

Olympicisation: Growing for Gold

Iain Lindsay

(Brunel University, London)

iainlindsay1981@hotmail.com

This article offers an analysis of the social implications of Olympic related urban regeneration. This paper argues that the creation of urban Olympic cities necessitates a programme of regeneration that is fundamentally undemocratic and often unrecognizable to the process delineated during its conception. This paper draws upon empirical ethnographic research, represented here as a case study of an urban social movement, that highlights the form, function and impact of Olympic delivery. It argues that the process of being an urban Olympic host – as opposed to a suburban Olympic host that utilizes out of town appendages - is underwritten by totalitarian mechanisms. Moreover, this process ensures an Olympic City model that delineates, marginalizes and ultimately cleanses an area of any perceptible threats to its utopian vision. This process is defined here as Olympicisation.

Olympicisation implements a spectrum of controlling mechanisms within its unique brand of urban regeneration. The conceptual framework of the Olympicisation of the spatial realm focuses upon the act of transforming and, subsequently, controlling a city. The imposition of the Olympic city can be seen to perform a primary cleansing function, whilst concurrently minimising and marginalising opposition. The underlying initial processes of Olympicisation necessitate community solidification during the bidding phase and then requires the subsequent dismantling of this community during the delivery phase. This iniquitous practice and its symbolic and instrumental processes are the primary concern of this paper.

Key words Environmental activism, corruption, Eastern and Western Europe

Urban Regeneration: The Great Gold Rush

The fates of individual cities are no longer determined by national economies. Instead, cities increasingly must forge roles for themselves in an international division of labour. At the same time globalization has heightened the sense of cities as actors on the world stage (Smart and Smart, cited in Low 1999: 171).

The evolving autonomy of the contemporary city has necessitated great modification to regeneration policies since the beginning of the twentieth century. Policies governing urban regeneration following this period have undergone a transformative journey from functionality, to aesthetics, via social modification and urban cleansing. David Harvey purports that aesthetic urban design involves an understanding of space ‘as something independent and autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aims and principles which have nothing to do with an overarching social objective’ (1990: 66). However, it can be argued that this view does not consider that the aesthetic ambitions of regeneration facilitate the achievement of its social

objectives. Aesthetically transforming the physical environment can be regarded as the first and most important step toward achieving social objectives:

Physical renewal is usually a necessary if not sufficient condition for successful regeneration. In some instances it may be the main engine of regeneration. In almost all cases it is an important visible sign of commitment to change and improvement (Jeffrey and Pounder 2000: 86). The act of demonstrating a visible commitment to change, whilst, systematically, providing global standardization that is permeated with a locally themed and aesthetically pleasing uniqueness has necessitated a new wave of urban regeneration. This new wave often utilizes aesthetics in combination with spatial actions (Lefebvre 1991) to make change palatable yet progressive. To achieve such proliferation of cultural and sociological modification a distillation of social diversity is often accompanied by the minimization and marginalization of objection. The use of spectacles and events that promote collective, commercialized forms of enjoyment are habitually implemented to achieve this aspiration. ‘A spatial action overcomes conflicts, at least momentarily, even though it does not resolve them, it opens a way from everyday concern to collective joy’ (Lefebvre 1991: 222) and there is no bigger, more transient, spatial action than that of the Olympic Games. Moreover, critical commentators claim the range of spatial practices in regenerated environments are restricted to those that provide passive social contact and passive experiences such as rest, contemplation, eating, sitting - in other words quiet consumption (Crilley 1993; Talen 1999). The primary exemplar of which is, again, the Olympic Games.

Trickling towards 2012

‘After major disinvestment in European cities during the 1970s, the late 1980s witnessed the beginning of a radical redesign, refurbishment and renewal of the urban landscape’ (Degen, 2008: 6). Articulations of these reinvented or rediscovered cities are customarily dominated by embodiments of wealth, branding and power such as London’s Canary Wharf or Times Square in New York. Those that do not fit this model are often perceived as in need of modernization. The east London of the early 2000’s was perceived as the domain of the unsafe, the criminal, poverty, immigration and deprivation. It was the backside of the City and according to Olympic Park Legacy Company (OLPC) head Andrew Altman it was London’s gash and it needed healing. Arguably, it always has, Dench, Gavron and Young (2006) illustrated, as the City of London began evolving over six centuries earlier into a hub of global capitalism, the east evolved too,

albeit in symbiotic differentiation. At first the east supplied food to the emerging urban community. Then, as the City concentrated increasingly on the pursuit of profit, its less valuable and more polluting trades were relocated to the east. As the City became wealthier and more important its contrast to the East End became more pronounced. Together, they became the hub of the British imperial trading system. They were inextricably linked and yet paradoxical narratives of the same story; one clean, wealthy and powerful and the other dirty, poor and powerless. In this pursuit of wealth the city bought, sold and financed, whereas east London took, stored and transported. This unequal partnership transformed east London into the largest impoverished urban enclave in the world that was ‘abandoned entirely to the working class’ (Sanders 1989: 91). It has, by and large, remained this way ever since.

After decades of stagnation and decline British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher instigated a neoliberal policy of deregulation. The neoliberal ‘trickle-down’ policy she implemented justified private developments that were, fundamentally, profit orientated ventures, fortified with righteous intentions. As David Harvey (1990) suggests, during this period neoliberalism prevailed, consequently, free enterprise and private ownership were considered fundamental to a progressive society. Planning and control were considered threats to this freedom and effectively castigated as disguised slavery. The regulations that were intended to protect society were now considered to be exacerbating sociological problems as a result of unnecessary authoritarianism. Consequently, the legacy of this era was the removal of many of the regulatory restrictions placed upon regeneration. This unregulated methodological baton for dealing with east London’s urban tribulations has now been passed to the 2012 Olympic regeneration.

London 2012: Taking the bait

David Stubbs was employed as London 2012's Head of Environment to assess the practicalities of the London 2012 bid. In 2005,¹ he stated that to be a creditable candidate, London had to ‘engage with the community so that they felt part of the process. Public Support was critical.’ Stubbs explains that his advisory group made of representatives from NGOs, public authorities,

¹ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4299714.stm>

academia and business, ‘did a lot of work with the voluntary groups to get them involved in the process. By the end, they were really championing the whole thing’ (Kinver 2005).²

The London 2012 bidding committee approached The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) to contribute to this process. TELCO are a social movement that acted on behalf of London’s citizens in negotiations with the Olympic delivery team. Telco encompasses a diverse alliance of active citizens and community leaders that promote democratically selected causes intended to benefit the local community. Over thirty-five institutions including faith groups, schools, student organisations, union branches and charities, across five London boroughs constitute its membership. Moreover, they form an integral part of a London-wide social movement, London Citizen’s (LC) affiliated with the nationally recognized Citizen’s Organising Foundation (COF), who, in turn, are affiliated with the internationally recognized Industrial Area Foundation (IAF) based in the United States. All of these movements interact and share advice, resources and methodologies.

TELCO felt that such support should be conditional upon certain guarantees to benefit the East London populace. These guarantees included employment opportunities, affordable housing, greater sporting provisions and educational opportunities. Consequently, an agreement was put in place to delineate the rewards for public demonstrations of support for Olympic hosting. This became known as the Ethical Olympic Charter. This charter consisted of six key points: Affordable homes were to be built for local people and managed through a Community Land Trust where the value of the land is removed from the property price making homes more affordable.

Olympic development monies were to be set aside to improve local schools and health services.

The University of East London was to be the main higher education beneficiary of the sports legacy with a view to becoming a sporting centre of excellence.

At least £2m would be set aside immediately (upon winning the bid to coincide with the first building phase), for a construction academy in Leyton to train local people in employable trade.

² See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4299714.stm>

It was determined that at least 30% of construction jobs would be set aside for local people, which, would require the implementation of a 30% local labour clause with the contractors responsible for construction.

The Lower Lea Valley made to be designated 'living wage' zone with all jobs in the defined boundary guaranteed to pay a 'living wage' (Set at £6.70 per hour in 2004).

The proposed benefits were agreed upon between the community leaders and the Olympic bidding team. This agreement was publicly solidified during its signing in 2005. It was signed on behalf of the Olympic Bidding Team by the Chairman of the Olympic Bidding Committee Lord Sebastian Coe, by Ken Livingstone, then Mayor of London and by John Biggs, Deputy Chair of the London Development Agency (LDA). As a result of this shared commitment Lord Coe stated that the Games were now 'eminently more winnable' (Lydall 2005).³

This act of unifying the community through a written agreement between Olympic deliverers and TELCO solidified the boundaries and expectations of the local community. This unifying charter was an agreement that instilled hope, promise and expectation. It created what Benedict Anderson (1983) referred to as an 'imagined community.' Anderson's definition of imagined communities relates to nationalism where citizens unite despite being unfamiliar with each other by virtue of shared characteristics and criteria. It is argued here that these principles are applicable to more than nationalism. Furthermore, that throughout an individual's life they will become part of many such identity defining, imagined communities, often concurrently. In this instance as the community became unified through hope and promise, they became such an imagined community. The assurances made to them instilled a sense of ownership of place, and of resources therein, during Olympic delivery and beyond. The promises instilled a sense of right and entitlement into this community that were previously non-existent in this transitory, impoverished deprived location.

This community was assured that because they would be most affected by the upheaval of delivery that they would benefit commensurately. This definition allowed the community to reconstitute and solidify its boundaries and its expectations in relation to identity. As Anderson contends for an imagined community to exist there must be other communities against which self-definition can be constructed. This community became delineated during the bid and,

³ *Evening Standard*, 10th November 2004, p.12.

consequently, anyone from outside this delineated community became part of the group against which their self-definition was constructed.

Reality bites

The 2012 Olympic Games are principally concentrated across five London ‘Olympic Boroughs’: Newham, Waltham Forest, Tower Hamlets and Hackney in the east of the capital, and the more prosperous Greenwich in the south.⁴ Post-industrialism impacted upon this part of the capital particularly hard. A 2007 report by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) found that ‘[t]he north east quarter of London remains particularly deprived with Newham, Hackney and Tower Hamlets continuing to exhibit very high levels of deprivation’ (DCLG 2007: 40). On the bases of an averaging of rank over 50 different indices of deprivation, England’s three most deprived local authority areas were the Olympic Boroughs of Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets (respectively) with the fourth East London Olympic Borough, Waltham Forest, placed fifteenth (DCLG 2007). This deprivation fulfills all the criteria for urban regeneration and the area has long been earmarked for such. This regeneration was expedited enormously following the success of the bid.

Theoretically all local Government councils should be accountable for everything that occurs within their designated region. The Olympics necessitated the removal of much of this control from the local councils. The Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA)⁵ is responsible for

⁴ As Olympic organisers have been at pains to point out, Olympic events will also take place in other parts of the country, including football at Coventry, Manchester, Newcastle, Cardiff and Glasgow. However, the vast majority of events will take place in London with 61% hosted by Newham.

⁵ The Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) is the public body responsible for developing and building the new venues and infrastructure for the Games and their use post 2012. The ODA was established by the London Olympic Games and Paralympic Games Act, which received Royal Assent in March 2006. The Act was passed to ensure the necessary planning and preparation for the Games can take place. It allows the ODA to buy, sell and hold land, make arrangements for building works and develop transport and other infrastructure, develop a Transport Plan for the Games, with which other agencies must cooperate, and make orders regulating traffic on the Olympic Road Network and be the local planning authority for the Olympic Park area. See <http://www.london-2012.co.uk/ODA/>

delivering the 2012 Games and is accountable only to central Government. This not only removes any notion of being accountable to local people, it also alleviates local authority planning controls and regulations.

After London won the 2012 Games the ODA would not interact with TELCO on the issue of the Ethical Olympics. The ODA claimed the Ethical Olympics proposal had nothing to do with them and refused to honor them. TELCO decided that to achieve ODA interaction organized collective action was required. They decided that the most appropriate course of action was to demonstrate their ability to mobilize and ambush the, then chairman of the ODA, David Higgins who was known for high-powered breakfast business meetings at London's top hotels. TELCO attracted significant media support and through their lobbying they established their credibility with the ODA, which led to an on-going series of meetings.

These meetings were intended to establish the implementation and progress of the TELCO Ethical Olympics, which included discussing the living wage and the promise of hiring of local residents. As Srnivasa (2006) purports that to use information most effectively the selective release or withholding of information is crucial and the ODA consistently achieved this. They maintained that 95% of the workforce was earning over and above the living wage. Furthermore, guidelines were in place, such as the necessity for proof of residence for construction workers to ensure local employment. One member challenged this point by commenting that, because there was no limit upon how long potential employees needed to be a resident this guideline was surely just a method to placate rather than actually improve the employment prospects of Londoners. This challenge was deflected and never returned to during the course of the time-limited meetings. Fundamentally, these negotiations were taking place during the building phase and, consequently, the window of Olympic delivery employment was rapidly closing with migrant workers filling these positions.

The conceptual vagueness surrounding accountability within Olympic delivery proved problematic. The repetitive act of replacing short-term, unaccountable hegemonic structures with other short-term, unaccountable hegemonic structures appears to be intended to deliver the most valuable commodity possible in time-limited social change scenarios – more time. In a Durkheimian sense, the processes involved in Olympicisation appear to hold functionality that augments the position of those imposing order, rather than the publically articulated beneficiaries of such processes, widely assumed to be the residents of regenerated communities.

Olympicisation

The contestation for resources between global cities necessitates an unrelenting frenzy of urban regeneration. Olympicisation provides a boost to any city that is engaged within this global commercialization contest. It is a process that satiates both pursuit and demand for standardization and provides arguably the greatest example of Lefebvre's spatial action to overcome conflict and objection - the Olympic Games. Olympic redevelopment also provides a strict time frame that permits the circumvention of democratic process that is imposed upon other urban creation or regeneration projects.

The commercialization of the city ensures 'city space and architectural forms become consumer items or packaged environments that support and promote the circulation of goods' (Boyer 1988: 54). This commercialization habitually replaces heritage with mythology that circumvents 'the negative iconography of dereliction, decline and labour militancy associated with the industrial city' (Hall and Hubbard 1998: 7). This 'production of image and discourse is an important facet of activity that has to be analysed as part and parcel of the reproduction and transformation of any symbolic order' (Harvey 1990: 255). This process re-emphasizes the clean-slate potential of Olympicisation, complete with its associated rich and historic Olympic mythology. Consequently, urban managers increasingly perceive Olympic hosting as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the large-scale redevelopment and rebranding of a city.

Olympicisation is the pursuit of lifestyle branding, inclusive of place, people and existence. The initialization of which instigates cross-border economic processes of flows of capital, labour, goods and services, raw materials and tourists. It is a finite process and only one city can become Olympicised every four years. This limitation increases hosting desirability and exclusivity and further enhances the willingness of a host to become subjugated by the movement because it is perceived as something to aspire towards. Furthermore, because a host is selected, only, after demonstrations of widespread public support all objections and objectors have been minimized and marginalized before the outset of the process. This prerequisite subservience ensures the process will flourish whomever the contemporary host nation.

Olympicisation permits its deliverers to design and implement clean-slate regeneration of entire urban areas to facilitate the creation of globalized utopian hubs. They utilize huge budgets to accomplish this goal with the new city designed for an idealistic future populous rather than

considering the existing one. The entire process circumvents democratic rules and regulations and is, for the most part, above rebuke and public scrutiny, and offers little or no chance of accountability. Furthermore, local communities that had voraciously demonstrated their willingness to become Olympicised, if they somehow survive the transition, are often left unable to exist in these new utopias for any extended period of time. Eventually, most are forced to move elsewhere, making way for a more suitable Olympicised populous to fill their void.

Conclusion

Perceptions of the virtues of Olympicisation are readily apparent within wider society. However, this research has found that the representations of this phenomenon have proved at odds with the local communities' experiential perspective. This study examined the genesis of a new Olympic city and how the characteristics of this informed community identity. The TELCO case study demonstrated the complex, inconsistent interplay between ideology and implementation during the evolution of Olympicisation.

Hosting the Olympic Games has altered the process of identity formation in East London. In terms of composition, time, space and place. The communities willingness to accept that the much-anticipated benefits of Olympic hosting will never materialize to the anticipated levels resulted in the breakdown of the Olympic imagined community that was delineated during the bidding phase. This attitude of acceptance appears systematic of the original processes of this highly transitory, low ownership, diverse location.

The key difference between the period before the imagined unification of this community and the period after its dismantling is that within the communities systems of meaning and identity which have changed immeasurably. This is perhaps best symbolized by considering that the biggest surges in new national insurance numbers, necessary for legal employment in the UK, are from within the Olympic borough of Newham since the success of the 2005 bid. Furthermore, more than 51,000 migrant workers have surged into this area, the vast majority of which came from Eastern Europe (Pierce 2008).⁶ To put that into context official statistics demonstrate that

⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/london-2012/3453006/More-than-50000-migrant-workers-move-into-Olympics-borough.html>.

the borough had a population of 246,200 before the bid.⁷ Therefore, previous articulations of identity have been systematically taken apart during Olympic delivery as the community attitude towards this appears limited to apathetic acceptance. This apathy more than most defines the identity of members of this transitory community. It is the characteristic that leads to the inescapable question: Is ownership of time, space and place a domain reserved only for the rich?

⁷<http://resources.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/Publications/Documents/Document/DownloadDocumentsFile.aspx?recordId=105&file=PDFversion>.

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