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THE OLYMPIC CITY AFTER THE GAMES: DILEMMAS OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION 20 YEARS AFTER ATHENS 2024

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Abstract

This paper examines the post-Games legacy of Olympic Cities (with a focus on Athens 2004) and situates mega-events as catalysts for urban transformation. It interrogates motivations beyond practical, political, and economic issues –cultural and psychological factors, along with city identity –while debating whether bigger cities hold an advantage. Integrating temporal frameworks, it analyses opportunities: infrastructure, global positioning, community engagement, and city branding strategies. It balances these against dilemmas such as overemphasis on flagship projects, sustainability challenges, and underutilised facilities. Drawing also on references to Munich, Barcelona, London, and Paris, it examines the impact of scale on hosting capacity and civic identity. The analysis of Athens 2004 details planning decisions, infrastructure achievements, cost overruns, and varied legacies –sporting, social, urban, and economic. Post-games venue repurposing efforts highlight successes and failures in sustainability and community integration. The paper concludes by advocating (among other factors) integrated legacy planning, city branding, scalable processes, as well as prioritising civic pride and quality of life to maximise benefits and mitigate risks for future hosts.

Keywords:

Olympics legacy, Mega-events, urban transformation and city branding, spatial scale, Athens 2004.

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1. Introduction

Despite persistent criticisms and well-documented challenges, the opportunity for a city to host the Olympic Games remains highly attractive (see also the Italian debate over Milano-Cortina for the Winter Olympic Games in February 2026, for example, Jreij et al., 2026, in this issue). Regarding the 2004 Athens Games, why are we still discussing them 20 years later? Why do we still research it? Why are relevant books, papers and student essays still produced?

The principal question is whether, in studying the role of sport in urban transformation, positive assessments prevail over critical analyses, particularly whether sports mega-events primarily constitute agents of progress or potential pitfalls of mismanagement. The complex interplay of opportunities and dilemmas faced by host cities raises the following additional questions, mostly addressing the balance between economic and symbolic motives. Also, the literature has focused on legacies, failures, competition, the roles of smaller cities and local communities, and the potential of city branding

The opportunities faced by host cities are stated in Box 1 below, while the dilemmas are mainly analysed in Section 3.

Box 1 Opportunities (Source: Zhang & Zhao, 2009: p. 247) and examples faced by host cities, own elaboration

Opportunity	**Examples**
New landmarks of urban space and architecture and infrastructure development (Essex and Chalkley, 1998).	Construction of the grand stadium, and the international-standard athlete village and infrastructure (Essex and Chalkley, 1998).
Access to new markets and resources.	Securing of funding sources through event sponsorships and various forms of public–private or international–domestic partnership, and marketing of event-centred commodities and souvenirs.
Global positioning and urban hierarchy can be achieved through improvements in international relations, enhanced economic and social conditions, and accelerated urban development (Derudder et al., 2003).	Tokyo 2020 (2021) showcased Japan's technological innovation and resilience in the face of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.
City identity and community engagement. The creation, promotion, and strengthening of a city's identity through media coverage, tourist visits, public participation, and support from the local community (Gold and Gold, 2007/2024; 2008).	The London 2012 Olympics showcased the city's multicultural vibrancy and ecological consciousness.
Urban regeneration as policy. Strategically, mega-events can be used as tools for public policy, especially in urban regeneration (Smith, 2012).	London 2012 was a good example of the fact that revitalising neglected neighbourhoods and enhancing public spaces can yield long-term benefits (see Section 3.2 for more).

The paper's methodology largely relies on secondary sources (academic literature, reports, media, data, and so on). The choice of European cities for various comparative references was mainly based on timing (e.g., one 'characteristic' example with a few good practices from each decade).

Various ideas were first developed in a less organised manner in another paper (Deffner, 2013). It is also challenging to check if a prediction from 2002 has been justified:

"The identity of a city is much less an achievement to be explored and deciphered than a challenge to be built and mastered. Barcelona has invested time and resources in doing so (Busquets, 1997; Sanchez, 1997). Athens seems caught in a race against time. Although the Olympic Games will ultimately probably be well organised, the goal of using this occasion as a springboard for the qualitative development of the city, which would, among other things, highlight its cultural heritage and build a social consensus around this goal, now seems much more hypothetical" (Deffner and Maloutas, 2002: 357).

2. Theoretical framework: Challenges and complexities of urban mega-events

2.1. The scale issue in mega-events

In his seminal book *Scale* (2017), Geoffrey West combines the study of biology, cities, and companies and focuses on the three *key questions* of scales, size limits and sustainability. This framework facilitates discussions on the broader implications of scale in urban planning, sports infrastructure, and big projects. Urban tourism is integrated into this framework as it requires a multi-scale approach; from the architectural scale of the building to that of the city (Vlès, Clarimont and Hatt, 2011).

Two of the crucial scale issues analysed in this paper are:

1. *Scale and Sustainability.* Questions about the scale of projects are strongly raised. Are bigger cities and bigger stadia better equipped to host these events, or can smaller cities, like Athens in 2004, succeed?

2. *Learning from Failures***.** History reveals numerous instances of cities facing financial strain (Montreal 1976, Rio 2016), underutilised infrastructure (Beijing 2008), and/or lacklustre global recognition after the event (Rio). Despite these risks, cities such as Istanbul, Rome, and Paris have repeatedly bid for the Olympics, driven by a mix of ambition and the allure of potential prestige. Of the 16 cities that have bid more than twice since 1992, six (37.5%) have won the bid (Table 1).

Table 1: Repeating bidding since 1992. Sources: Chappelet (2015: 8), olympics.com & macrorends.net, own elaboration

City	Bidding years	Approximate population (first and last bidding)	Total number of biddings
1. Istanbul	2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2020 & 2036	8,740,000 & 16,420,000 (2026)	5
2. Rome	2000, 2004, 2020 & 2024	3,710,000 & 4,330,000	4
3. Paris	1992, 2008, 2012 & *2024*	9,470,000 & 11,280,000	4
4. Madrid	2012, 2016 & 2020	5.960,000 & 6,620,000	3
5. Rio de Janeiro	2004, 2012 & *2016*	11,730,000 & 13,060,000	3
6. Belgrade	1992 & 1996	1,150,000 & 1,200,000	2
7. Brisbane	1992 & *2032* (40 years difference!)	1,440,000 & 2,600,000 (2026)	2
8. Athens	1996 & *2004*	3,130,000 & 3,180,000	2
9. Manchester	1996 & 2000	2,320,000 & 2,350,000	2
10. Toronto	1996 & 2008	4,270,000 & 5,310,000	2
11. Beijing	2000 & *2008*	13,570,000 & 15,460,000	2
12. Seville	2004 & 2008	688,000 & 694,000	2
14. Havana	2008 & 2012	2,160,000 & 2,130,000	2
15. Tokyo	2016 & 2020 (*2021*)	37,800,000 & 37, 270,000	2
16. Doha	2016 & 2020	600,000 & 640,000	2
17. Baku	2016 & 2020	2,230,000 & 2,340,000	2

Note: italics denote the year that the games were hosted

With regard to the size of the cities noted above, if a limit of 5 million inhabitants is adopted (used either for the designation of very large cities, large metropolitan areas or major cities) then, from the resultant list of 10 cities (Rome, Belgrade, Brisbane, Athens, Manchester, Toronto 1996, Seville, Havana, Doha and Baku) are below this limit, and of these only Athens and Brisbane have won a bid to host the Games. It would appear, therefore, that size matters and 'the bigger the better'.

2.2. The evaluation of mega projects and the motivation for hosting mega-events

The key principles of large-scale project management act as a framework for evaluating the success or failure of the Olympic Games. In addition, regional impacts belong to the broader theme of complex project evaluation. City marketing and branding, from the moment they involve their respective communities, can improve the quality of life. This line of argument constitutes a key lever in decision-making processes and can significantly influence a city's willingness to host the event.

2.2.1. Key principles of large-scale project management

Flyvbjerg and Gardner's *How Big Things Get Done* (2023) provides a compelling examination of large-scale project management. They argue that successful execution requires a strategic balance between careful planning and decisive action. Their *key principles* (also applicable to the Olympics) are:

- Think slow, act fast (see also Kahneman, 2011)
- The commitment fallacy (see also Holborow, 1971 and Kahneman, 2011)
- Think from right to left, i.e. start with the most basic question of all: "why"?
- The positive psychology of tinkering: try, learn, do it again, i.e. plan like Pixar and Frank Gehry do
- The experience can deeply enrich judgment and improve project planning and leadership. Another return to the classics is necessary: Aristotle claimed that experience is 'the fruit of years' and the source of 'phronesis' (it allows us to see what is good for people and to make it happen), which Aristotle saw as the highest 'intellectual virtue' (cited: Flyvbjerg and Gardner, 2023:81)
- Understanding that your project is not unique is key to getting your forecasts right and managing your risks
- Ingenuity must be accompanied by planning
- You need a strong team
- Modularity delivers faster, cheaper, and better, making it valuable for all project types and sizes

(Flyvbjerg and Gardner, 2023).

2.2.2. Regional Impacts

The Olympics' influence is not limited to the host city of a 'winning' Games; it often extends to surrounding regions. For example:

1. *Athens 2004:* Athens sparked development in Volos, which was designated an Olympic City for hosting Football Group matches. Whilst there has not been a noticeable positive impact on Greece's overall tourism development, this does not seem to be the case for Magnesia and Volos, especially if this factor is related to the development of the local Nea Anchialos airport (Liouris and Deffner, 2013).

2. *Beijing 2008:* influenced Shanghai, which, like Volos, hosted Olympic Football Group matches. Although there was limited leverage planning in Shanghai before, during, or after the Beijing Olympics, the Olympics served as a learning opportunity for Shanghai regarding hosting the 2010 World Expo (Chen and Liu, 2021: 392-394).

3. *London 2012:* extended benefits to Leicestershire, which retained the top position within its region across several key performance indicators for various London 2012 programs and initiatives (Chen and Liu, 2021: 389).

2.2.3. Quality of life

A pressing concern is whether mega-events genuinely improve residents' quality of life. While some cities – such as Vienna, Zurich, and Tokyo – consistently rank high on quality-of-life indices, others struggle with public discontent due to displacement, rising costs, and/or the utilisation of facilities (Table 2).

Table 2: Relation of Olympic Cities to the *Monocle* list of cities based on quality-of-life criteria.
Source: olympics.com & *Monocle,* no. 175, July/August 2024, own elaboration

Order and City	Year	Order and City	Year
Munich	1972	Helsinki	1952
Vienna		Kyoto	
Zurich		Oslo	1952 (Winter)
Copenhagen		Amsterdam	1928
Madrid		Sydney	2000
Lisbon		Barcelona	1992
Tokyo	1964, 2020 (2021)	Berlin	1936
Melbourne	1956	Singapore	
Stockholm	1912	Milan	2026 (Winter)
Paris	1900, 1924, 2024	Athens	1896 (start), 2004

The 2025 *Monocle Quality of Life Survey* comprises a list of 10 cities that excel in a specific factor (Monocle 2025):

- Paris is the best all-rounder
- Athens is the best for nightlife
- Barcelona is the best for urban greening
- Mexico City (host of the 1968 Olympics) is the best for conviviality
- Tokyo is the best for cleanliness.

2.2.4. The Importance of city marketing and branding

The organisation of a mega event by a city presents an excellent opportunity for publicity and can lead to positive results, including increased tourism and enhanced branding (Deffner and Koutsiana, 2003). Mega events, characterised by their duration, ongoing attention, lifetime experiences, and professional organisation, can play a vital role in promoting and transforming a city (Zhang and Zhao, 2009: 247). The undertaking of such an event by a city provides an excellent opportunity to promote itself (Whitson and Macintosh, 1996).

City branding has become a central part of contemporary urban management, urban development and placemaking. The pandemic has shown that problems and challenges are global in our times, and that solutions to them require connection, collaboration and the crossing of all sorts of boundaries. With regard to city branding, three different sets of boundaries may be crossed:

- Country and continent boundaries
- Disciplinary approach
- Methodological and theoretical boundaries

(Deffner and Kavaratzis, 2025: 1-2).

Globalisation has intensified competition between cities in terms of influence, markets, and the attraction of investment, as well as visitors, personnel, and events. In this context, city marketing and branding have become a strategic tool for promoting a city's competitive advantages (Zhang and Zhao, 2009: 245). The most common marketing practices include adopting a brand (a distinctive characteristic of the city's identity), developing creative initiatives, implementing flagship projects, constructing innovative buildings, and hosting mega-events, among others (Deffner and Liouris, 2005: 5-6).

City marketing is one of the key aspects through which the policies and planning impacts of mega-events in urban regeneration can be examined. It is ideal to have a strategic plan that includes field research. Throughout the process, it is essential to investigate *factors* such as site size, visitor numbers, investments, population, interest groups, objectives, and methods (Van Vrijaldenhoven, 2007).

2.3. Temporality, impacts and legacies

2.3.1. Variety of times

Introducing the temporal perspective implies exploring different concepts, such as ordinary time, conjunctural time and longue durée (Braudel, 1985), thinking fast and slow (Kahneman, 2011), think slow and act fast (Flyvbjerg and Gardner, 2023), in praise of slow (Honoré, 2004 and 2014), and temporary urbanism (Madanipour, 2017).

Regarding Braudel, examples of ordinary time (or event-based time) are individual actions, political decisions, or crises (e.g., a specific battle or a diplomatic treaty). Conjunctural time spans medium-term cycles; typically, decades (10–50 years). In addition, it tracks broader trends such as economic fluctuations, demographic shifts, and the rise and fall of prices, and bridges the gap between a single event and centuries of stability. Longue durée is the long-term. It focuses on the relationship between humans and their environment, stable social frameworks, and deeply rooted mentalities (Braudel, 1985).

Kahneman distinguishes two cognitive systems that drive human judgment and decision-making. System 1 (Fast Thinking) operates automatically and quickly, relying on intuition, impressions, and heuristics; mental shortcuts that allow us to make immediate judgments. While efficient for survival, it is prone to systematic errors and cognitive biases. System 2 (Slow Thinking) is characterised by slow, effortful, and deliberate logical reasoning, and is used for complex computations, critical thinking, and overriding the impulses of System 1 (Kahneman, 2011).

The views of Braudel and Kahneman share common elements and fit well with the Olympics. Given this, these views are also linked to the notion of legacy.

2.3.2. Olympic legacy dimensions

The International Olympic Committee categorises legacy into five key dimensions (IOC, 2013, as adapted: Ramchandani, Wilson and Gratton, 2021: 356):

1. *Sporting legacy*: sporting venues, popularity, and uptake of sport. Mega-events often inspire increased participation in sports at both amateur and professional levels. According to Weed (2021), the Olympic Games can deliver health-related legacies through physical activity and sport.

2. *Social legacy:* showcasing national culture (mainly through the opening and closing ceremonies), promoting Olympic values, social inclusion, and cooperation. The Olympics have the potential to foster unity and national pride, particularly through cultural events and volunteer programs. However, this dimension can also spark tensions, as Girginov (2018) highlights, with debates over the balance between global visions and local needs. The educational programmes for Sydney 2000, London 2012, and Tokyo 2020 (Fuller and Barr, 2021) can also be considered part of the social legacy of each of the three games.

3. *Environmental legacy*: urban revitalisation, and new energy resources. Sustainability has become a core focus of Olympic planning only in recent years. For instance, the London 2012 Games incorporated extensive eco-friendly initiatives, setting a benchmark for future hosts.

4. *Urban legacy:* renewal and beautification, and transport infrastructure. Urban regeneration is a defining feature of the Olympic Legacy. The transformation of East London for the 2012 Games stands out as a model of successful redevelopment. In contrast, cities such as Athens 2004 have struggled with underutilised venues post-Games, highlighting the need for integrated urban planning.

5. *Economic legacy:* increased economic activity and new job opportunities. Host cities often view the Olympics as a catalyst for economic growth, driven by tourism, job creation, and global marketing.

2.3.3. Cultural and arts legacy

Arts and culture play a pivotal role in shaping the Olympics' identity. According to Bonde (2015), the opening ceremony can serve as cultural propaganda (e.g. Beijing 2008), and may also, as for instance illustrated in the cases of Beijing 2008, and London 2012 offer opportunities to create historical consciousness using socially constructed 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) based on national myths that create a group identity for the members of the nation (Bonde, 2015: 106). It can be argued that this approach of 'imagined communities' is also applicable in the cases of Athens 2004 and Paris 2024.

As far as Cultural Olympiads are concerned, Barcelona initiated the movement in 1988, which led to the 1992 event. During the Cultural Olympiads from 1992 to 2012, the branding tension between 'official' arts events, sporting competitions, and related Games activity also led to attempts to establish separate Cultural Olympiad or Olympic Arts Festival brands. Rio in 2016 was the first event since Barcelona that did not organise a four-year Cultural Olympiad; this also occurred in Tokyo 2020/2021 (Garcia, 2021: 410-411).

The Cultural Olympiad in Athens began on January 27, 2001, and finished on September 18, 2004. It comprised 112 events, and the final cost was 89,000,000 €. According to Papanikolaou (2017), the criticism was intense. It came from many sides and was primarily due to the lack of strategic planning and the inability to manage the cultural Olympic reserve. However, specific high-quality cultural actions remain vivid in the memory of Greeks (Papanikolaou 2017).

3. Dilemmas

The challenges and complexities analysed in Section 2 give rise to genuine dilemmas that are closely linked to opportunities (Box 1). The dilemmas regarding hosting mega events are particularly linked to cultural and time planning. To address these issues, various best practices have emerged.

3.1. The impact of cultural and time planning

Cultural and time planning are interconnected (Deffner, 2005) and are also related to mega-events (Deffner and Labrianidis, 2005). While these events promise transformation, they often fail to achieve a balance between long-term and short-term issues (Box 2).

Box 2: Plurality of dilemmas relating to cultural planning, especially in combination with time planning.
Source: Deffner and Labrianidis, 2005: 256, own elaboration

More negative side	More positive side
competition	sustainability
flagship projects	small-scale projects
short-term impacts	long-term impacts
singular event (Braudel's ordinary time)	process (Braudel's longue durée)
tourist considerations	resident considerations
'routinisation of everyday life' (Lefebvre, 1968/ 2023)	uniqueness
planning considerations regarding isolated planning	planning considerations regarding integrated planning
failure to construct a cultural identity and to increase civic pride	sense of place

The seven symptoms that Müller identified as a 'mega-event syndrome' (overpromising of benefits, underestimation of costs, event takeover, public risk taking, rule of exception, elite capture, event fix) (2015: 8-12) also belong to the more negative side. An interesting example of 'event takeover' comes from Rio de Janeiro, where 'the realisation of a decade of sports mega-events extraordinarily rendered circulations in the metropolis' (Gaffney, 2017: 68-69).

3.2. Good practices

Munich and London are among the cities that have succeeded in establishing good practices in Olympic legacies:

- Munich 1972: The Olympiapark is one of the world's most successful Olympic developments, combining recreational use with sustainable design. Built as Germany restructured its post-war image, the park remains one of the most well-known examples of Olympic infrastructure. It is praised for its successful integration with the city and its ongoing contribution to Munich's global appeal. The park's design, particularly that of the athletes' village, has been described as a '1970s utopia' that continues to be admired 50 years later. Through its design, the park successfully created a sense of vibrancy and character, showcasing a playful use of materials and open spaces (Roos, 2024).

- London 2012: Since the 2012 Olympics were awarded to London, East London has been at the heart of an extensive urban regeneration strategy. At the centre of this initiative is Newham Council, the local government, with their exciting proposal for an 'Arc of Opportunity' to transform 1,4 hectares of Newham for developers. Exploring how places are transformed into simple stories for packaged investment opportunities, how people living in those places relate to those stories, and how music and art can convey those stories in various ways is interesting (Duman et al., 2018).

4. The Athens 2004 experience

4.1. Mega-events in Greece

Greece had few opportunities to transform its urban landscape through the hosting of a mega-event, and the greatest was the 2004 Athens Olympics. Two cases before 2004 were the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 1985 (Athens) and 1997 (Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city). Two cases after 2004 were the European Capitals of Culture (again) in 2006 (Patras, the third-largest city). and 2023 (Elefsina, a small town near Athens, initially planned for 2021). In 1985, Athens was the first ECoC, and Thessaloniki was quite problematic: there was a lack of strategic planning, particularly cultural and time planning, and this resulted in a variety of interconnected problems, such as the construction of flagship projects, the lack of a city marketing perspective, and the need for a tourism policy (Deffner and Labrianidis, 2005). The most characteristic element in Patras, unlike Thessaloniki, was the construction of only one new building. Elefsina's election was considered a surprise as it competed against 13 other strong candidate cities in Greece (Karachalis and Deffner, 2017). For Elefsina, we must wait for the complete official evaluation, although the Impact Assessment Plan was mainly positive in the pre-evaluation phase (Deffner, Metaxas, and Mantelou, 2017).

4.2. Smaller cities and countries: Athens 2004 and after

Athens, Greece, with a metropolitan population of approximately 3.2 million in 2004 (when Greece's total population was around 11 million), represented a rare case of a smaller city hosting the Summer Olympics (see also Table 1).

Athens was the first city from a smaller country to host the Games since Helsinki (1952), which had a metropolitan population of 381,000 and a national population of 4.1 million; and the smallest capital since Rome (in 1960), which had a metropolitan population of 2.4 million. Also, it was the smallest host city since Montreal (1976), with a metropolitan population of 2.8 million.

After Athens, host cities were often global centres, such as Beijing (2008), London (2012), Rio de Janeiro (2016), Tokyo (2020/ 2021), and Los Angeles (2028). However, in 2032, Brisbane will break this pattern. Despite its size, Brisbane benefits from being part of a large country (Australia), which mitigates some of the infrastructural and financial challenges associated with smaller nations.

4.3. Planning and Implementation

Barcelona in 1992 was the first Olympiad that placed the city at the heart of the Olympic experience (Garcia, 2021: 410). Athens did not follow this successful example (Balibrea, 2001; Garcia-Ramon, 2000; Marshall, 2000) in its central urban planning policies for the Games (Beriatos and Gospodini, 2004: 198). In the context of globalisation, the focus in the new emerging urban landscapes was on "glocalised" ones; this was usually aided by the concentration of projects in one area, something Athens did not follow (Beriatos and Gospodini, 2004: 197).

There are two main *planning options concerning the location of Olympic venues*: concentration or dispersion. Athens chose, in contrast to Barcelona (Beriatos and Gospodini, 2004: 198), the second option, as its existing sports infrastructure (mainly the Olympic Stadium) was in the northern suburb of Marousi. The only available space that could accommodate most of the other sports was the former Hellinikon Airport, located on the seafront of the southern suburbs (Figure 1). The option of dispersion has been broadened in selected Greek Cities (the project 'Greece 2004', which included upgrades to sports facilities and cultural initiatives) chosen to host the preliminary round of football. In Thessaloniki and Patras, the existing stadia were reconstructed, whereas in Volos and Heraklion, new stadia were built.

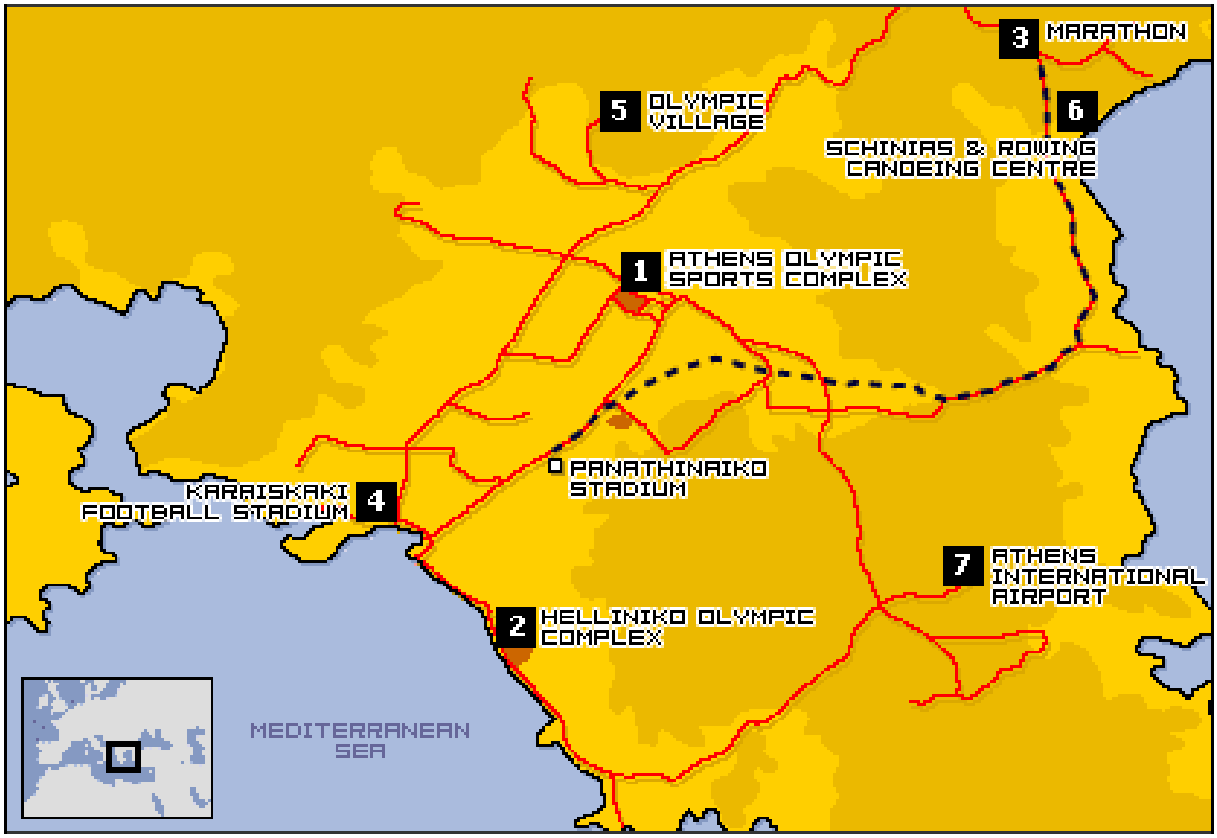

Figure 1: Athens 2004 Venues Guide. Source: BBC SPORT | Olympics 2004 | Athens Venues Guide

The primary objective was to present a modern image of Greece that diverged from the one-dimensional cultural focus on ancient Greece. While Maria Gravari-Barbas focused on the repositioning of Athens on the global map (2007), Marie Delaplace's work often zoomed in on the gap between the projected image and reality, particularly in peripheral areas hosting the games, such as Seine-Saint-Denis (Gignon, Delaplace and De Souza, 2022).

The starting point for attempts to rebrand a nation is the opening ceremony; this can also be compared to the closing ceremony. In the case of Athens, the closing ceremony primarily featured a concert centred on contemporary Greek pop music.

An additional important factor regarding infrastructure is the post-Olympic use of venues. Since the change of government following the 2004 elections, this policy has changed, resulting in some delays (see Section 6). The promotion of a new national image during the opening ceremonies is a common feature of most games, from Barcelona in 1992 to Paris in 2024. This issue should ideally have been linked to a city branding and marketing policy, but it did not occur in Athens.

4.4. Infrastructure achievements, limitations and architecture highlights

With regard to the Athens Olympics, specifically the main infrastructure projects, the only new construction was the tram. It was a choice, not an obligation, for the government, and it has not been wholly positive. Problems with the network still exist today, and it has not been widely adopted by residents and tourists, although it is more environmentally friendly than buses and the metro. The completion of the metro, the new airport, and the new ring road (Attica Road) was accelerated due to the Olympics. The wise choice was not to create extensive new parking spaces, primarily because parking private cars was not allowed at all venues.

The approximately 70,000-seat (Post Games) iconic *Olympic Stadium* (Figure 2) already existed (built for the 1982 European Athletics Championships), so there was no construction of a 'white elephant' in the city. This was also the case in Paris, where no new Olympic Stadium was constructed because the Stade de France already existed. The use of landmarks is another common feature shared by the Paris and Athens Olympics.

Figure 2: Athens Olympic Stadium, 13 August 2004, opening ceremony,
source: www.olympics.com/ioc/legacy/living-legacy/athens-2004

According to Pollalis (2006), the idea of architectural interventions was based on Gianna Angelopoulos' vision that the success of the Olympic Games would boost the country's confidence (2013/2018). This impact included not only a political aspect but also a psychological component that had to reach people's hearts and minds, both mentally and visually. Angelopoulos understood that this could be achieved by building illustrious, impressive sports venues that would capture spectators' eyes in the short term and remain after the Olympic Games, serving as a reminder of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. The star Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava was commissioned in October 2001 to design additional works for the Olympic Stadium, ensuring the Games

would have a highly aesthetic dimension and the "signature" of an internationally recognised architect (Pollalis, 2006: 4-5). According to Alaily-Matter, Ponzini, and Theirstein (2020), cities use star architects to brand flagship projects, spark urban regeneration, and market the city's image internationally. However, the attention (which is also a 'form' of economy, see Frank 1998) must shift from star architects to star architecture, which can be better understood as assembled by multiple actors and in its relationship to urban transformation.

The most famous construction was the steel dome; it has presented various problems since its construction. The decision by Greek authorities to shut down the Athens Olympic Stadium on 29 September 2023 sparked criticism of the government's 2019 promise to revamp it in 2021: "A recent investigation found that several critical hazards were attributed not to the initial construction, but rather poor maintenance that authorities had deemed too costly to carry out" (Monocle Minute 2023). There was a race against time to ensure the dome was ready just in time for the Coldplay concerts in June 2024.

Figure 3: Athens Olympic Stadium. Constructions in the steel dome after its closure in September 2023.
Source: *Monocle Minute*, 04/10/2023

4.5. Costs and revenues

Preuß, Andreff, and Weizmann (2018) examined cost and revenue overruns for Olympic Games held between 2010 and 2018. The starting point was the methodological differentiation between the three budgets:

- The expenditures and revenues of the Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (OCOG) are at the centre of the Olympic Games' organisation
- Olympic-related capital investments in venues which are needed to stage the Olympic Games
- Non-Olympic infrastructure projects (airports, metro, roads, urban parks and so on) for the long-term benefit of the host city and region; not required for the organisation of the Games, but are often mistakenly included in the Games-related costs and have not been considered in this study
- (Preuß, Andreff and Weizmann, 2018: xi).

The four main findings of their study were:

- The costs of organising Olympic Games (OCOG budget) are usually covered by revenues, which are almost entirely private resources, plus the International Olympic Committee (IOC)'s contribution
- The OCOGs typically overran their budgets significantly during the first few years. Still, all OCOGs managed to save during the last two years, and all of them finally balanced their budgets or generated a profit
- All Games underestimated their revenues, resulting in revenue overruns
- The core Olympic capital investments considered in this study show cost overruns, but these are like those of other (non-sporting) mega projects
- (Preuß, Andreff and Weizmann, 2018: x).

The *financial legacy* of the Athens Olympics presents a *complex picture* (Table 3):

- The OCOG budget recorded a modest positive balance of € 311 million, driven by larger budget overruns in revenues (51%) than in expenditure (30%)
- The non-OCOG budget, covering public investments in Olympic and additional venues, presented a deficit of EUR 622 million. The Greece 2004 Programme (see Section 4.3) is also included here

Table 3: Athens 2004 cost and revenues, Source: Preuß, Andreff and Weizmann (2018: 62-68), own elaboration

Categories	**Final (M EUR)**	**Candidature file (000 EUR)**	**Overrun %**
OCOG final revenue	2.278.800	1.508.374	51,08
OCOG final expenditure	1.967.800	1.508.374	30,46
subtotal	311.000	0	
Non-OCOG budget (including Olympic-related and additional venues, as well as 'Greece 2004')	622.410	481.370	29,30
Total	-311.410	-481.370	No overrun (35,31 % less)

A *comparative analysis* shows a better picture (all figures in 2022 USD):

- In terms of the outturn since Montreal 1976, Athens (with 3.1 billion) was the second lowest after Los Angeles 1984 (0.8 billion)
- In terms of the cost per athlete, Athens (with 0.3 million) was again the second lowest after LA (0.1 million)
- With regard the cost per event, Athens (with 10.2 million) was again the second lowest after LA (3.5 million)

(Budzier and Flyvbjerg, 2024: 5, 7).

In the discussion of *cost overruns* in Greece, there are four critical factors (Preuß, Andreff and Weizmann, 2018: 69-70):

- The presence of publicly owned land within an urban area facilitates the integration of Olympic projects into the city; as demonstrated by the 2004 Athens Games. This limited the potential for extensive urban regeneration projects and increased the financial burden on public authorities, as the necessary expropriations often incurred high costs due to the elevated market demand for available areas (Cartalis, 2015). This is the main reason why, compared with London 2012 and Paris 2024, there was no overarching vision for improving areas with various problems (apart from the Olympic Village, which was transformed into low-cost housing; see Section 4.6).
- Time pressure, related to the previous factor, was the primary reason for fast-track planning.
- The change in plans was primarily due to legal reasons related to Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). A good example of late planning was the architectural interventions mentioned in Section 4.4. The costs for such an undertaking could not have been included in the initial budget.

- The change in security costs in the aftermath of 9/11. These increased from roughly EUR 400 million to EUR 1,100 million after 9/11 (Cartalis 2015; Panagiotopoulou 2014: 177).

4.6. Repurposing space after Athens 2004

Of the venues used for the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, 23 of the original 33 remain in use today; 20 venues were new, 2 were temporary, and 11 existed. 8 new venues, 5 of them located at the Hellinikon Complex, are no longer in use. "While planning and management issues have prevented some of the venues from being used since the Games, many continue to be used for diverse purposes, including high-performance and recreational sport, hosting competitions and housing the city's leading sports clubs" (OSC, 2022: 154).

The post-Olympic transformation of venues is a critical aspect of the legacy of mega-events and reflects both the opportunities and challenges of sustainable planning. In the case of Athens 2004, the initial vision for space reuse was not fully implemented due to a change in government in March 2004.

The key transformations were:

1. *Olympic Village*. Initially designed to house 17,000 athletes, it was repurposed after the Games into low-cost housing for 10,000 residents, including economic migrants (Figure 4). Decaying facilities, high unemployment, a lack of investment and public transport, and closed shops are among the problems it has faced (OSC, 2022: 159). Thus, while it provided immediate social benefits, the Village's broader economic and urban impact has been limited.

Figure 4: Olympic Village, Source: The Olympic Village illustrated 3D map (10) | Images: Behance

2. International Broadcasting Centre. This facility, central to media operations during the Games (Figure 5), was later handed over to private development and transformed into The Golden Hall, an award-winning shopping mall. The mall also houses the Athens Olympic Museum, preserving a link to the city's Olympic heritage (Figure 6).

Figure 5: International Broadcast Centre. Source: https://digitaltvinfo.gr/arthrografia/technologia/ibc-international-broadcast-center/

Figure 6 Golden Hall. Source: https://athensattica.com/el/highlight/golden-hall/

3. The Goudi Olympic Hall, initially used for badminton competitions, was converted in 2007 into The Badminton Theatre, with a seating capacity of 2,430. It was successful mainly as a cultural venue, serving as the main stage for foreign musical productions and hosting concerts, plays, and dance productions. However, it was later characterised as an 'arbitrary' building and closed in 2013.

4. Galatsi Olympic Hall, the venue that hosted table tennis and rhythmic gymnastics (Figure 7), has been used for various activities after the Games, including basketball and volleyball games. It was rebranded as The Christmas Theatre in 2021. With a capacity of 3,600 seats, the venue has provided a space for entertainment, effectively replacing the shuttered Badminton Theatre (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Galatsi Olympic Hall. Source: Athens HHH - Olympic Games 2004 - Venues

Figure 8: Christmas Theatre. Source: https://www.musicity.gr/christmas-theater/

5. *Faliro Sports Pavilion Arena.* Designed for Taekwondo and handball events, this venue transitioned into the largest post-Olympic concert and event space (*Faliro Indoor Hall*) and boasts a capacity of 4,300 seats. The initial plan to transform it into a large congress centre (for 10,000 participants, primarily serving medical congresses) was not realised. The Olympic Beach Volleyball Centre (Figure 9) was abandoned after the Games. This area should have been considered an intrinsic part of the Faliro Bay renovation projects (Markou, 2015), as evidenced by the fact that on July 15, 2025, the Attica Region was granted a 40-year lease of 154,000 m^2 to create a Metropolitan Park, which will incorporate a congress centre.

Figure 9: Faliro Indoor Hall and surrounding area. Source: https://www.athens24.com/directory/faliro-olympic-indoor-hall-tae-kwon-do-stadium.html#details-photos-4

6. *The Hellinikon Olympic Complex,* the southern complex, featured facilities for basketball, volleyball, fencing, baseball, softball, hockey, and canoe/kayaking (Figure 10). It is undergoing a significant transformation, and the site is now part of *The Ellinikon*, Greece's most important private mixed-use urban development project. With an estimated investment of € 8 billion, it is expected to create 85,000 jobs, with Phase 1 scheduled for completion in 2026. This phase includes the residential Foster + Partners-designed Riviera Tower that will eventually become the tallest building in Greece. Alongside housing, Ellinikon is also due to host businesses, cultural centres and a vast coastal park (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Hellinikon Olympic Complex, 2019. Source: el.wikipedia.gr

Figure 11: The Ellinikon Project (future image). Source: https://theellinikon.com.gr/

7. The *Olympic Stadium* already existed and was refurbished for the Olympics (see also Section 4.4). It has yet to be transformed after the Games. It remains a landmark that, in addition to its use as a sporting venue, continues to host significant cultural events. Notably, the two Coldplay concerts staged in June 2024 (Figure 12) were, according to the stadium's current director, the most important events held there since the Olympics.

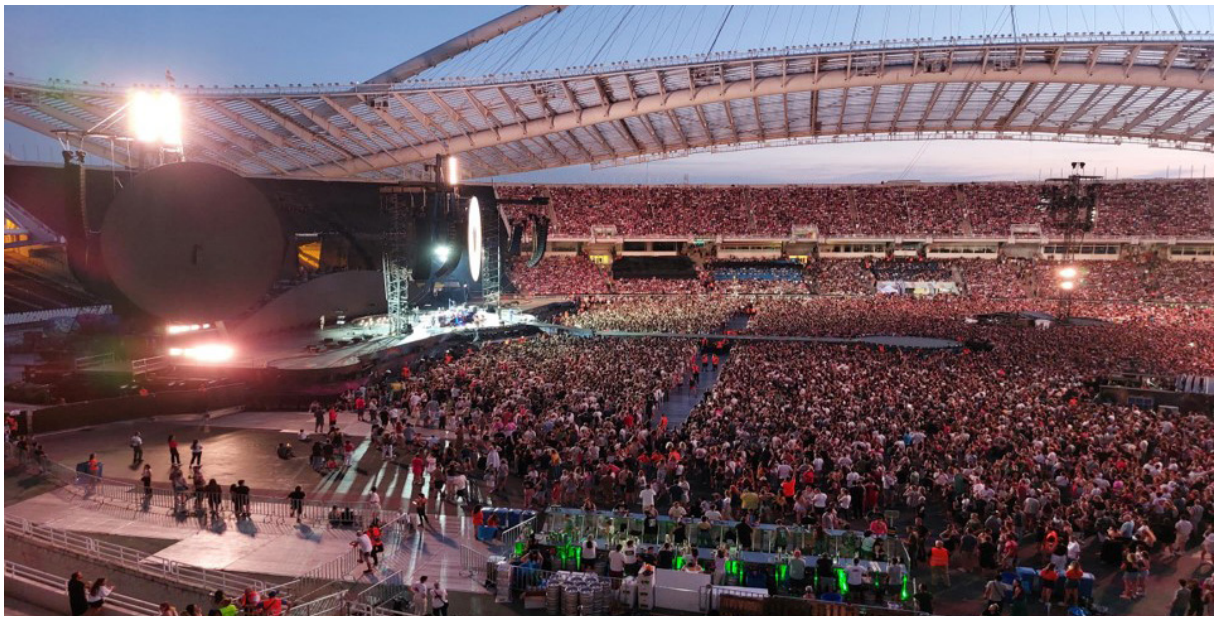

Figure 12: Athens Olympic Stadium, 6 June 2024, Coldplay concert. Source: author

The *Olympic Indoor Hall* was built in 1995 with a capacity of 21,000 and renovated for the 2004 Olympic Games. The venue was refurbished again in 2016. It is also a youth development centre for fencing, gymnastics, and basketball, and hosts concerts and shows. It hosted the Eurovision Song Contest in 2006 (OSC, 2022: 157). In 2023, the professional basketball team Panathinaikos was granted permission to use it for 49 years.

The *Panathenaic Stadium* (built in 329 BC and restored for the 1896 Games) is usually the finish line for marathon races. The same happened with the 2004 Olympics, and the venue also hosted the archery competition. In April 2010, it opened to the public and became a visitor attraction, offering educational programmes for schools and tours, while also functioning as a concert venue (OSC, 2022: 156-157). Its seating capacity is, currently, 45,000.

5. Conclusion and proposals

The Olympic Games hold substantial potential as catalysts for urban transformation, but their impact depends on balancing short-term gains with sustainable, long-term development. The risks of underused infrastructure and limited post-Olympic planning highlight the need for integrated strategies that ensure lasting benefits. City branding further shows how the Games can reshape a city's global image and attract investment and tourism. Yet, these ambitions must be linked to residents' quality of life, including happiness and civic pride. Revisiting the main research questions leads to several key points.

5.1. Positive and negative outcomes

The Athens 2004 Olympics had a variety of outcomes; of these, a majority were positive rather than negative (Box 3).

Box 3 Outcomes of the Athens 2004 Olympics

Positive outcomes	Negative outcomes
Volunteerism	Fast-track planning
Public-Private Partnerships (first major implementation in Greece)	Complex picture of costs
Increase in civic pride	Lack of place branding and tourism strategy
Reputation enhancement	Underutilisation of spaces
Improved urban functioning, especially transport	Cultural Olympiad under-marketed and costly
Effective organisation and management	
Sporting success	

Liakopoulos (2025) notes that although Greece benefited in many areas, a large proportion of these advantages have not been sustained. The Games have remained a largely positive memory for Greeks and the international sports community.

5.2. Quality of life and the politics of civic pride and happiness

Mega-events contribute not only to economic and spatial development but also to intangible gains such as increases in civic pride or 'psychic income' (Burgan & Mules 1992). Kavetsos and Szymanski (2008) add the perspective of the 'politics of happiness': hosting events such as the Olympics, World Cup or Euro boost life satisfaction, even though sporting success itself has minimal statistical influence. This aligns with Layard's (2005/2011) arguments that economic growth does not automatically translate into higher happiness.

Local and national policy should therefore prioritise quality-of-life outcomes—civic pride, social cohesion, and urban liveability—over narrow economic metrics. This emphasis is also reflected at the European level.

A comparison with Monocle's 2024 list of the 20 best quality-of-life cities (Table 4) shows that 6 post-1972 Olympic cities are included; in the 2025 list of the 10 best cities in specific categories, 5 are former Olympic hosts. Of the 26 cities that are in both lists, 7 (27%) have hosted the Games. Hosting the Olympics is clearly not a prerequisite for a high quality of life, but it can support it.

Mega-events such as Athens 2004, London 2012, and Paris 2024 demonstrate that increases in civic pride and collective happiness often outweigh immediate economic gains. Athens experienced a temporary

rise in morale and an improvement in visitors' experiences. Yet the endurance of the aforementioned pride may be questioned given Greece's prolonged socio-economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and recent geopolitical turbulence.

5.3. Legacy, repurposing space, scale and urban transformation through sport

A central dimension of the Games' legacy lies in the *post-Olympic use of venues*, which typically fall into three categories: Sport, maintaining athletic functions; Sport and culture, combining uses to increase versatility; Culture, integrating venues into community life.

Sport and culture are among the major categories of leisure-time activities (Deffner 1999/2006). Tourism, although not always a primary aim, offers an additional avenue which cities could exploit more systematically in their legacy strategies.

Sport plays a significant role in urban transformation and may contribute to city branding, attract investment, and develop public spaces. Mega-events often stimulate tourism indirectly through increased visibility and improved urban environments, while also generating ancillary developments that strengthen urban vitality.

The relationship between city scale and Olympic hosting raises concerns about sustainability. Large cities possess greater infrastructure and financial resilience, whereas smaller cities may use hosting to drive regional development. While city size influences the ability to host mega-events, it is unrelated to sporting achievement. After Athens, hosting shifted toward very large cities, though Brisbane 2032 marks a return to the smaller-scale model.

5.4. City marketing as a connection between mega-events, urban transformation, and stadia development

Three issues shape the relationship between mega-events, urban development, and stadium construction:

1. *Transition from one-time event to continuous activity* – such as Manchester's Etihad Stadium, repurposed after the 2002 Commonwealth Games as the home of Manchester City (Thornley, 2002: 814).

2. *Community response* – public attitudes to new stadiums are typically more positive when associated with a major event (Thornley, 2002, 814-815).

3. *Stadia as tourist attractions* – a trend originating in the U.S. and later adopted in Europe, based on architectural value or team reputation (Smith, 2001; Thornley, 2002: 814).

City marketing and branding link events, urban transformation, and stadium development. The Olympic Games can drive economic development while also influencing culture, identity, and the physical environment. This broader perspective underlines the strategic role of branding in shaping long-term urban benefits.

5.5. Proposals

Mega-events can transform cities, but this potential is realised only when global ambitions align with local needs, integrated planning, and long-term visions. The quote, frequently attributed to Benjamin Franklin in the 1700s, "by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail", captures this necessity. Athens 2004 offers valuable lessons, while Müller's critique of the 'mega-event syndrome' highlights the need for substantial policy change, distinguishing between radical and incremental changes (2015: 12-14):

The following proposals aim to maximise positive legacies while addressing urban, social, and community challenges:

1. *Build on positive dilemmas and outcomes*, and strengthen the areas identified in Boxes 2 and 3.

2. *Prioritise integrated legacy planning*, ensuring post-event uses, community integration, and tourism strategy are addressed from the outset to prevent underutilisation of venues.

3. *Reduce cost overruns*, drawing on the 18 recommendations by Preuß, Andreff, and Weitzmann on financial control and risk management (2019: 162-170).

4. *Enhance civic pride and quality of life,* including measuring happiness, wellbeing and urban liveability.

5. *Strengthen city marketing and branding* through coherent identity narratives, cultural diplomacy, and sustainable promotional strategies.

6. *Advance research on happiness and wellbeing*, examining how mega-events influence civic pride, cultural engagement, and social cohesion.

7. *Learn from successful examples,* including Munich's Olympiapark, Athens' volunteerism and PPPs, and London's cultural legacy.

8. *Address contemporary challenges*, particularly economic recovery, social support, and environmental sustainability.

9. *Promote regional cooperation* by involving non-host regions through shared investments and knowledge exchange, as seen in Greece in 2004 and in the London–Leicestershire collaborations of 2012.

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