Olympic Legacy: A Comparison of Barcelona 1992 and Athens 2004

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Abstract

Hosting an Olympic Games has a major impact on a city and its people. I compared the Barcelona 1992 and Athens 2004 approaches to “legacy,” the lasting impacts of a Games. In Olympic circles, few cities live up to the long-term planning standard set by Barcelona, especially in urban regeneration. However, most scholars agree that Athens did not plan for the post-Games period as effectively as they could have. Barcelona had better organization and cooperation, while the Athens organizers and the Greek government disagreed on various issues. Political disagreements prevented Athens from utilizing their Games as much as they could have and delayed any benefits for the city. Barcelona had a much more concentrated plan for their venues and improvements, whereas Athens venues were dispersed throughout the city. Barcelona was better able to make strong improvements to areas of the city that needed it most. Though Athens wanted to leave a positive legacy and did in many ways, they were not as focused on that aspect. Athens shined in the concept of “héritage,” which encompasses bringing the past into the present as a “legacy.” Because of their unique past, they were able to bring historical meaning to their Olympic Games.

The spectacle of the Olympic Games has captivated audiences around the world since the first ancient Olympic Games was held in Athens in 776BCE. Since then, the Games have grown into a global affair that has become a symbol of peace and the coming together of the nations of the world. The Olympic Games give citizens of the host city and country an experience they will never forget. Hosting an Olympic Games can have a major impact on the city and its people in many different ways. Because hosting an event such as an Olympics is such a unique opportunity, cities ideally want to obtain the most benefit from it they possibly can. Ideally these benefits will last for years after the event. The long-term impact that the Olympic Games have on a city and its people is known as the Olympic legacy. How did the host cities of Barcelona and Athens differ in their approach to legacy? Barcelona had better organization and cooperation, a concentrated plan, and more focus on the issue, while the Athens organizers and the Greek government disagreed on various issues and placed less emphasis on the implementation of a legacy. Barcelona cooperated with the necessary parties and had a vision of what they wanted to achieve in their city in conjunction with hosting the Olympic Games, and therefore left a more impactful legacy on their city. Athens, on the other hand, dealt with political disputes that made it more difficult to put the necessary planning into making the same kind of impactful legacy. While the Athens Olympics did have an effect, they were not as focused on producing one. They attempted to link their Olympic past to the present and made more of an impact on the Olympic Movement in that way.

Hosting an Olympic Games is a major orga-
nizational undertaking. A Summer Olympic Games lasts 17 days, so ideally cities would like all of the resources that go into hosting the Games themselves to have a much larger impact on the city in the long term. Because the Olympic Games have grown into such a massive event, organizers want to make sure the Games impact the city as positively as possible. Cities must put in a great deal of work and resources to be able to host a Games. They need to not only build sports infrastructure for the competitions themselves but have the capacity to host a large number of visitors from around the world. In Beijing 2008, there were 10,942 athletes, 70,000 volunteers, and 24,562 accredited media. These people alone would represent a major population increase in the city, but it does not include all of the officials, judges, coaches, unaccredited media, and of course spectators who also flock to the city.

In Olympic circles, few cities live up to the standard set by Barcelona in 1992 in terms of the legacy left to the city. Some scholars refer to the city’s way of leaving a legacy as the Barcelona model. According to Coaffee (2011), the key aspects of the Barcelona model are “strong and long-term strategic visioning, excellence in urban design, and the importance of well-funded social programmes.” In short, Barcelona planned very well for the Games themselves and for the post-Games period. In fact, Athens 2004 expressed interest in trying to follow the Barcelona model in hosting their own Games. However, most scholars agree that Athens did not plan for the post-Games period as well as they could have. As one Athenian told the BBC, “We had a fantastic Games but no plan for the day after.” The Olympics themselves were glorious and wonderful and filled Greeks with pride, but once they were over Athens struggled to take as much advantage as possible from hosting them.

In general, the Barcelona Olympics had better organization and cooperation than Athens. Barcelona planned the sporting venues to be in line with their view for the future of their city and what they could do to help their city. They integrated their Olympic project in to the Barcelona 2000 Strategic Plan, first approved in 1990, which was their vision for the future. Architects and urban designers were given a central role in the constructing of Olympic projects in Barcelona. The Athens organizers sought advice from a few big name architects, but it was much later in the process. Barcelona had a much clearer plan for what to do with their venues as well as how to use the Olympics to market the city for touristic purposes. A company called Barcelona Promocio was set up to manage venues. In 1994 alone, “they held 346 events for 1,514,348 people and created over 450 new jobs.” Two years after the Games, the venues were far from being used for the first time since the Olympics. Venues such as swimming and diving were opened to the public with much reduced seating capacity. The Piscines Bernat Picornell, where swimming took place, has a board commemorating the medalists from the Barcelona Olympics as homage to the athletes and the Games. Port Olímpic, where the Olympic Sailing was held, is now a sporting marina and is one of the most successful in the Mediterranean. Athens, on the other hand, spent the first few years after the Games embroiled in a political dispute over who was to blame for venues sitting empty.

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From the very beginning, the Greek government and the Athens Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (ATHOC) did not see eye to eye on many issues. There were assurances that the group that won the bid for Athens to host the Games, the Athens Olympic Bid Committee (AOBC), would spearhead the efforts to prepare for the Games. However, the government replaced the AOBC, led by Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, as soon as the Games were won in 1997 and changed many of the plans Angelopoulos-Daskalaki and her team had put in place. The government spent precious time reviewing the master plan that had allowed them to win the bid in the first place instead of getting started on construction and other preparations. In 2000, four years before the Games, International Olympic Committee president Juan Antonio Samaranch actually threatened to take the Olympics away from Athens because of lack of preparation. The government decided to bring Angelopoulos-Daskalaki back to speed up the process, which she did, but she had to execute the plan the government had come up with rather than the plan she and her team had originally created. Because the proper planning was not in place, venues were left dormant after the Games. It took two years for any of the venues to have any real use due to the political issues and lack of planning both before and after the Games. In July 2005, there was finally an initial start when Hellenic Olympic Properties SA announced a competition for the development of the canoe kayak slalom, the badminton hall, and the International Broadcast Center (IBC). Investors and businesses could compete for the best design of what they would do with the venue and it would be leased to the winner. Two years after the Games, things finally started happening when the first result of an international competition came in and the badminton hall was leased for 20 years to a business group and turned into a luxurious theatre.

When planning construction and urban regeneration, Barcelona concentrated their projects in a few areas around the city, which allowed for intense development and rejuvenation in those areas. Barcelona concentrated its projects in four regions which were completely remodeled: Diagonal, Montjuïc, Valle de Hébron, and Parc de Mar. Of the 24 sports on the Olympic program, 19 were held in these four areas. In Athens, the projects were more scattered. They built all over the city, but this was not the original idea. When Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki and her bid team came up with the original master plan, the Games were centered around four main venues and four additional ones. When the government prompted a review of the plan in 1998, they wanted to eliminate potential town zoning legislation problems that could come up. They decided to spread out the venues. There were originally supposed to be 11 sports in the Falirio Coastal Zone, but the government changed that to only four. They moved the other sports to other areas around the city, which did not allow for the same type of concentrated regeneration as there was in Barcelona.

Though Athens wanted to leave a positive legacy to the city and certainly did in many ways, they were not as focused on it as in Barcelona. Their Olympic planners were more focused on historical sides of the Olympics, and emphasized the concept of “héritage.” MacAloon (2008) talks about two different ways that members of the Olympic Movement conceptualize the idea of a legacy. There are two official languages of the Olympic Movement: French and English. When speaking in French, Olympic officials and directors tend to use the word “héritage” where English speakers would

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use the term "legacy." However, the two words have slightly different connotations. "Héritage" encompasses more of bringing the past into the present than "legacy" does. "Héritage" has “an emphasis on the accumulated historical, cultural, and moral capital that comes to the present from the past.”16 Its connection to the future is made through the past offering “its heritage to the present, which in turn leaves an héritage for the future.”17 Though “heritage” encompasses bringing the past in for the future, “legacy” is much more oriented towards what the present can do for the future and is less focused on the past.

This aspect of legacy, or héritage, is where the Athens 2004 Games shined. Because of their past, they were able to bring historical meaning to their Games. Both the organizers and the media focused a great deal on the fact that the Olympics were going back to their birthplace. NBC, the owner of the broadcasting rights of the Olympic Games in the United States, opened their entire Olympic broadcast with “Tonight the Games come home, their remarkable invention first conceived some three millennia ago. They return once more to the place of their birth.”18 The focus of NBC’s opening sequence was all about tying the old with the new because that is what the ATHOC had been marketing since they bid for the 2004 Games. NBC referred to the historical Olympic ideals associated with the ancient Games a few sentences later saying, “While a thousand wars have flamed and burned, as our world has been shuttered and renamed, a call to the starting line yet remains [...] an ancient dream of what we can become if we race toward greatness.”19 This opening epitomizes the Athens Organizing Committee’s philosophy of bringing the Olympics back to its roots. Organizers incorporated aspects of the ancient and the first modern games, all held in Greece, to bring back that feeling and connect the 2004 Games to the past. For example, the organizers held events in the ancient stadium at Olympia as well as in the modern Panathinaiko Stadium from the first modern Olympics in 1896. All medal winners were given a laurel wreath to wear on their heads during the medal ceremonies, just as ancient winners were. Though leaving a legacy for the future was very important to the Athenians, they placed more emphasis on the past and showing the pride of the Greek people for being the originators of an event such as the Olympics. The aspect of héritage was not an area Barcelona focused on when planning their Games.

The Olympic Games are a premiere event that is celebrated all over the world. Cities want to host the Games for the benefits, such as economic and urban impacts, as well as the prestige that can come to the city and joy it can bring to residents and visitors. Barcelona and Athens both took on the task of hosting the Olympics and produced successful Games. Barcelona emphasized the legacy the Games would have on the city and concentrated their venue plan, while Athens had political disputes that prevented them from leaving the most positive legacy possible, but they did place more of their focus on héritage and bringing the past into the present, which is something that Barcelona did not do. It is important for cities all over the world that have aims of hosting a large sporting event to take note of what cities such as Barcelona and Athens did right and wrong and effectively apply these practices to their own bids. The Olympics are a truly global affair and if cities work together and share knowledge, the Olympic Movement can bring their message of peace through sport to the world while benefiting the cities that host it.

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17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.