

Drawing on previous examples of major sporting events and festivals, critically d...

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

TCP 2022 REGENERATION AND PLACE Final assessment: essay writing

Subject: Drawing on previous examples of major sporting events and festivals, critically discuss the assumption that London will benefit from hosting the Olympic Games. Word count: 2370

Mega sports events like the Olympic or the commonwealth Games, the Football World Cup or the European Capital of Culture always have big and beautiful aims, like for the last one, according to the European Commission 'highlight the diversity of cultural wealth in Europe and the ties that bind us as Europeans' (toutel'europe. Eu, seen on the 4th january 2012). But nowadays, countries and cities bid to host these kind of events with more pragmatic objectives where art, culture and sport can be considered as tools of 'place marketing and urban regeneration' (MATHESON, 2010). But even if these aims are respectable, the history shows that the results are not always as expected. While London is going to host the Olympic Games in the summer of this year, it could be interesting to observe some examples of the past and to see how the London authorities are using this important experience. That is why, the aim of this essay is going to critically discuss the assumption that London will benefit from hosting the Olympic Games by drawing on previous examples of major sporting events and festivals. To deal with this subject, the essay is divided in 3 parts. Firstly, we will talk about what authorities look for when they bid for hosting major sport events and festivals, followed by a section which will draw upon the lessons learned from previous initiatives, and finally we will examine if London authorities seem to have taken into account these lessons.

I. The expected aims when hosting mega events

As noted by L

Davies (2011), 'over the last two decades there has been a new trend emerging within sport, which has seen a shift, from investment for the sake of sport to investment in sport for good'(p1). This shift, which has also been seen within art and culture, is a new emerging trend generated by the context of globalization. According to the metaphore of "commodification" of cities noted by Elias Beriatos and Aspa Gospodini (2004), 'mobile capital and tourists are the highly flexible consumers, cities are the product, and local government, organizations and institutions are the manufacturers, the marketers and the retailers' (p188). In a 'highly competitive market' (irbid), sport, art and culture are then a piece of factors used by the last kind of actors to improve their product, by making it different and meeting the needs of the consumers. More concretely, sport, art and culture have been more customised to address urban regeneration objectives (L Davies, 2011) because a lot of governments, sporting and non-sporting organizations believe that a wide range of economic and social benefits can be conferred by this to individuals and communities. This can be then used to revitalize declining urban areas (irbid). The important term of legacy needs then to be introduced. Indeed, this word for which numerous authors explain that it's a widely contested and certainly misunderstood concept, has become overused in all major sporting events from the bid to the planning of the event and post-event period. For L Davies (2011), this term represents: 'the wide range of outcomes commonly associated with and expected of major events, ranging from physical elements including sporting infrastructure and urban and environmental development, through to wider socio-economic

improvements to an area such as enhancing skills and workforce development, community relations and social capital' (p. 1). According to MATHESON (2010), the presentation of short-term impacts to bid and to host major events are not sufficient anymore. Nowadays, the city and the host country need to prove the investments can be sustainable with the creation of legacies, whether to win the right to host the event, to encourage community and stakeholder support for the event, but also to justify when there are high levels of public sector investment. That's why the authorities which host such mega events take more and more care of the legacy planning and even create specific organization, which in the case of the London 2012 Olympic Games is named the Olympic Park Legacy Company. The Legacy planning can be widely varied with themes including the improvements of the physical activity levels, the educational benefits, the sustainability and regeneration developments, and economic and social developments (Scottish Government, 2009b). But as L Davies claims, when she reuses the idea created by Gratton and Preuss (2008), a cube with three dimensions: positive and negative, planned and unplanned, tangible and intangible can be used to conceptualize the concept of legacy. The problem is then, that in reality the studies realized to measure the feasibility and the impact of the events are only focused on the positive, planned and tangible dimensions. Thus, because it can be quantitatively measured, the economic outcomes are often lead to the foreground (irbid). Now we have presented the aims of some cities and countries to host major sporting events and festivals, the next part will look at some lessons learned from previous

examples of cities and countries which have hosted such mega events. II. Some lessons learned from previous initiatives In order to critically discuss the assumption that London will benefit from hosting the Olympic Games, we are going to briefly observe some previous examples of cities which have hosted such mega events and to draw up some lessons learned that should be taken into account. To begin with, the examples of the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000 and in Athens in 2004 will be observed because they both illustrate the fact that, as Bernadi (2010, p. 22) explained it, “despite a real lever effect, the organization of international events like the Olympics, lead to some non negligible disadvantages, especially in terms of the respect of Fundamental Rights often ignored in favor of the ‘ gigantic’ that remains the Achilles’ heel of the games”. The example of Athens’ Olympics is particularly prominent. By hosting the Games, the city and the Greek government wanted to deeply modernize the transport and the accommodation infrastructures which existed but were outdated for a European city, while launching the construction of the Olympic venues, and they also had the desire to enhance the archeological heritage of Athens and of its suburbs (Beriatos E., 2006). Thanks to the Olympics, they were able to realize Herculean works and were to be funded by up to 50% by the European Union but the Greek capital has failed to anticipate the post-olympic period and became the example of what not to do (irbid). Today only 30% of the venues were converted, the others remaining as ‘ white elephants’ (irbid). In addition to the total cost of the games, the Greek state and its capital must spend each year since the end of the Olympic competitions £40 million for

the maintenance of these abandoned Olympic venues (irbid). We can learn many lessons from this example. The first one is that what is really important for the hosted authorities is to plan a long-term legacy usage of the Olympic venues as soon as possible and to promote a regular usage of the Olympic Park to maximize the economic and social legacies in the surrounding area (L Davies, 2011). By attracting regular events, it will not only maximize the employment opportunities within the venues themselves and return on public investment, but create a vibrancy to the place, which will encourage other investment and usage (irbid), but it will also permit for every venue to generate their own revenue and to be economically viable (irbid). The 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney was another example of Olympics organization which paid little attention to legacy planning. Indeed, even if it delivered successful games (irbid) which “ had significant implications for the regeneration of Homebush Bay” (Searle G., 2002) in bringing it “ forward and at a scale probably not otherwise possible” (irbid). The bid for the Olympics permitted the authorities to shift from a project of an industrial zone to the regeneration of the brownfield site into a green Olympic Park (irbid). However, the underestimation of the final cost of the Olympic park, the subordination of planning to economic development, the need for partnerships with the private sector and the post-games competition between different venues in the city lead to a more reactive, short term and unpredictable planning process which could have been avoided if a public sector organization have directly planned the regeneration of the area in a holistic way (Davies L. E., 2011). Another lesson that we can learn from

previous initiatives is this importance of the involvement and the participation of the local communities in the regeneration of their area. Whether on an economic point of view by integrating local businesses in the economic activity of the Olympics Park, but also on a social point of view by inviting communities to participate in sports activities and services offered on the park (irbid). On this point, the example of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games has shown that negative legacies can be created if the local population is excluded from the planning process, with fear of increasing property prices and gentrification (irbid). Moreover, the successful experience of the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester has shown that “ a volunteer labour force is critical to mega sport events such as the Olympic or Commonwealth Games” (Nichols G. & Ralston R., 2011, p. 1), which left a long term legacy in terms of employability, social inclusion, and economic benefits (irbid). The last lesson that we can learn from previous initiatives is the importance of making regular evaluations of the economic, social and environmental impacts of such events’ legacy even if some are not really quantifiable. III. The London 2012 Olympic Games faced to these previous lessons While the Olympic Games will begin in few months, it is not currently possible to clearly know the assumption that London will benefit from hosting the Olympic Games but what we can already say that unlike the examples of Sydney and Athens, the London authorities seem to have taken legacy as a very important factor of the success of the Games from the outset (L Davies, 2011). This argument can be illustrated by the early creation of the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC), which aim is to lead

the long-term physical transformation of the Park after the Games (irbid). By visiting the official website of the London Olympic Games and of the OPLC, the general feeling when seeing the very diverse list of legacy aims, is that the London authorities tried to take advantage of previous failed examples. It begins with the considerable aim to regenerate an important part of East London, within the Olympic boroughs which represent “ the greatest cluster of deprivation in England and Wales (L Davies, 2011, p228). The local communities seem then to be the focal point of the legacy aims which plan with a holistic consideration to “ create a vibrant and active Olympic Park" (OPLC web site, seen on the 5th January 2012), which will be “ fully integrated within the surrounding areas"(irbid) , and “ to provide the widest possible public benefits"(irbid). The Olympics are seen as “ a unique chance to reconnect communities across the Lea Valley" (irbid) and to achieve this, transports connections have been or are being improved, for example the upgrading of the Stratford Regional Station. Another aim claimed by the London authorities is that 100% of the spectators will get the Games by public transport, or by walking or cycling (London 2012 legacy site, seen on the 5th January 2012). Concerning to the long term usage of the Olympic Park, the OPLC plans to transform it after the Games. The aim being to create a new centrality with mixed usages, a unique ‘ 21st century garden city’ (OPLC web site, seen on the 4th January 2012), with an important emphasis on sustainability highlighted by the elaboration of The London 2012 Sustainability Plan: Towards a One Planet 2012. This is where the Olympic stadium, transformed into a multi-purpose venue which will be

adaptable for a wide range of sporting and cultural events to maximize its chance of being regularly used, will be a central point (ibid). But while all of this looks perfect, the reality is not, as noted L Davies (2011, p228) when she said “ proposals currently reflect aspirations rather than reality, with implementation and funding of legacy plans still unclear”. Indeed, in the context of economic crisis, the final global cost of the Games has tripled compared to the initial budget (lepetitjournal. com, seen on the 7th January 2012), what should lead us to think about what will be the real legacy of the Olympic Park, what will be the final cost for the taxpayers, about the difficulty the OPLC will certainly have to find investors for the transformation of the Park, about the high probability that an important part of the jobs created by the event will only be temporary. Conclusion What cities are looking for today by hosting international events like the Olympics or the Commonwealth games or like the title of European Capital of Culture, are primarily of short-term effects, such as the fact that these events have real lever effect to obtain funding from private sector and public institutions like the European Union to make public and private infrastructures which are often realized at a very large scale. This kind of initiatives taking more and more part of an approach that aims to address the needs of “ transforming urban landscapes to address globalization and intercity competition”(Beriatos E., Gospodini A., 2004). But at the sight of previous examples such as the Beijing, Sydney and in particular Athens Olympic Games, authorities hosting these events are now asked to foresee the long-term effects, which are called the 'legacy'. But while the London Authorities

seem to have taken seriously into account the legacy planning from the start of the Games preparations, with the main aim to regenerate a part of East London areas containing some of the most deprived neighbours of England and ensuring that " within 20 years the communities who host the 2012 Games will have the same social and economic chances as their neighbours across London", according to the Strategic Regeneration Framework (L Davies, 2011), the current economic crisis leaves the future of this very ambitious target relatively uncertain, and confirms the fact that socio-economic evaluations will have to be carried out over the next 15 to 20 years.

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