally, diversity of data refers to a posture of openness in regard to who can speak for the mega-event experience. To employ management lexicon, this means employing broader and more inclusive definitions of who counts as a 'stakeholder' in mega-event planning, so as to better represent the residents and the city (Mair et al., 2023; Wolfe, 2023; Ziakas, 2015).

Neutrality and independence are challenging to attain in any domain, so they are best thought of as intentions and processes rather than discrete achievable goals. This is particularly true given the history of mega-event authorities abusing their gatekeeping power and revoking access to critical voices (Boykoff, 2013; Oliver, 2025). At a minimum, however, it should become standard practice to ask *who* is making mega-event claims, *how* they generate their data, and *what* their connections to vested interests might be. For instance, if a university researcher also happens to serve on an organising committee or in a rights holder's legacy commission, this does not necessarily mean they are biased – they could be directly advising practitioners with best practices, for example. This close participation with power should be made transparent, however, and should naturally raise questions about researcher independence, data availability, and bias.

As for data diversity, this can be achieved by augmenting the macro scales that tend to dominate mega-events research with a dedication to micropolitical subjects. The approach stems from a moral position to give voice to voiceless populations and focus on the everyday implications of hosting that too often are obviated under the glare of the spectacle. Focusing on the micropolitical is a means to uncover what lies beneath the Potemkin surface so common throughout the mega-event lifecycle (Wolfe, 2024a). This perspective also entails refined sensibilities towards researcher and researched alike. Thus, a micropolitical approach means making space for a diversity of subject positions; taking into account the researcher's own positionality and the subsequent implications for research; and charting the evolution of attitudes and development over time.

Operationalising the sensitivities

Given the preponderance of existing frameworks, it makes little sense here to add to the pile with a new creation. Instead, this paper acknowledges the potential suitability of numerous approaches and, as with substitute terminology, it remains agnostic. Here, in demonstrating how to operationalise these sensitivities, the paper prefers light and transferable frameworks for their ease of use and general applicability, and above all wishes to avoid convoluted models and their assorted appeals to scientificity (Lather, 2006). Thus, the paper employs a simple mental matrix based on foundational work by Chappelet (2012) and Horne (2014, 2017).

This matrix orients impacts according to whether they are tangible or intangible, because mega-events engender both material and immaterial changes. Simultaneously, the matrix categorises effects according to universal or selective populations, that is, whether these changes apply only to certain groups or to the majority of the host city. In this way, the matrix recognises mega-event-related interventions in both the built environment and the human heart, while also identifying fundamental issues of equity. These should also be organised with an eye towards chronology and the mega-event lifecycle, as both the built environment and resident reactions are not stable and will change over time.

To demonstrate: the Summer Olympics in Paris 2024 were presented by local organisers and the International Olympic Committee as profoundly successful in all domains, leaving positive 'legacies' for Paris, Parisians, and the Olympic Movement, as well as providing crucial lessons for future hosts (International Olympic Committee, 2024). These 'legacies' were planned, justified, and proven via impressive-looking frameworks and sophisticated indicators, including no less than 13 government evaluation studies, while also making claims to scientific validity and political independence. No mention was made of social, economic, or ecological harm.

On the flipside, local activist groups catalogued a range of damaging practices during the mega-event lifecycle, including evictions of marginalised groups and other so-called 'social cleansing' processes, the hollowing out of democratic practices, the extra-constitutional installation of security and surveillance systems, and the destruction of protected environments (de la Médaille, 2024; Saccage, 2024).

Organisers called the Games a financial success, generating a surplus of almost 27 million EUR, despite going over their original budget as promised in the bid (Perelman, 2024). Though organisers planned for a minimum of public contributions,

the Court of Auditors reported that the public actually footed a bill of about 6.5 billion EUR (Cassel, 2025). These sums do not include the profits flowing to the International Olympic Committee from the sale of broadcast rights and sponsorships, which are substantial. So, returning to the mental matrix, these profits would be understood as tangible but selective: benefiting the IOC, France's National Olympic Committee, and certain as-yet undefined sports programmes in France. Conversely, significant costs were paid via taxes by the French population. As a wealthy country, these outlays did not represent a major percentage of GDP, but nevertheless they would be understood as tangible and universal because they are material and impact people at large.

Similar categorisations can be performed for other mega-event impacts. One of the advantages of Paris 2024 was the reliance on existing venues, which avoided the problem of white elephant infrastructures that plagued so many mega-events (Alm et al., 2016; 2022). Authorities did build a new Aquatic Centre, however, in an underserved area. This investment can be understood as tangible, around midway on a spectrum between universal and selective, given that the benefit is relatively selective but still targeted at a broader population. Along the same lines, investments into public transport and public parks can be categorised more squarely as tangible and universal.

The intangible aftereffects are more challenging to capture but no less important. Paris 2024 demonstrated profound social and cultural value, especially for people on the ground during the Games. These emotions and subsequent memories can have life-changing aftereffects for people, and indeed account for much of the staying power of mega-events, despite so much evidence of their destructive potential. The profound social and cultural value of the mega-event can be understood as intangible and universal.

Conversely, many people lost out when the Games came to Paris, including in intangible terms. These include feelings of segregation, hopelessness, loss of autonomy, political alienation, and fear. Authoritarian planning practices convinced many residents of the poorer northern areas that government at all levels were not concerned with them, but rather served the interests of powerful moneyed interests both in France and abroad (Wolfe, 2024b). The messages of exclusion and alienation for these residents was clear, and while the absolute numbers are less than in other, more destructive mega-events, the point from London still stands: any damages against the host city and society should be brought to light, discussed, and ameliorated. Using the matrix, these personal losses would be understood as intangible and selective, restricted only to certain groups – in this case, the poorest, most marginalised, and most vulnerable.

As demonstrated in this matrix snapshot, and building on Dawson and Jöns (2018), mega-event impacts are not ordered strictly in positive or negative categories. Instead of this binary, mega-events here are understood simply according to whether they apply to broad or narrow selections of the population, and it is left up to thick qualitative description to explain the *who*, *how*, and *when* (Leonardsen, 2007). Similarly, thinking through this matrix makes space for subjective and sometimes deeply personal intangible aftereffects without framing them in binaries, as positive or negative 'legacies'. Nor does it strive to reduce them to indicators, instead leaving room for qualitative description to do justice to these vital aspects inherent to the mega-event experience.

To reiterate: the aim here is to reorient mega-events research towards an appreciation of micropolitics, subjectivity, positionality, and time, all grounded in political neutrality, scientific independence, and diversity of data. These sensitivities counter the normative

positive framing of the concept of legacy, counterbalance the overreliance on quantitative data, and escape the binary trap of categorising results as simply good or bad. These more realistic and inclusive postures make space for the messy lived realities of the mega-event totality in all phases of the lifecycle, ultimately aiming to maximise benefits and minimise harms, for more of the host city and society.

Conclusion: towards better terms and better outcomes

The goal of this paper is to stress the importance of moving away from using legacy. Though the concept has flourished over many years and across a variety of disciplines, it has outlived its usefulness as a means of understanding and analysing the actual effects that mega-events engender on cities and societies. Moreover, since legacy has served as the basis for many frameworks and models, the concept's fundamental weaknesses have had serious implications on how mega-events are understood overall. With fundamental flaws in terms of definition, designation, and duration, legacy functions through a normative positive framing to portray a frictionless world where hosting mega-events is only ever to the good. In this way, legacy has come to service the interests of the powerful at the expense of the marginalised and the vulnerable. It constructs a Potemkin façade under which, to greater or lesser degrees, the same mega-event-led problems continue unabated. Regardless of the progress of various reforms, hosting still manages to shape the built environment to benefit the wealthy and harm the vulnerable, to exacerbate socio-spatial exclusions and inequalities, and to damage general wellbeing. The continued usage of 'legacy' plays a key role here.

Even scholarship critical of legacy risks falling into the trap of retrenching the concept's power. While in previous times it may have made sense to fight for wider definitions and include 'negative legacies', this paper argues that the battle is lost and it is time to refocus and move on. There exists a veritable army of well-funded legacy departments, teams, forums, and frameworks, all supported by the globe's most powerful narrative-shaping media apparatus. When critical scholars use 'legacy', we contribute academic legitimacy to a term that by rights should be understood as part of a political project.

This paper proposes abandoning legacy entirely, with the understanding that organisers and other associated authorities will continue to employ the term, since they benefit from its inherent biases. Yet if scholars and media eschew legacy in favour of other concepts, it might help reveal the normative positive framing invoked by those with vested interests.

Overall, the goal is not to champion one term over another, but to refocus attention on those who lose out during the mega-event lifecycle, with the goal of steering towards more equitable and less damaging outcomes. The time has come to move away from legacy and its attendant problems, and to move towards more inclusive conceptualisations that embody political neutrality, scientific independence, and openness to a diversity of data. This should be engaged through a focus on micropolitical subjects, subjectivity, positionality, and time, so as to maintain focus on those regularly harmed, excluded, and rendered invisible by the mega-event spectacle. This approach stems from a moral position to give voice to the voiceless as well as the aspiration for a more balanced representation that includes a spectrum of mega-event damages and benefits, both

tangible and intangible, universal and selective. The paper calls formally to begin the long overdue process of abandoning legacy for all who care earnestly about better mega-event outcomes in what should realistically be celebrations for all.

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Notes on contributor

Sven Daniel Wolfe is professor of social and cultural geography at the Institute of Geography, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. His research interests include mega-events, sustainability, geopolitics, and the implications of spectacular transformations on people and places traditionally ignored by the global spotlight.

ORCID

Sven Daniel Wolfe http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4517-6056

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