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MEGA-EVENTS AS URBAN GAME CHANGERS?

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EDITORIAL NOTE BY IMMEDIATE PAST EDITOR IN CHIEF OF TRANSACTIONS OF AESOP

Olivier Sykes[1]

This special issue, under the editorship of Marco Cremaschi, has emerged and evolved across a transition period for the editorship of Transactions of AESOP. When the proposal for the issue was accepted following the AESOP Congress held in Paris in July 2024, culminating a mere fourteen days before the start of the Summer Olympics on July 26, Marco became its Guest Editor. Today, as this significant contribution to the state of knowledge and debate on mega-events as urban game changers is published, Marco is the Editor in Chief of the Journal, following his appointment to the role by the AESOP Council of Representatives in 2025. As the outgoing Editor in Chief, I would like to extend thanks to Marco and all the authors and reviewers who have contributed to this issue. I would also like to thank all those who have contributed to the journal in different ways since 2019 during my tenure as Editor in Chief. In a historical conjuncture where many questions are being asked about the sustainability and ethics of financialised and often predatory academic publishing models, and internationalism is under pressure from many quarters, Transactions epitomises the AESOP ethos in providing an open-access and inclusive space for the international planning community to share research, innovative practices, and constructive provocations. As the journal looks towards its tenth anniversary in 2027, this mission is in safe hands under the new Editorship.

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Transactions of the Association of European Schools of Planning • 10 (2026)

INTRODUCTION: MEGA-EVENTS AS URBAN GAME CHANGERS?

Marco Cremaschi[2]

This special issue on the urban impacts of mega-events emerged in the aftermath of the Paris Olympic Games and the 2024 AESOP conference held at Sciences Po. Following that meeting, a few contributions were revised and assembled into the present collection. The connection between the conference and the Games was explicit in the conference title, which echoed the recurrent claim that mega-events function as urban game changers. Yet this proposition has never been self-evident. A substantial body of scholarship has instead qualified the transformative role of the Games in urban development, while showing that their effects on ordinary planning procedures are often more consequential, and at times more problematic, than their celebrated material legacies.

All six papers were written after Paris 2024, with several substantially revised or completed in 2026; thereby drawing on post-event assessments rather than bid-stage projections. Paris appears in every paper, not only those directly devoted to it. It is the reference point for Delaplace's giga-event classification, the comparator for Barcelona and London in Deffner's analysis, the principal case for Bourdin *et al.* and Cremaschi, and an implicit benchmark in the Buenos Aires discussion of successful and failed Olympic urbanism.

Paris bid for the Olympic Games three times (1992, 2008, 2012) before eventually succeeding in 2024. Other cities also bid repeatedly. This persistence, documented more broadly in Deffner's contribution, raises a central question: why do cities continue bidding despite well-known risks? Across the collection, the answer appears less economic than political and symbolic. Mega-events promise, for different reasons, global visibility, civic identity consolidation, and political legitimation for hosting countries and local urban coalitions. These aspirations adapt swiftly to diverse political environments and accommodate different rationales. In Paris, the strategy under Mayor Bertrand Delanoë was explicitly tied to metropolitan rebalancing; the 2024 revision under Mayor Anne Hidalgo adapted to a wider territorial focus including neighbouring Seine-Saint-Denis. The sustainability narrative was subsequently layered into this agenda as both international positioning and political justification.

Other cases illustrate contrasting trajectories. Athens mobilised the Games for national affirmation rather than metropolitan redistribution, producing spectacular infrastructure but weak legacy planning and a debt burden that was later associated with sovereign crisis. Milan adopted a minimum-intervention strategy, using the Games primarily to accelerate already-planned private developments. Buenos Aires pursued a socially progressive model by directing investment toward its most vulnerable territory, yet lacked the institutional capacity required to consolidate those gains.

Taken together, the collection suggests that Paris 2024 represents the most sophisticated iteration of mega-event urbanism to date, not because it resolved the tensions that exist between sustainability and equity, but because it managed to contain them long enough to deliver the event while securing metropolitan transport investments likely to outlast it. Whether the social legacy of the Seine-Saint-Denis Village proves durable or is overtaken by gentrification remains an open question that none of the papers can yet conclusively answer.

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Delaplace's introductory Outlook, an invited piece written for the Journal, for example, revises the total public cost of Paris 2024 by demonstrating that the organising committee's figures excluded security, transport, and mobilisation expenditures. This is not a marginal correction. It significantly alters the cost ratio and directly challenges the Agenda 2020 narrative of fiscal restraint. Such post hoc accounting has often been absent from the field, and its availability here grounds theoretical claims in a way pre-event scholarship rarely could.

Paris 2024 nevertheless adopted a diffused spatial model: 95 per cent of venues were existing or temporary, distributed across the Grand Paris metropolitan area, while permanent construction was concentrated in Seine-Saint-Denis. The Saint-Denis Olympic Village, spanning 52 hectares across Saint-Denis, Saint-Ouen, and l'Île-Saint-Denis, serves both as an emblem and a test case of the sustainability agenda. Designed for 14,000 athletes, it is now being converted into a mixed-use district comprising approximately 2,200 housing units, offices, and schools, with half the housing designated social or affordable.

Two Structural Paradoxes

The unifying concern of this special issue is the urban consequences of mega-events viewed through two recurring structural paradoxes.

The first is scalar. The costs of hosting the Olympic Games are typically borne at national level: without state guarantees and TV broadcasting fees, such events would be not feasible. In contrast, their direct and indirect effects, positive or negative, are experienced primarily at local level. Benefits are usually framed in terms of infrastructure, regeneration, or housing, particularly through Olympic Villages and their residential afterlives. Yet the mismatch between centralised costs and localised impacts remains a persistent feature of mega-event governance.

The second paradox concerns the exceptionalism of decision-making. Although mega-events are planned many years in advance and often benefit from extraordinary resources, ordinary planning procedures are repeatedly deemed

insufficient. Special legal regimes, accelerated approvals, ad hoc governance arrangements, and derogatory planning instruments are introduced in the name of urgency or efficiency. Thus, even where time and money are abundant, exceptional rules continue to prevail. This tension between long preparation cycles and procedural exceptionalism helps explain why mega-events remain fertile terrain for urban research.

The papers collected here engage directly with these two dimensions, scalar asymmetries and exceptional governance, while also emphasising comparison. Rather than focusing on a single case, the issue uses the conjuncture created by Paris 2024 and the AESOP conference to contrast the celebrative narrative surrounding recent European Olympics with more contested experiences elsewhere. These include Athens, often cast as the negative mirror image of Paris in legacy debates, and transatlantic perspectives comparing Olympic village developments with large-scale event districts in Buenos Aires. Collectively, the articles demonstrate that mega-events are not merely spectacles or temporary interruptions of urban life. They are moments in which broader dynamics of state intervention, territorial redistribution, planning exceptionalism, and urban transformation become unusually visible.

In the preceding thirty years, studies of mega-events and their effects on urban areas have evolved into a multidisciplinary domain encompassing urban planning, geography, sports studies, and management. A synthesis of extant literature reveals several major trends. The primary concern pertains to the classification and scale of the data. Müller's (2015) seminal framework remains pivotal in defining mega-events through metrics such as cost, media reach, and visitor numbers, while recent contributions have refined these indicators to better capture urban pressures and population presence. A secondary trend is centred on fiscal risk, with substantial evidence demonstrating recurrent cost overruns, optimistic forecasting, and uncertain economic returns. A third strand of research examines legacy, moving from celebratory narratives toward more critical approaches that distinguish between tangible and intangible, positive and negative, and legacies perceived differently depending on the actors involved and the timing of events (Leopkey & Parent, 2012; Chappelet, 2012; Preuss, 2019).

A fourth line of research analyses opposition, securitisation, and reform, documenting bid withdrawals, anti-Games mobilisations, and the rise of surveillance-oriented governance, including AI-based monitoring. Across this literature, reforms such as Olympic Agenda 2020 are often perceived as tempering excesses without effecting fundamental alterations to the underlying political economy of Olympic urbanism.

Finally, research into governance and planning processes draws on collaborative planning, project governance, and 'projectification' theory to explain how mega-events coordinate heterogeneous actors under severe time constraints. Recent studies on sustainability suggest that, while newer Games have reduced some material impacts, social and territorial inequalities remain unresolved. Extant literature indicates a tendency towards a shift in the form of Olympic urbanism rather than in its underlying logic.

The collection demonstrates the limits of universal models. Neither Agenda 2020 nor sustainability discourse can override the effects of institutional capacity, planning culture, and urban political economy. Similar Olympic frameworks produce sharply different outcomes in Paris, Milan, Athens, and Buenos Aires because they are mediated through distinct territorial systems. The papers assembled here move beyond the binary language of success and failure and shift attention from outcomes alone to mechanisms: how actors are coordinated through time, how territorial priorities are selected, how governance is distributed across scales, and how legacy is politically constructed.

Presentation of the Papers

Delaplace's opening piece offers a conceptual and empirical framework for understanding the scale, costs, and governance challenges of contemporary mega-events, using Paris 2024 as its primary reference. It opens by revisiting Müller's (2015) four-criteria classification matrix — visitor numbers, media coverage, organisational cost, and capital investment — and proposes a refinement that replaces ticket sales with total population present; a more operationally relevant measure for urban management. Applying this updated matrix, the paper argues that Paris 2024, with a total estimated cost of approximately €13 billion (of which 42 per cent was publicly funded) and 11.2 million people present during the Games, qualifies as a *giga-event* rather than simply a mega-event, matching London 2012 on this revised scale. The analytical core is organised around three structural challenges facing contemporary mega-event governance. The first is sustainability, treated as a persistent tension: Paris 2024 committed to reducing carbon emissions by 55 per cent compared to London 2012. This was achieved primarily by limiting new construction to 5 per cent of total venues, but international travel by spectators and athletes remains structurally incompatible with genuine carbon neutrality. The paper critically examines claims of sustainability, arguing that they are largely dependent on offsetting mechanisms of doubtful validity. The second challenge is the management of uncertainty in environments where the rationality of action is necessarily limited. The third, and perhaps most analytically rich, concerns the growing *opposition* to mega-events: bid withdrawals driven by referenda or political resistance, the NOlympics movement, controversies over AI-powered surveillance systems trialled during Paris 2024, displacement of populations, and the contested nature of the concept of legacy itself. The paper situates legacy as a political instrument mobilised by event promoters to pre-empt opposition, and notes that what constitutes a legacy is inherently contested among local populations, urban regimes, and the IOC. The conclusion calls for earlier and more genuine civic participation in bid decisions, without which future mega-events will remain increasingly vulnerable to organised opposition.

Bourdin *et al*'s paper makes an original methodological and theoretical contribution to urban project management research by focusing on temporality as the central analytical dimension, using the Paris 2024 Olympic Games as an extreme case. The central argument challenges the common ex post interpretation that the Games' successful delivery was simply the product of a non-negotiable deadline; instead, the paper demonstrates that temporal coordination, the alignment of heterogeneous temporal frameworks across dozens of actors, was actively produced through specific management instruments and was far from given in advance. The methodological contribution is the development of the "timeline" tool: a comprehensive chronological map of the Olympic project, constructed from 62 semi-structured interviews conducted across the full production system (SOLIDEO, Paris 2024 organising committee, national ministries, local authorities, private developers, architecture firms) between 2020 and 2025, supplemented by legislative, regulatory, and press documentation. The paper describes the timeline's four reading modes (global, horizontal, vertical,

and nodal), with each revealing different dimensions of how temporal coordination is built and breaks down. The nodal reading is particularly revealing: the timeline is not uniformly dense but structured around moments of heightened activity (the IOC's designation of Paris in 2017, the Olympic Law of 2018, the post-COVID acceleration from 2021) that concentrate interactions, decisions, and critical adjustments. The paper also explores the fragmentation of the Olympic project under Agenda 2020 (36 competition sites, 70 facilities managed by SOLIDEO), and argues that this spatial dispersion created a qualitatively new form of managerial complexity, which is centred less on engineering and construction and more on urban planning coordination and political negotiation. The conclusion contributes to mid-range planning theory by conceptualising the urban project as a mechanism for progressively building shared frames of reference and temporal alignment in conditions of deep uncertainty; a process that cannot be reduced to deadline imposition, however fixed and consequential that deadline may be.

Deffner's paper revisits the Athens 2004 Olympics two decades on, situating the case within a broader comparative framework that also draws on Munich 1972, Barcelona 1992, London 2012, and Paris 2024. Its central preoccupation is whether the positive assessments of mega-events in urban studies have systematically outweighed critical analyses, and whether sport mega-events function primarily as agents of urban progress or as vehicles for mismanagement. Written with explicit auto-critical awareness: the author revisits a prediction made in 2002 that Athens's ambition to use the Games as a "springboard for qualitative development" looked "hypothetical" even before the opening ceremony, the paper is notable for its intellectual honesty. The theoretical framing draws on Geoffrey West's work on scale to interrogate whether city size systematically determines hosting success. The data are striking: of the 16 cities that have bid more than twice since 1992, only six have won, and among smaller cities (under 5 million inhabitants), only Athens and Brisbane have ever been awarded the Games. Size, the author concludes, largely determines hosting capacity. The paper then applies Flyvbjerg and Gardner's principles of large-scale project management (think slow, act fast, avoid the commitment fallacy, think from right to left) to evaluate the Athens case. Athens is assessed against multiple legacy dimensions: sporting (significant investment in national sports infrastructure, partial success), social (limited; persistent inequalities of access), urban (new metropolitan infrastructure including the Attiki Odos ring road and the airport, genuinely transformative), and economic (largely negative; the Games accelerated debt accumulation, with no measurable tourism premium for Greece as a whole, though Volos and its regional airport represent a partial exception). The post-Games fate of venues is documented in granular detail, with most facilities either underused, deteriorated, or repurposed only partially. The paper closes by advocating integrated legacy planning, scalable design processes, and a city-branding strategy that embeds civic pride and quality of life as core objectives, rather than treating the Games as a one-off event-marketing exercise.

Jreij *et al*'s paper provides the most systematic comparative analysis in the collection, examining how the IOC's Agenda 2020 reforms (introduced 2014, updated 2021) have reshaped the spatial and environmental dimensions of Olympic planning through the cases of Paris 2024 (Summer Games) and Milano Cortina 2026 (Winter Games) — the first two games to be fully designed under this framework from the bidding stage onwards. The paper develops four analytical dimensions — spatial configuration, governance structure, sustainability strategy, and legacy projection — and applies them to both cases, generating a comparative synthesis table. The paper notes the contradictions between the green narrative and local realities: displacement of vulnerable populations, speculative land pressure, and limited municipal participation in governance. Milano Cortina 2026 adopted a constellation model: venues spread over 400 kms across four clusters (Milan, Cortina d'Ampezzo, Valtellina, Val di Fiemme), the most territorially dispersed Winter Games in history. The Porta Romana Olympic Village in Milan will convert post-Games into student housing; raising immediate questions about affordability. Across the Alpine clusters, decisions to rebuild the Cortina bobsleigh track and to derogate environmental assessment procedures expose the tension that exists between sustainability rhetoric and institutional shortcuts. The paper's overarching conclusion is that Agenda 2020 has succeeded in reducing material excess but not in ensuring territorial justice or environmental coherence, and that it systematically privileges well-equipped metropolitan regions with existing governance capacity; thereby reinforcing rather than correcting spatial inequalities in Olympic hosting.

Tomé *et al*'s paper examines the 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires, focusing on the Barrio Olímpico built in the city's historically underinvested southern area. It situates this case within a long genealogy of failed or fragmented planning interventions for the south of Buenos Aires, from the Almirante Brown Park Plan in the 1960s through the various post-1990 urban plans and asks whether the Youth Olympics offered

a genuine catalyst for reversing this pattern of spatial inequality or merely added another layer of sporadic intervention. Existing literature on mega-events in the Global South has focused predominantly on Summer Games or World Cups in contexts of significant state power and geopolitical assertion. The Youth Olympics in Buenos Aires is an analytically distinct case: a secondary-tier event used by a city with no plausible claim to global mega-event status, held in its most disadvantaged territory, with a redistributive social intent that the primary literature does not associate with Olympic urbanism. The empirical portrait of Commune Eight is detailed and sobering: the lowest population density and property values in the city, the highest proportion of informal dwellings, the worst connectivity, the most fragmented green space governance, and poverty rates three times higher than the city centre. The paper analyses the infrastructure investments triggered by the Games (the Metrobus Sur, the Olympic Bridge over the Riachuelo, the sports complex and 1,370 housing units) and evaluates their actual post-event impact through community surveys, spatial analysis, and census data. The findings are mixed. The affordable housing programme (UVA mortgage loans tied to the inflation-indexed purchasing value unit) was reasonably successful in providing access to middle-income families, whilst the socio-urban integration of Villa 20 (renamed Barrio 20 - Papa Francisco), where 1,665 units were built through participatory planning, is assessed as having been a genuine achievement. However, 205 plots in the Olympic Village remain undeveloped seven years after the Games; sports facilities are largely inaccessible to the public; connectivity remains deeply deficient; and the surrounding land uses are still incompatible with a stable residential neighbourhood. The paper's analytical contribution is the concept of a new vision for the southern area, a comprehensive development plan, developed 2022–2025, that attempts to reframe the Barrio Olímpico not as a legacy monument but as a node within a metropolitan-scale territorial strategy. This re-framing, the authors argue, is a prerequisite for capitalising on the investments already made.

Cremaschi's paper analyses the structural duality at the heart of French urban planning: the coexistence of a centralised statutory regulatory framework with flexible, design-driven, project-based practices. Taking the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and the new *Plan Local d'Urbanisme bioclimatique* (PLUb) as dual empirical anchors, the paper traces the evolution of French planning through three historical ages (postwar Fordist centralism, 1980s decentralisation and entrepreneurialism, and the post-2010 ecological imperative) before arguing that this evolution has produced a system characterised by what it calls a 'double bind': planning is simultaneously too centralised to allow genuine local adaptation, and too fragmented to ensure territorial coherence. The paper analyses the ZAC (*Zone d'Aménagement Concerté*) instrument in depth, identifying it as the primary mechanism through which statutory planning and project delivery are institutionally separated in France. This separation, the paper argues, enables flexibility and negotiation, but also constrains ecological ambition, limits democratic accountability, and generates a proliferation of planning tools that obscures rather than clarifies responsibility. The emergence of the *projet urbain* since the 1980s is analysed as a partial corrective to regulatory planning's rigidity, but its integration into statutory frameworks remains unresolved. The paper then examines tactical urbanism (temporary uses, community gardens, co-production experiments) as a third layer of practice, noting both its innovative potential and its risk of serving as cover for market-driven transformation. The theoretical conclusion, drawing on Bernardo Secchi and Sciences Po's political approach to planning, advocates for what the author calls 'strategic incrementalism': a combination of binding ecological and social regulatory frameworks with context-sensitive, politically literate project-based implementation. The Paris 2024 Olympic Village in Saint-Denis is offered as an illustration of both the system's capacity for coordination under pressure and its limitations in terms of social equity and democratic participation.

The game rhetoric

The most productive comparative thread running through the collection is the persistent disjunction between the rhetoric of legacy and its territorial reality. Deffner's Athens paper documents this at its starkest: twenty years after 2004, most Olympic venues are underused or deteriorated, and the Games accelerated fiscal crisis rather than generating a sustainable urban dividend. The Buenos Aires paper adds a different register: a city that used the Youth Olympics not for global prestige but for targeted neighbourhood upgrading in its most marginalised commune and still faces the challenge of translating fragmented investment into coherent urban transformation. The spatial planning paper on Paris and Milan shows that even under the reformed Agenda 2020 framework, which explicitly prioritises existing infrastructure and legacy planning, the conversion of Olympic Villages into affordable housing remains contested, affordability is not guaranteed, and gentrification risks in already vulnerable territories (Seine-Saint-Denis, the districts surrounding Porta Romana) are documented by multiple authors across the collection.

What distinguishes Athens from Buenos Aires is scale and ambition: Athens produced genuine metropolitan infrastructure (ring road, airport, metro extensions) but at unsustainable fiscal cost. Buenos Aires produced more modest infrastructure at community scale, with more realistic social targeting, but the territorial impact remains limited. Paris 2024, positioned between these extremes, inherits the tension: grand sustainability claims, significant transport investment (Line 14 extensions, Grand Paris Express acceleration), but unresolved questions about displacement and gentrification that Delaplace and Cremaschi identify as structurally embedded in the ZAC financial model and in the exceptional planning regime that mega-events impose.

Milan offers a further variation: a city that, having absorbed the lessons of Expo 2015's difficult post-event transformation, deliberately chose a minimalist, market-led approach to the Olympics. The result, the spatial planning paper notes, is that sustainability is reduced to infrastructural efficiency, while social equity and affordability at Porta Romana remain largely unaddressed.

The collection therefore suggests that Agenda 2020 has successfully changed the form of Olympic urbanism—less new construction, more reuse, greater dispersal—without fundamentally altering its political economy, still characterised by land valorisation, selective redistribution, and unequal territorial effects.

Olympic Villages

Three papers in the collection specifically examine Olympic Villages as an urban planning intervention: the Buenos Aires paper, the Delaplace spatial planning comparison, and the Bourdin *et al*. temporality paper. Placing them in dialogue reveals a typology of village models with distinct spatial logics, social ambitions, and post-event trajectories.

The Buenos Aires Barrio Olímpico is the only case in the collection built in a genuinely disadvantaged peripheral urban territory, with an explicit social mandate (50 per cent of units allocated to long-term residents of the southern communes) and an affordable mortgage mechanism. Its limitations are equally specific: post-event stagnation, poor connectivity, underutilised sports facilities, and inadequate integration with the surrounding urban fabric. The model is one of targeted social investment that lacks the metropolitan leverage needed to convert isolated intervention into systemic transformation.

The Saint-Denis Olympic Village is the most extensively analysed case. It operates at a completely different scale (52 hectares, 14,000 athletes), within a global sustainability narrative, in a territory that is simultaneously deprived and adjacent to some of the densest metropolitan infrastructure investment in Europe. Its post-Games programme (2,200 housing units (half social or affordable), schools, offices) is more socially ambitious than any previous Olympic Village, but the Bourdin *et al.* paper reveals the extraordinary temporal and organisational complexity required to deliver it, and the spatial planning paper notes that gentrification risks in Seine-Saint-Denis are real and not addressed by the current planning framework.

Porta Romana is the most financialised of the three: a brownfield redevelopment embedded in a private-led masterplan involving luxury real estate partners (Prada Holding, Covivio), where the Olympic Village will be converted to student housing at market or near-market rents. The sustainability case rests on brownfield reuse alone. This comparison exposes a gradient from redistributive (Buenos Aires) through ambivalent (Saint-Denis) to financialised (Porta Romana), a gradient that maps closely onto each city's planning culture, governance capacity, and political economy, rather than onto the IOC's sustainability framework.

Together, these cases reveal a continuum from redistributive to ambivalent to market-led village urbanism, shaped less by IOC doctrine than by local planning systems and political economies.

A Critical Assessment

The first contribution concerns the classification of Paris 2024 as a *giga-event* rather than a mega-event, proposed by Delaplace through the revision of Müller's matrix. This is not merely terminological. The collection

does not fully develop this reclassification into a research programme, but it opens a productive line of inquiry.

The second contribution is methodological, and it is the most original in a strict disciplinary sense. Bourdin *et al.*'s development of the project timeline as a research instrument for analysing temporal coordination in mega-project delivery represents a genuine innovation in the sociology and management of urban projects. The field has frameworks for analysing project *outcomes* (legacy, cost overrun, venue reuse) but remarkably little on the *process* through which heterogeneous actors are aligned across time This methodological approach could be profitably applied to non-Olympic urban mega-projects, and its explicit connection to Midler's clinical management tradition (1995) provides it with theoretical anchoring that previous planning-process accounts of Olympic delivery have lacked.

The third contribution is comparative, and it reshapes how the relationship between Agenda 2020 and planning systems is understood. Existent literature on Agenda 2020 has focused primarily on the IOC's intentions and the bid documents that respond to them. Jreij *et al*'s find that Agenda 2020 prescriptions generate outcomes that depend less on the IOC's recommendations than on the pre-existing governance capacity, planning tools, and socio-economic contexts of host territories.

Thereafter, Cremaschi's accounts the cost of the French flexibility model: the concentration of distributional choices in a technico-legal instrument insulated from democratic participation, the structural bias toward intermediate programme categories that reduces social ambition, and the proliferation of planning tools that obscures rather than clarifies accountability. This is an endogenous critique of the French planning system as it specifically operates under mega-event pressure, and it connects the empirical Olympic literature to broader comparative planning theory debates around the relationship that exists between regulatory frameworks, project-based delivery, and democratic governance.

Planning Systems Under Pressure

The collection also shows that the decisive variable in Olympic outcomes may not be event scale or IOC reform, but the character of national and local planning systems, as shown by Cremaschi's 'double bind' paper on French planning and the Bourdin *et al.* temporality paper. But the planning system question is latent in all the others. The ZAC instrument in France provides flexibility and public control over land but institutionalises a separation between statutory regulation and project delivery that limits ecological ambition, and concentrates distributional choices in techno-legal instruments insulated from democratic participation. Bourdin *et al.* show how this system, under Olympic pressure, produces extraordinary coordination capacity but at the cost of local participation: SOLIDEO's centralised management enabled delivery, but municipalities like Saint-Denis were "primarily in a consultative capacity rather than functioning as principal decision-makers" (Bourdin *et al.*).

Milan offers the counterpart: a polycentric governance arrangement through the Fondazione Milano Cortina that distributes authority across regions, provinces, municipalities, and national bodies, but generates fragmentation and accountability gaps. Environmental assessments were derogated; legacy planning beyond individual venues was postponed; the bobsleigh track decision was driven by local prestige politics rather than sustainability. The planning system's decentralisation, rather than enabling local responsiveness, enabled local capture of the planning process by specific interests.

Buenos Aires presents the Global South variant: a planning history marked by imported planning models inadequately adapted to local conditions, and an institutional fragmentation that required extraordinary political alignment (between local, provincial, and national governments in 2015) to achieve even the modest coordination that the Youth Olympics produced. Athens represents the fourth variant: a planning system mobilised by state sanction to deliver major infrastructure on time. However, it lacks the institutional capacity to manage post-event reconversion, resulting in the 'white elephant' phenomenon that Agenda 2020 was designed to prevent.

The collection suggests that the most important variable determining Olympic urban outcomes is neither the IOC's sustainability framework, nor the form of spatial configuration (compact, diffused, or constellation),

but the quality and political character of the host planning system and its capacity to integrate exceptional project delivery with long-term statutory planning, to protect against financialised capture, and maintain democratic accountability over distributional choices. The central issue, therefore, is whether planning systems can reconcile exceptional project delivery with long-term statutory planning, democratic accountability, and socially equitable distribution.

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OUTLOOK
MEGA AND GIGA EVENTS AND HOST TERRITORIES: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Marie Delaplace[1]

Abstract

This Outlook explores the future of mega-events through the case of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, arguing that they should be understood not only as global spectacles but also as large-scale urban projects that reshape cities, mobilise significant resources, and generate lasting territorial effects.

The analysis identifies three major challenges. First, environmental sustainability: despite efforts to reduce carbon emissions through innovative construction and mobility strategies, the Olympics' global scale continues to generate substantial environmental costs. Second, uncertainty: organisers must increasingly respond to climate change, health crises, geopolitical instability, and security threats, which require more adaptive forms of planning and governance. Third, social and political contestation: criticisms related to costs, displacement, surveillance, and uneven benefits challenge the legitimacy of mega-events and raise questions about their long-term legacy.

The Outlook concludes that the future of mega-events will depend on their capacity to balance urban development, environmental responsibility, social acceptance, and resilience in an increasingly uncertain world.

Keywords:

Mega-events, urban transformation, sustainability, uncertainty, legacy.

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Now over, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games were widely considered a success, but the question of how to organise future mega-events such as the Olympic Games remains. Such events require not only private funding but also public funding, but other investments seem more urgent, particularly in the context of climate change. After clarifying what these mega-events are, this paper shows that, in an increasingly uncertain and complex context, which may lead to significant and sometimes irreconcilable conflicts, and at a time when the issue of sustainable development is becoming increasingly pressing, the urban action they require faces many challenges.

1. Main events, mega-events and giga-events: what are we talking about?

There is no consensus in the existing literature on the definition and size of mega-events (Müller, 2015): some authors consider only the largest sporting events, foremost among which are the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. Others include world exhibitions, major political meetings (such as the G7, G20 and UN summits) and festivals. Paris 2024 can be defined as a mega or giga-event.

A definition of events that needs to be explored further

Müller (2015) proposes a matrix for rating event size based on four criteria; the first is size, measured by the number of visitors and/or tickets sold. While Müller uses the number of tickets sold, we consider it insufficient from an urban action perspective. This is for two reasons. First, because people can take part in the (given) mega-event without necessarily having bought tickets. Second, the current population is more important for managing transport and waste, as well as for considering other urban networks (electricity, water, sewage, telecommunications, etc.). Given this, we consider the population that is present (tourists, day trippers, residents and so forth) (Terrier, 2009) in the host territory at the time of the (given) event. This population may be much larger than the resident population of the location if the latter wishes to remain in the territory at the time of the event, or is forced to do so. This population, that is present, however, is harder to assess.

Mega-events also receive extensive media coverage and can be watched on television and other visual media. Media coverage is Müller's second criterion. For example, Tokyo 2020 took place in 2021 without spectators due to the COVID pandemic. It was watched by more than 3 billion television viewers and thus qualifies as a mega-event. Though this criterion is certainly important when it comes to defining a mega-event, it has little impact on urban action, except that the area must be equipped with efficient electricity and communication networks to enable television (or other) broadcasting.

Mega-events also entail costs associated with the organisation of the event itself and the construction of the infrastructure required to stage it. The cost of organising the event itself is Müller's third criterion. Beyond the overall financial aspect, we believe it is interesting, from an urban development perspective, to identify the funding sources for such organisations. In theory, the organisation is mainly funded by private sources. However, the host region must ensure security, accommodate attendees, and provide transportation services during the event. Public funding can therefore be very significant (as discussed below).

Costs associated with the infrastructure required for the event are capital expenditures. This is the fourth criterion. These costs vary depending on the scale of the construction work. Costs are also associated with urban transformations (construction of facilities, transport infrastructure, etc. or demolition of others). Once again, it is important to emphasise that the majority of such costs are borne by local authorities and are therefore ultimately financed by the host country and/or local residents (inhabitants, businesses) through existing taxes, or by the country and/or local residents when funding is provided through a public loan.

The overall organisation of the mega-event changes local residents' living conditions before the event (construction work); during the event (due to factors such as traffic and security constraints it entails, as well as due to the festive atmosphere that such events may bring); and permanently after the event (buildings and image of the area).

Müller then classified events according to the number of points obtained for each criterion (Table 1).

Table 1 Müller's scoring matrix (2015)

Size	**Attractiveness to visitors**	**Media coverage**	**Cost**	**Urban transformation**
	Number of tickets sold	Value (US $ 2025) of broadcasting rights	Total cost (US $, 2025)	Capital investment (US $, 2025)
XXL (3 points)	> 3 million	> 2.74 billion	> 13.7 billion	> 13.7 billion
XL (2 points)	> 1 million	> 1.37 billion	> 6.87 billion	> 6.87 billion
L (1 point)	> 0.5 million	> 0.137 billion	> 1.37 billion	> 1.37 billion

Source: Reconstructed from Müller, 2015, updated to 2025 dollars

Giga-events total between 11 and 12 points, mega-events between 7 and 10 points, and major events between 1 and 6 points. If we look at this scale, mega-events mainly concern sporting mega-events such as the Winter Olympics, the Asian Games, the Euro (football), the Football World Cup, or events such as the Kazan Universiade organised by the International University Sports Federation (FISU). The only non-sporting event is the Shanghai World Expo. In this analysis, London 2012, with a total of 11 points, was a giga-event; so too was Paris 2024.

Paris 2024: a giga-event significantly supported by public funding

12.1 million tickets were sold for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, including 3.5 million to people outside France and 4.2 million outside the Ile-de-France region (giving Paris 3 points for this criterion). As we mentioned in a report submitted to the Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games (COJOP2024) (Delaplace et al., 2020), with an average of 4 tickets per spectator at the Olympic Games, approximately 3 million people attended the events. However, visitors without tickets to attend may have been present in the city. According to data from Orange/Paris je t'aime, 11.2 million people were present between 23 July and 11 August 2024 during the Olympic Games: 3.1 million tourists (including 1.7 million international and 1.4 million domestic), as well as 3.1 million day trippers and 5 million inhabitants of the Paris region. The Paris 2024 events and ceremonies were watched by 5 billion television viewers (IOC, 2024) and generated US$3.3 billion in broadcasting rights, or €2.94 million at the average exchange rate for 2025 (3 point).

The total cost of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games is difficult to determine, to distinguish between the budget for organising the sporting event, which in theory was covered by the COJOP2024, and the budget for the infrastructure that remains after the Games, which was covered by public and private funding.

The first, which rose to €4.49 billion at the end of 2025 instead of the €3.6 billion planned in 2018, was covered by €4.2 billion from private funding (IOC, sponsors, ticket sales, etc.), plus €224.1 million in public funding for the Paralympic Games. However, the organisation of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games also required public funding for security measures in the city. These were estimated at €1.44 billion in 2025: transport services for spectators and accredited persons (€570 million), public mobilisation efforts (€459.8 million) and other public expenditure (interministerial coordination, health, subsidies and funding for high performance, etc.) (325.1 million; bringing the total public expenditure for the organisation of the Games to 3.019 billion (CRC, 2025). The budget for organising the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, therefore, amounted to €7.219 billion; not simply the €4.49 billion calculated by the COJOP2024: 42% of which was public funding.

Furthermore, though public funding for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games in terms of infrastructure directly related to the Games was *ultimately* estimated in October 2025 at €3.63 billion, there is a need to add the private funding for the Olympic Village and Media Village of approximately €2.13 billion to this figure, bringing the total infrastructure cost to 5.76 billion.

The total cost of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, therefore, amounts to €12.979 billion (including net public expenditure of €6.7 billion (CRC, 2025)), or €14.6 billion at the average 2025 US dollar exchange rate. In terms of cost, Paris 2024 would also be an XXL event (3 points). Paris 2024 would then be classified as a giga-event as a consequence of its accumulation of 12 points.

The definition of these mega-events highlights the importance of visitors and private and public costs for host regions. A comparison with the Seine-Saint-Denis (SSD) department's budget, where most of the infrastructure (Olympic Village, Media Village, Olympic Aquatic Centre) was built, illustrates the scale of this event in terms of funding. The SSD department's investment budget for 2024 amounted to €398 million out of a total budget of €2.1 billion. It financed €85 million of the €3.8 billion spent by SOLIDEO (which is responsible for building the infrastructure for the Olympic Games), while receiving 80% of SOLIDEO's investments.

2. The challenges of urban action associated with mega-events

Three main stakes must be taken into consideration in the organisation of mega-events and urban action in the current context of climate change, whose consequences are already being felt in cities. The first concerns the sustainability of such mega-events; the second concerns the management of the uncertainties that characterise our societies; and the third, which is partly linked to the other two, concerns the opposition faced by organisers.

Sustainable mega-events: an oxymoron?

Sustainability issues are now at the heart of the organisation of mega-events, even though these issues are not new. For example, concerns about the sustainability of the Olympic Games date back to the early 1990s (Lopes dos Santos & Delaplace, 2024). In terms of environmental aspects, the Olympic Village in Sydney was designed as a model of eco-sensitive construction, which incorporated solar energy, water and electricity, water recycling, and passive heating and cooling. In London, sustainable development was also a priority. 98% of the Olympic Stadium was built with recycled materials, and water recycling was also implemented. London's intention was to use the Olympic Games as a tool for urban regeneration and to leverage the "showcase" the event offered to project the image of a dynamic economic capital: a pleasant, sustainable, and innovative city (Amion, 2012). Environmental aspects were also evident at Tokyo 2020, as these Games were intended to showcase the circular economy in the construction sector (for example, a temporary exhibition hall near Tokyo Big Sight, built from 100% recycled, easily dismantled materials). Similarly, as part of the BATON (Building Athletes' Village with Timber of the Nation) programme, 63 Japanese municipalities participated in the construction of the Olympic Village square using Japanese timber from legal and sustainable sources; the timber used for construction was then returned to the communities from which it had come to be reused in public buildings and schools.

As part of the implementation of the Olympic Agenda 2020 promoted by the International Olympic Committee (Lopes dos Santos & Delaplace, 2023), Paris 2024 committed to organising more sustainable Games. In April 2021, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games Organising Committee announced its commitment to staging an event that would make a *"positive contribution to the climate"*, i.e. one that captured more greenhouse gases than it emitted by offsetting all CO2 emissions linked to the event, and by also supporting additional projects. The aim was therefore to go beyond "carbon neutrality". The reference to "carbon neutrality" was subsequently abandoned due to the difficulties posed by the concept. However, Paris 2024 committed to reducing emissions from the Games by at least 55% compared to the London Games in 2012, representing a saving of 1.9 tonnes of carbon and a threshold of 1.6 million tonnes of CO2 not to be exceeded.

Construction was at the heart of this plan. Only 5% of the facilities were new buildings, whilst the Olympic Village was designed, under the responsibility of SOLIDEO (Olympic Delivery Authority), as an experiment in what a sustainable city would be in terms of its living environment in 2050. In other words, it had to be adapted to be resilient to what is assumed to be the climate of 2050 (including extreme weather events such as heat waves and possible flooding). The apartments, therefore, needed to withstand the 2003 heatwave without air conditioning (comfort being defined as a temperature not exceeding 26°C). this issue was criticised by the athletes, and fans had to be purchased. The event organisers also replaced conventional generators with grid electricity.

The circular economy was also promoted: 96% of the volume of materials dismantled at the Olympic Village site has been reused across various industries.

To reduce transport use and its environmental footprint, Paris 2024 also emphasised the compact nature of the Olympic Games (with most venues located within a 10 km radius of the Olympic Village in Seine-Saint-Denis). It has also promoted sustainable modes of transport, with nearly 30 kilometres of additional infrastructure built for the Games, creating a 60-kilometre-long cycle network connecting all the Olympic venues.

However, like any mega-event, the Olympic Games inevitably emitted greenhouse gases. According to Paris 2024, 34% of emissions were linked to the travel of spectators, officials and athletes, 33% to construction, and 33% to the running of the Games (catering, accommodation, logistics, etc.). Transport to the host city for the mega-event remains a black spot for greenhouse gas emissions, as it is in tourism.

Mega-events attract millions of people to the host city. While some of these visitors are local, a large proportion come from abroad: the carbon footprint of these mega-events is therefore all the higher as they attract international tourists travelling by aeroplane. Tourism accounts for around 8% of greenhouse gas emissions from human activity, including not only emissions directly linked to transport but also those associated with tourist consumption (e.g., catering, hotels; Lenzen et al., 2018). According to the UNWTO and the International Transport Forum (2019), 75% of CO2 emissions from the tourism sector are attributable to transport (40% from air travel and 32% from cars). In France, tourism-related emissions account for 11% of the national GHG emissions inventory, which corresponds to the GHG emissions of 11 million French people over an entire year (Ademe, 2021), with 77% of those emissions being attributable to transport. Foreign visitors were therefore responsible for around 80% of GHG emissions linked to transport between origin and destination, despite accounting for only 32% of arrivals at holiday destinations in 2018, due to the long distances that they travelled. While the pandemic period demonstrated the feasibility of staging certain mega-events - such as the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 - without spectators in attendance, remote mega-events seem difficult to envisage.

Finally, consideration of environmental issues leads to a narrow definition of sustainability. It does not consider the social (e.g., inclusion, the fight against inequality) or economic (e.g., financing issues) dimensions of sustainability (Lopes dos Santos & Delaplace, 2024).

Managing uncertainty: key to the feasibility of future mega and giga-events

Societies today face many uncertainties that are partly interrelated: geopolitical uncertainties regarding current and future conflicts and their consequences in terms of terrorist acts; uncertainties regarding the political functioning of our societies (authoritarian drift, polarisation or even multipolarisation with increasingly incompatible positions); uncertainties concerning the scale of technological changes associated in particular with artificial intelligence, economic and financial uncertainties (in terms of public debt, pension systems, the functioning of the world of work); and social uncertainties (growing inequalities, discriminations, etc.) partly linked to the above uncertainties. These uncertainties are amplified by climate change, which itself generates high costs (health, insurance, security, etc.).

Each of these uncertainties makes it difficult for both individuals and organisations to predict the future. For example, the use of artificial intelligence is subject to major uncertainties regarding its impact on jobs and the risks it poses. Its use requires adapting existing legal and regulatory frameworks, limiting the risks it entails, and ensuring its social acceptability. Economic uncertainties are hampering local authorities' capacity for future investment, and political uncertainties make it difficult to define joint projects. Social uncertainties reinforce societal polarisation and call into question the relevance of actions undertaken in the name of the public interest (see below).

Faced with such mutually reinforcing uncertainties in the sense of Knight (1921), rationality of action is necessarily limited (March, 1988, March & Simon, 1969). Moreover, this rationality is not merely a weakened one because it is difficult to anticipate and process all options and information (March, 1988: 139) (an impoverished form of substantial rationality), whilst the set of options is also unknown.

This is the context in which public action in general, and the preparation and organisation of mega-events in particular, must now take place. To paraphrase Amin (2011: 631), the question is how organisers and host cities should *"act in an urban environment that is daily shaped by distant forces and hidden interdependencies that generate unpredictable and unexpected outcomes?"*

These uncertainties are significant throughout the event preparation phase, but some persist during the event itself. During the preparation phase, urban project management must therefore be adaptive and flexible to limit irreversibility whilst keeping as many options open as possible for adaptation along the way. The complexity of the action is all the greater as it is difficult to know all the variables that will affect urban development. Long-term planning is therefore difficult, and the overall costs associated with unforeseen events are not only unpredictable but also rapidly changing.

Public action must take into account the possibility of unforeseen events (such as the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather events such as heat waves and floods, and cyberattacks and terrorist acts) at the time of the events. Event organisers must ensure the safety of millions of participants in the event of such occurrences. They must guarantee water supplies, even though the availability and quality of this water may be affected by the phenomena noted. They must also consider how to manage the volume of waste generated by the population present, which may be much higher than usual. This poses significant logistical challenges, as supply management, drinking water and sanitation networks are primarily designed for resident populations. In addition, taking into account the likelihood of these extreme weather events is likely to generate additional costs related to potential material damage, insurance, and so on.

The smooth running of events also requires limiting uncertainties about process security, particularly regarding the internet. Ticketing problems during the Champions League final at the Stade de France in May 2022 illustrate the risks involved. While Tokyo recorded 450 million cyberattacks in 2021, the organisers of Paris 2024 anticipated 4 billion cyberattacks during the 15 days of competition. Although Paris 2024 did not ultimately experience any major incidents, 548 events affected entities linked to the organisation of the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games between 8 May and 8 September 2024.

The smooth running of events also requires limiting uncertainties associated with personal safety, particularly in the face of terrorist threats. While the location and precise timing of possible terrorist acts are difficult to predict, it is clear that mega-events are prime locations for such acts. By definition, a mega-event brings together several million people in a host territory and provides a certain form of camouflage for terrorists while offering numerous targets. *"Terrorists can move among travellers and carry out financial transactions in foreign currencies without arousing suspicion"* (Richter and Waugh 1986; Sonmez et al. 1999, 14). Furthermore, because they affect people of different nationalities, attacks benefit from widespread publicity (Weimann and Winn 1994: 143, cited by Sonmez et al., 1999). Security in the host territories of mega-events and, more broadly, in tourist destinations has thus become a central issue.

To ensure security during mega-events, increasingly sophisticated video surveillance systems incorporating artificial intelligence are being implemented, as was the case during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games (Zatsepina & Ludvigsen, 2025). Authorised by the Olympic Law of 19 May 2023 and valid until 31 March 2025, these experimental video surveillance systems, known as "augmented cameras", were deployed from spring 2024 onwards. Artificial Intelligence makes it possible to analyse thousands of hours of recordings in a matter of minutes and anticipate potential risks by predicting behaviour based on the automatic identification of unusual situations.

The difficult management of oppositions

In such a context of uncertainty, opposition to the event is inevitably stronger. The growing opposition to mega-events stems from the current characteristics of our societies in a context of climate change and the essential integration of sustainability issues: increasing polarisation or even multipolarisation, fewer and fewer shared truths and the emergence of post-truths, which are pluralistic in nature, have led to an inability to define common objectives and to the breakdown of the very notion of 'the general interest'. Any project may therefore face strong opposition and be exacerbated by the need to deliver the event on the scheduled date, which may limit the consultation process.

Opposition to mega and giga events is sometimes extremely strong right from the bidding stage. As a result, many bids to host the Olympic Games have been abandoned due to such opposition, and have sometimes been organised by anti-games movements (NOlympics), either following negative referenda or as a result of local political resistance (Kassens-Noor and Lauermann, 2017; Zeghni & Fabry, 2021; Bourbillères et al., 2021; Wolfe, 2023). Similarly, opposition to World Expos is significant. For example, Osaka 2025 has been heavily criticised, particularly because of the costs (€6.7 billion), which far exceeded the initial estimates (€1.5 billion), in the context of post-earthquake reconstruction. It was also criticised for the environmental problems associated with the construction of the artificial island of Yumeshima. Similarly, Universal Exhibition Riyadh 2030 is the subject of political opposition due to human rights violations and/or environmental concerns. Part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 - a plan which aims to diversify the economy away from oil - Riyadh 2030 is presented as the first carbon-negative exhibition but is considered by opponents to be a greenwashing event. Indeed, such a global mega-event cannot be carbon-negative except through climate-offsetting actions, which are subject to significant criticism.

Opposition to mega or giga-events focuses on the costs, which are sometimes considered exorbitant when other priorities exist; on the sustainability of these mega-events; and on the urban transformations they generate. Population displacement and the destruction of natural and cultural resources in host cities are also subject to criticism. According to the mayor of Beijing, around 18,000 people were relocated to make way for the construction of Olympic facilities, while COHRE (2007) estimated that 1.5 million people were displaced within Beijing. In Rio, as part of the federal Minha CAS, Minha Vida programme, more than 20,000 families were evicted from the favelas where they lived and given apartments further away from the city or financial assistance in return (Magalhaes, 2016). For the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, nearly 18,000 families were forcibly displaced to make way for construction work (COHRE, 2007). More recently, video surveillance systems that use artificial intelligence to ensure security have been highly controversial: while their promoters argue that they are temporary, as was the case for Paris 2024, some opponents believe that they could become permanent. *"History shows that the Olympic state of exception often becomes the new normal, handing more power to the already powerful at the expense of movements from below pressing for justice"* (Boykoff, 2023). These surveillance mechanisms are seen as symbolic of an authoritarian drift (Zirin and Boykoff, 2023).

The concept of legacy is then mobilised by the promoters of these mega-events who maintain that, while they are costly and lead to urban transformations, they leave a counterpart to residents. Thus, the notion of Olympic legacy, which first appeared with the Melbourne Games (Leopkey & Parent, 2012), is a tool designed to limit opposition from residents. Taken up again for Atlanta 1996, the Olympic Games must *"leave a positive physical and spiritual legacy and an indelible mark on Olympic history by staging the most memorable Olympic Games ever"* (Atlanta 1996: 20). Subsequently used by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2003, the concept was highlighted in 2014 in the new Agenda 2020 (Rule 2, Article 15 of the Olympic Charter): *"Olympic legacy (...) encompasses all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated by the hosting of the Olympic Games/sport events for people, cities/territories and the Olympic Movement."* (IOC 2017).

However, what is considered a legacy by some is not necessarily considered as such by others. *"Who is in a position to consider that a particular consequence of a mega event is a legacy? Here, it would seem essential to distinguish at least three points of view on the part of three stakeholders: that of the local population, that of the urban regime, i.e. the political and economic leaders of the host region (including the organising committee), and, that of the owner of the event (who attributed it to the city)"* (Chappelet, 2012: 80). Furthermore, there are also negative legacies (Preuss, 2019) and the very notion of legacy can be debated. So, *"what is a legacy for Paris 2024 and the Polynesian government is not necessarily the same for the local population, as the absence of changes to the natural heritage may be considered preferable to any form of legacy. It therefore seems important to question this notion from a territorial and cultural perspective"* (Delaplace *et al.*, 2024).

It should be noted that opposition sometimes concerns only a very small minority of the population. Opposition to Paris 2024 among residents (in mainland France) was relatively weak and fragmented (Martinache & Le Noé, 2023; Delalandre & Schut, 2024). But, even if this opposition is limited, the organisation of future mega-events requires that it be curtailed, unless they are to be held in authoritarian political systems. It is therefore necessary to prepare for them collectively, particularly by involving residents at a very early stage of consultation.

Conclusion

In a fundamentally uncertain context, the challenges posed by mega and giga-events are significant. Even L.A. 2028, which is characterised by private funding, is the subject of fierce controversy, again in the context of climate change (mega-fires) and complex politics (Trump's election). However, these challenges should not obscure the fact that these events have an important festive dimension. Surveys we conducted among people present during the Olympic Games in Seine-Saint-Denis, Seine-et-Marne, and Paris showed that, beyond the sporting aspects, the festive aspects were particularly important, especially in Seine-Saint-Denis and among residents of the Île-de-France region and domestic tourists (Delaplace, 2025). The festival has thus become a strategic urban planning tool for cities and enabled the creation of a new festive urbanity (Gravari-Barbas, 2009).

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MANAGING THE TEMPORAL COMPLEXITY OF URBAN PROJECTS: THE CASE OF THE PARIS 2024 OLYMPIC GAMES

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Abstract

This article examines the role of temporalities in complex urban projects using the case study of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Based on interviews and document analysis, it develops a method, that we call the 'timeline', which highlights how heterogeneous temporalities are coordinated throughout project management. The paper argues that coordination is not given but progressively built through instruments, interactions between actors, and shared frames of reference. The Olympic programme is thus understood as a set of interdependent action systems whose temporal alignment is not given in advance but emerged as a result of the project. The article contributes to planning theory by conceptualising the urban project as a mechanism for coordinating multiple temporalities in situations of uncertainty.

Keywords:

Urban Project, temporality, Paris Metropolitan Area, Olympic Games.

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Introduction

Our work builds on studies that have analysed large-scale urban projects as a major feature of contemporary urban development (Healey, 2006; Salet & Gualini, 2006), and that have emphasised the inherent complexity of such projects. Megaprojects are subject to inevitable reversals and changes in an uncertain world, particularly given the scale and magnitude of the operations involved (Hall, 1980; Hiller, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 2005). In response, actors have learned to navigate uncertainty and change in order to design and manage projects (Rauws & De Roo, 2016; Abujder Ochoa & al., 2025). At the design stage, Midler's (1995) work in management science notably formalised the relationship between project knowledge and the capacity to modify it.

Some of the aforementioned studies also highlight that projects generate shared frames of reference, which enable the alignment and coordination of heterogeneous actors and facilitating collective action in uncertain contexts (Healey 1997; Innes & Booher, 2018). However, such analysis has sometimes given the impression that projects are reified, as if their mere existence were sufficient to produce cohesion and coordination.

Our work challenges this assumption. We argue that coordination and shared frames of reference are progressively produced by actors throughout the project process; they are not given at the beginning. Rather than constituting preconditions for collective action, they should be understood as the (given) project's outcomes. As such, they rely on management and coordination mechanisms deliberately put in place by actors responsible for steering the project.

Within this perspective, temporality emerges as a central dimension of project management in high-uncertainty situations, and is the main focus of our paper. While urban temporalities have been explored in planning scholarship (Abram 2014), far less attention has been paid to the temporalities of urban project management and production. However, project actors operate within heterogeneous and shifting temporal frameworks, and the mere existence of a project is not sufficient to align their temporal horizons for action. This article, therefore, shows how and why managing temporalities is central to both the steering and successful delivery of urban projects. Given this, we have developed a specific methodological approach based on an analytical instrument - the project timeline - which enables us to analyse how temporal coordination is addressed in project management.

To address these issues and to develop our methodology, we examine an extreme case in which temporal dimensions are particularly salient: the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, which we analyse as a large urban project. The project was characterised by extreme uncertainty, while the Olympic event itself cannot tolerate any delay. However, imposing a fixed delivery date - aligned with the opening ceremony - is not sufficient to ensure that actors automatically coordinate their actions, even if they formally share this objective. Under such conditions, project management consists to establish the mechanisms and conditions to coordinate heterogeneous temporalities of action.

Anthropologist Marcel Mauss (2007) introduced the concept of the total social fact, i.e., a fact that in one way or another concerns and mobilises the whole of society, such as the major religious festivals of the Australian Aborigines. It can also be seen to apply particularly to the Olympic Games. Precisely because they are among the most exceptional urban events, we must consider how they are embedded in urban space. It follows, that the games are a particularly relevant case study for our study.

The Paris Games in 2024 marked a revolution in the event's design. The Olympic Committee decided not to create an Olympic park in order to encourage the use of existing facilities and to avoid "white elephants" (Flyvjberg et al. 2024). The major consequence of the same was a large fragmentation of the Olympic project: 36 competition sites, 70 facilities overseen by a state-owned public company – the SOLIDEO -, including the Olympic and Media villages.

The result was a particularly complex project that had to be integrated into the existing city, both during the construction phase and during the event itself, using temporary or ephemeral arrangements. The opening ceremony of the Games illustrated this evolution: it conveyed the symbolic force of the event not through a big architectural gesture, but through the immateriality of a show that transformed the famous monuments of

Paris. The importance attached to environmental and social commitments was also a distinctive feature. In a large-scale traditional urban project, complexity is mainly concentrated in the engineering of the construction of the objects produced; the responsibility of the construction company. In the present case, our findings show that complexity primarily lay in the project's urban planning and organisational dimensions. While drawing extensively on existing knowledge and expertise, this corresponds to a breaking point from previous configurations and marked a new stage of complexity. Furthermore, all of the Olympic venues, tangible and intangible - including competition sites, principal training facilities, fan zones (35 in Seine-Saint-Denis and 26 in Paris), reception areas (villages), and the Olympic torch route have undergone at least some transformation in their design, management, or the role assigned to them within the overall Olympic framework.

Temporalities were at the heart of this project's management. After the games, some observers concluded that their overall and largely uncontested success, particularly regarding facility delivery, was due to the unchangeable deadline and the fact that no one, whether in major corporations, state administration, or local government, wanted to take responsibility for being the bad student. The conclusion drawn was that all major projects should be assigned non-negotiable completion dates enforced through strict constraints. We consider this interpretation to be insufficient, just as we believe that relying on the project's budget importance to explain everything is not enough. Given this, we sought to re-examine this temporal dimension.

In the first part, the article outlines the theoretical and methodological framework of the timeline. In the second part, we analyse how the project's temporalities are managed and coordinated. The conclusion discusses the implications of our approach for understanding urban project management.

1. Theoretical And Methodological Framework For Analysing Temporalities In Urban Project Management

1.1. Filling The Gap In Research On Temporalities Of Urban Project Management

The temporalities of the city have been the subject of extensive research in recent years (Abram 2014; Dobson & Parker, 2024), but this research has mainly focused on the daily functioning of cities and their uses (Wunderlich, 2013; Nemeškal et al., 2020; Gwiazdzinski et al., 2016; Gwiazdzinski, 2022). The temporality of urban production has rarely been addressed. When considered, it is most often approached through professional temporalities (Roy, 2026). If we look at urban projects, we see that English-language literature pays little attention to temporalities of urban project management. In France, as in other countries – particularly Italy, with several major urban theorist figures including Bernardo Secchi – the world of architecture revolves around two approaches to projects. The first, associated with Boudon (2014), focuses on analysing the design process and its relationship with architectural production. The second, which seeks to define the optimal way to build a city, claims the term "urban project" (Tomas, 1995). In France, Christian Devillers and Ariella Masboungi are major figures in this field, alongside a small generation of urban architects, most of whom are now gradually leaving the professional scene. Their works pay little attention to the temporalities of urban project management.

Our approach is more closely aligned with management science research on the project model (Arab, 2004; Bourdin et al. 2024a), even though they don't study urban projects. The founding reference is Christophe Midler's work (1995), whose theory and method (the clinical approach to management) insists on temporalities. In this respect, our perspective is closer to certain strands of management studies (Lundin et al., 2015) than to urban planning approaches. Bent Flyvbjerg & Dan Gardner (2023) also highlight the importance of temporalities in the management of different types of megaprojects, including several Olympic Games projects.

1.2. Forging New Tools

To study the temporalities of urban project management, we sought to capture the collective dimension of the Games' preparation and their legacies and to offer an overview of operations, rather than a fragmented view. To do so, we built a new research tool, the 'timeline', providing a comprehensive, but not simplified, picture of the collective narrative of the preparations for the Paris Olympic Games, as recorded throughout our long-term investigation.

Describing a megaproject is no simple task. Too often, we fall victim to the streetlight syndrome focusing primarily on what is already known, particularly through public statistics. Alternatively, we fall into the trap of Zeno's paradox trap: like Achilles, who could never catch up with the tortoise, we can understand the consequences of processes, but not the processes themselves. A project is at least as much a process as it is content. In urban production, this process is always complex and involves a multitude of actors. It is therefore often much more difficult to describe than in industrial projects. Narrative can, in such instances, appear to be a solution insofar as it presents chains and interactions, allowing, for example, the identification of weak ties (in the sense of Granovetter (1973), and path dependencies (David, 2007).

But the narrative is always that of a speaker. Communication produces 'meta-narratives' which become objects of study rather than analytical tools. The only solution would be to compare the narratives of different actors. This was our starting point; and we sought to improve it. While comparing the narratives of different actors allowed us to reconstruct a history (which is itself an artefact), it also provided us with a wealth of other information that could be incorporated into the analysis of the process; thereby diversifying the possible modes of interpretation.

From that perspective, our timeline of the Paris Olympic project compiled the main events and activities reported by the interviewees, along with technical, legislative, and regulatory documentation and press coverage. This timeline highlights the role of the various actors, their level of involvement, and their interactions.

1.3. A "Grounded Theory" Approach Of The Temporalities

The timeline was designed to build "mid-range theories" (Merton 1957). Based on empirical observation of a specific situation, we constructed theoretical propositions that can be extrapolated to other contexts. Case studies and comparative approaches make this type of theorisation possible. This differs from a strictly monographic approach (as in community studies), which seeks depth of analysis but often has limited capacity for generalisation. Our approach gives primacy to fieldwork. The construction of facts is not treated as a preliminary stage but as a research problem in its own right.

Traditional methodologies - including qualitative ones - often rely on existent literature to define a repertoire of facts and questions that can be mobilised in advance. However, when it comes to studying situations that are uncertain, undergoing rapid change, or cases that have been analysed superficially, such an approach risks falling into the streetlight syndrome. In such cases, we can turn to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which, despite its age, remains widely used: the aim is to develop medium-range theories by working with the actors involved to construct objects and questions. Here, notions such as Olympic facilities, Olympic projects, legacy, and others are not treated as given data but as problems that need to be transformed into objects, questioning widely used concepts as 'transition', 'adaptation', or "inclusion.

We consider the current situation of urban production particularly conducive to methodological approaches that are compatible with grounded theory. We therefore drew on this perspective to shape our method. Our analysis is based on a series of 62 interviews conducted since 2020 with actors across the entire production system of 'Olympic objects'. We interviewed a wide range of stakeholders, including national and local public authorities, large and small private operators, consulting firms, and architectural agencies. These interviews also involved the main organisers of the Olympic Games: SOLIDEO, the company responsible for coordinating the Olympic works, and Paris 2024, the organising committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It was also the case that, in such a lengthy investigation, the timeline helped us manage the large volume of information and documents collected by requiring us to identify and select key events and actions within the constrained timeframe of the Olympic project.

Beginning with a very open-ended question (e.g., "What do you consider to be the most important developments since our last interview?"), we allowed the actors to construct their own narratives. Most interviews were conducted by several researchers, enabling systematic cross-checking of interpretations — an essential safeguard in a qualitative approach.

Table 1 – Empirical Material Used

Types of structures	**Services/Departments**	**Number of interviews**	**Cumulative time**	**Periods of administration**
Olympic Programme Supervisor (SOLIDEO)	General Management, Innovation and Strategy Department, Programmes Department, Athletes' Village Department, Promotion and Legacy Department, etc.	43	53:45	November 2020–December 2025
Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games (Paris 2024)	Venues and Infrastructure Department	6	7:30	January 2021–December 2025
Interministerial Delegation for the Olympic and Paralympic Games and other government departments	DIJOP, Regional and Interdepartmental Directorate for the Environment, Planning and Transport (DRIEAT)	3	3:45	January 2021–December 2025
Local authorities	JOP EPT Plaine Commune Directorate, EPT Paris Terres d'Envol General Directorate, JOP 2024 Delegation Directorate, Departmental Council 93, Head of the Olympic Mission, Greater Paris Metropolis, Chief of Staff to the Mayor of Paris, Head of the Sports and Leisure Department, Departmental Council 93, Head of the Local Sports Department, City of Paris, Deputy Director of Services, City of Saint-Ouen, Director of Commerce, City of Saint-Denis, etc.	23	23	January 2021 - December 2025
Public and private developers and architecture agencies	- Development Department, Plaine Commune Development, Nexity Complex Projects and Competitions Department, CAO Bouygues Project Manager, Environmental Excellence Project Manager, Icade	12	3	January 2021 - December 2025
Other stakeholders	Caisse des Dépôts, Regional Directorate 93&95, Paris Urban Planning Agency (APUR) Directorate	4	5	January 2021 - December 2025

1.4. A Work In Progress Throughout the Investigation

As the investigation progressed, we gradually stabilised the timeline design (codes, figures, representation rules). Initially, we considered it to be somewhat artisanal and, because of this, we first assigned it an experimental status, mainly because of its form and its uses.

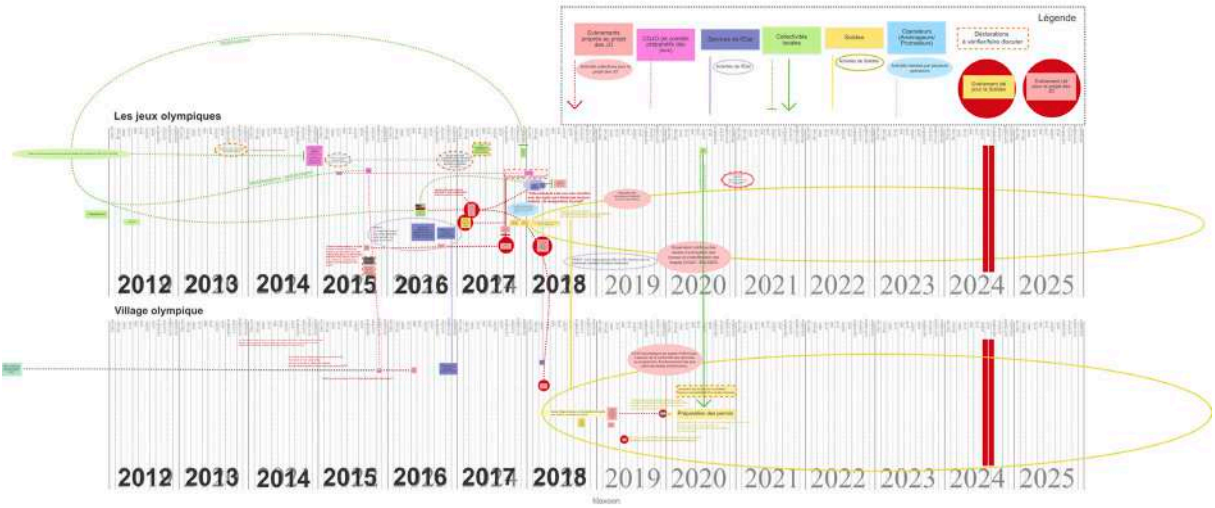

Figure 1. Timeline Under Development, October 2021

> *The timeline was deliberately presented in a rudimentary manner, bearing visible traces of its progressive construction (years added in bold, overlapping arrows, and so on.). Like the Olympic project itself, it was conceived as an evolving process. This first version, developed between December 2020 and June 2021, was intended to support discussion and revision through exchanges with researchers and project stakeholders. It was designed as a tool for constructing the analytical narrative of the Olympic project, a narrative that would be progressively refined and consolidated (Excerpt from the Coubertin Report, October 2021).*

We tested several versions and representations in order to find the most suitable graphic solutions for the different types of information featured on the timeline, such as laws, procedures, news, and organisations. This information covers a wide range of topics, projects, and activities across different scales. The tool, therefore, had to be robust enough to be shared between researchers while also being sufficiently clear to support exchanges with stakeholders. The choice of digital technology proved to be the most complex issue, as we had to rely on generic digital collaboration software rather than software specifically designed for the research. Due to the software's poor ergonomics, stakeholders could not manipulate the tool directly or modify the timeline in real time. As a result, we had to revise and update it after each session.

1.5. How To Read The Timeline

The timeline presented in Figure 5, is the final version. . It is structured into two parts: the overall timeline of the Paris Olympic project (upper section) and the timeline relating to the construction of the Olympic Village (lower section). The information is organised into three categories. Rectangles indicate specific events (e.g., signatures, inaugurations), while ovals represent the activities of the various stakeholders. The different colours identify the different actors involved.

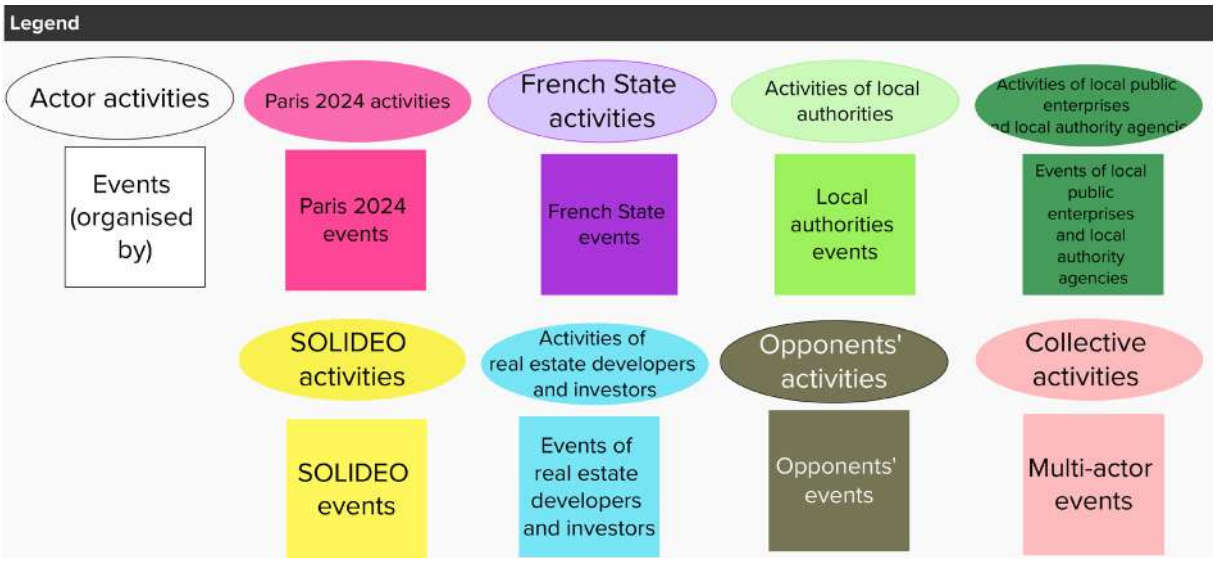

Figure 2. Extract from the timeline legend

Red circles highlight key milestones that triggered action sequences, such as the designation of Paris as the host city (2017) or the adoption of the Olympic Law (2018).

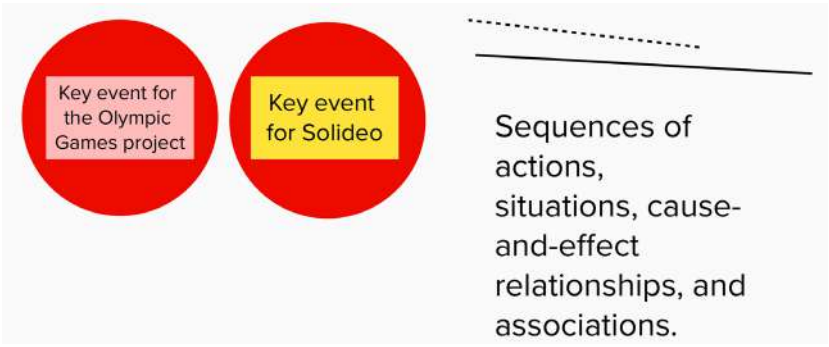

Figure 3. Another excerpt from the timeline legend

Connectors indicate sequences where causal relationships can be established. This was the case in the sequence of land sales, from the launch of the consultation process to the sale to developers.

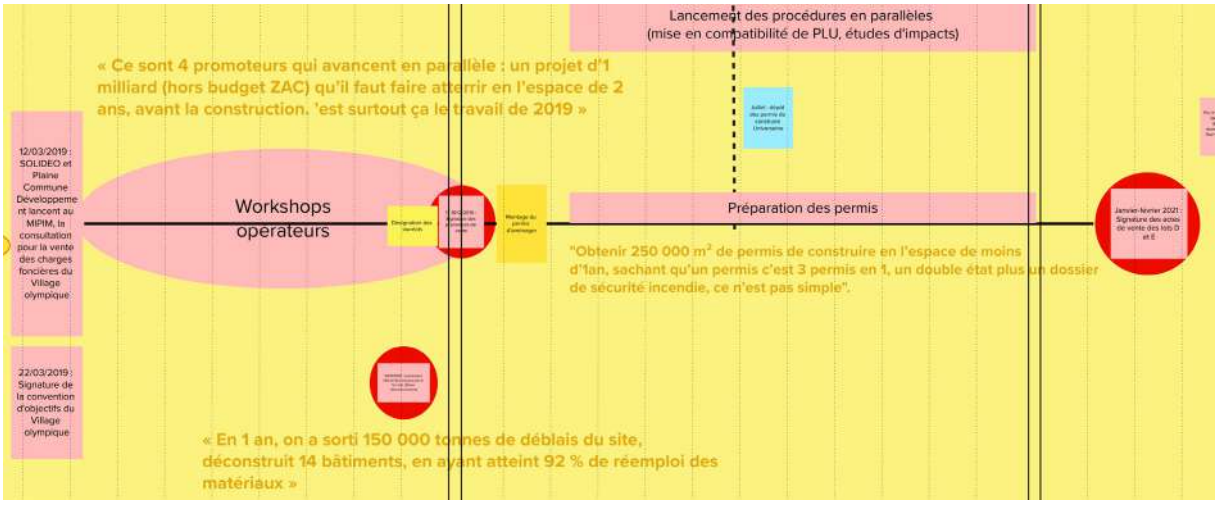

Figure 4. Sequence of plot sales

Finally, the size of labels reflects the duration of actions rather than their importance. This dual timeline can be interpreted in four main ways.

(1) A global reading provides an overview of the Olympic operational system. The two red vertical bars marking the dates of the Games serve as a central reference point for all actors, and functioning as an immovable deadline that structures the entire system. The articulation between the upper and lower sections highlights the links that exist between different scales of action.

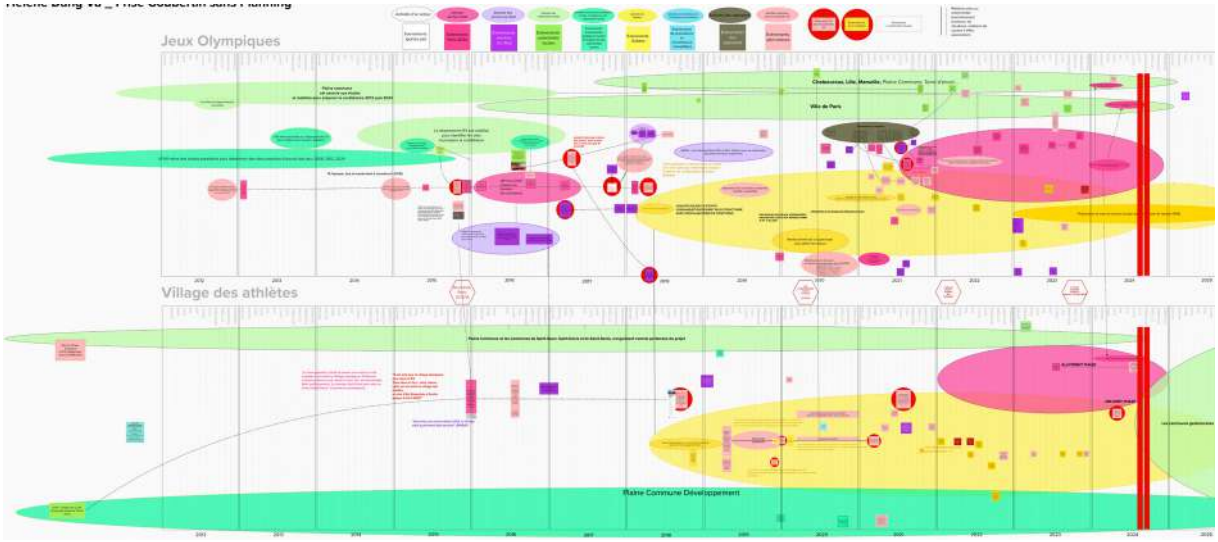

Figure 5. Progress of the calendar, 25-05-20

(2) A horizontal reading allows us to follow the temporal development of projects, actors, and processes, either as linear sequences or as layered dynamics. It highlights continuities, overlaps, and possible dependencies between project trajectories.

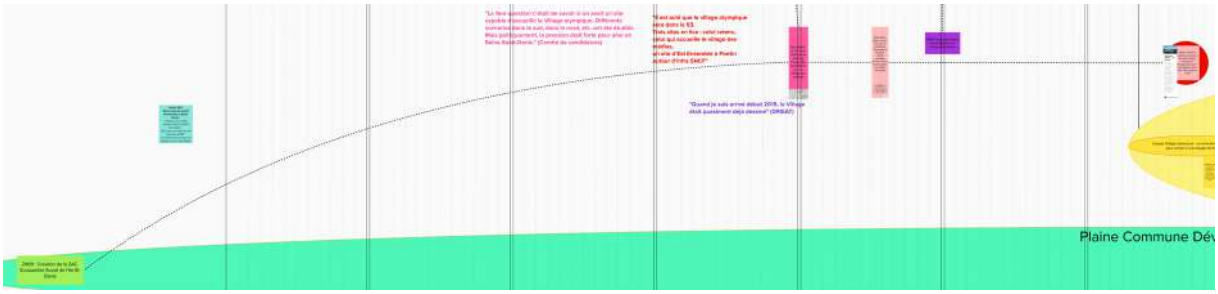

Figure 6. Horizontal reading

(3) A vertical reading captures the simultaneity of actions. By observing the timeline at a given moment, it becomes possible to identify parallel processes and the coordination of multiple action systems operating concurrently. For example, Figure 7 illustrates the deployment of Olympic venues on the Paris 2024 site (a process referred to as 'venueisation') during the last six months of preparations.

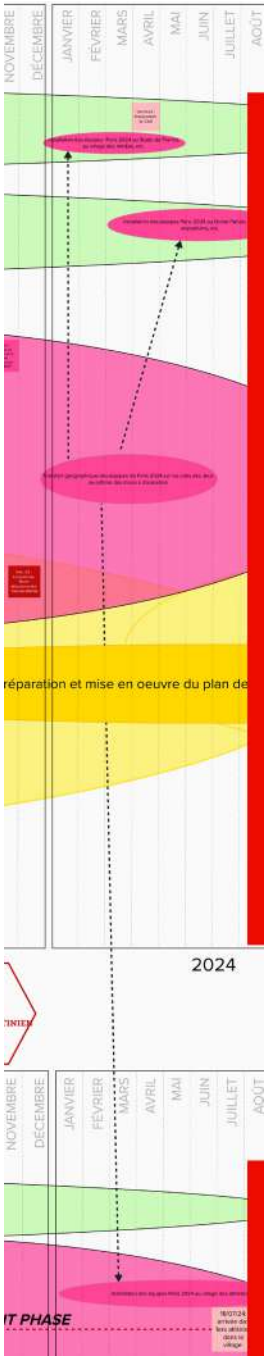

Figure 7. Vertical reading

(4) Finally, nodal reading reveals periods of heightened activity. The timeline is not uniformly dense but structured around moments of intensity, such as the awarding of the Games in 2017, and the acceleration of operations from 2021 onwards. These nodes represent concentrated interactions, decisions, and critical adjustments within the project.

The first node appears around the time that the Games were awarded to Paris in September 2017: this part of the timeline contains numerous action bubbles, some relating to the preparation of the bid and others to

the implementation of the project (drafting of the Olympic law, establishment of governance, selection of the developer consortiums, etc).

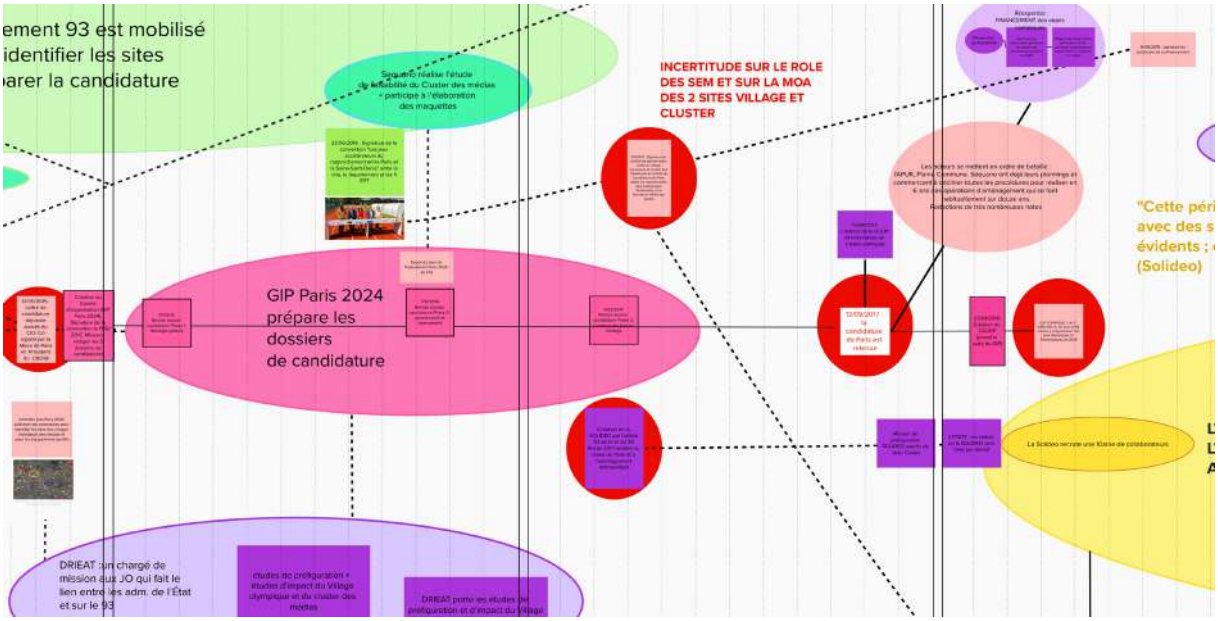

Figure 8. Node 1

A second critical moment emerged in early 2021, with public demonstrations around the Olympic facilities and the launch of the Paris Olympic Games communication campaign, which marked the beginning of broader media coverage of the Games. Although the event itself was still three years away, its realisation was becoming tangible to the public, arousing both hope and controversy. It was also a period of intense activity for operational stakeholders, who were working hard to secure construction sites and, above all, their schedules.

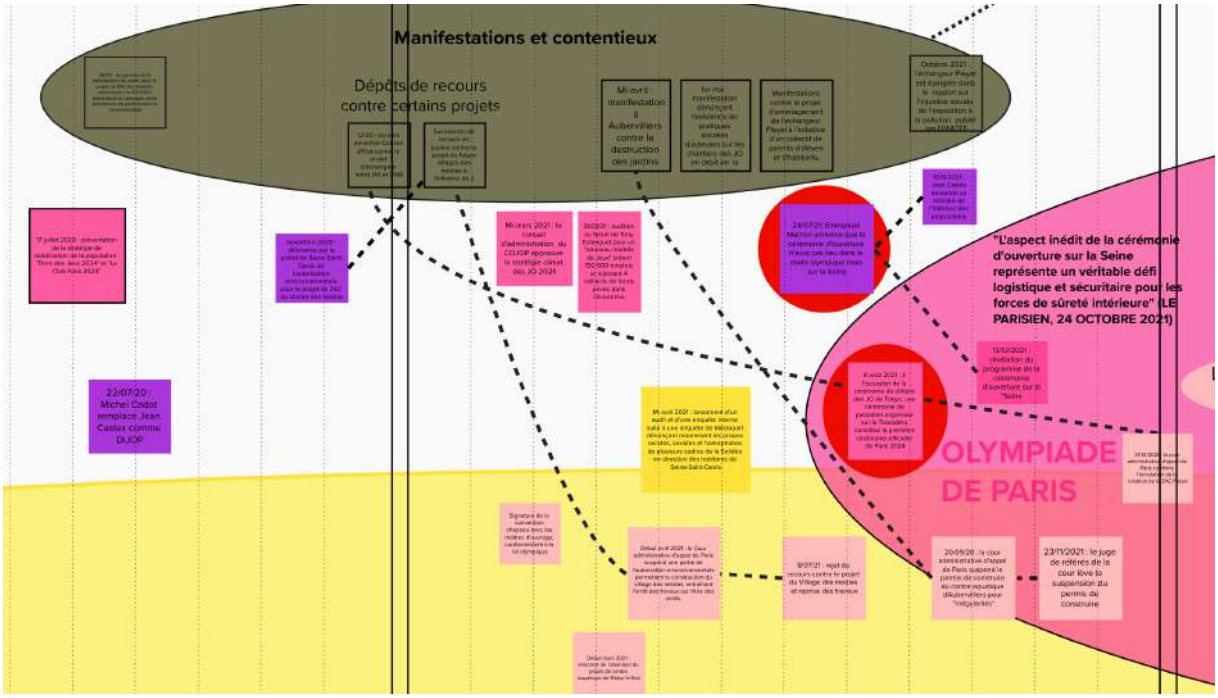

Figure 9. Node 2

2. Results: Managing The Temporalities Of The Project

2.1. The Timeline Highlights The Dynamics Of Action Systems

The timeline achieves two things that conventional analysis of action systems cannot: it shows the position of action systems over time, and it allows discussion of their interdependencies as well as temporal planning.

A Representation Of Action Systems Over Time

Research on action systems (in all fields) generally omits the temporal variable. In contrast, our timeline allows action systems to be situated in time and analysed according to their importance in the project at different periods. Some systems only concern part of a project: they transform or reconfigure themselves as the project progresses, gaining or losing importance. Several action systems can coexist; they can complement and interact with one another or, conversely, oppose one another.

Our timeline highlights the intertwining and overlapping of actions within the same overall project. In particular, there is a clear distinction between the action systems specific to the bid for the Games (before 2017), those relating to the construction of sports infrastructure (from 2018 onwards), and those specific to the event itself (which became more prominent after the Tokyo Games in 2021). These action systems were distinct and succeeded one another over time. They overlapped and were interlinked, but were not necessarily managed by the same actors. For example, the Parisian agency APUR (Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme), responsible for general and operational studies for the City of Paris, played a central role during the bid phase but diminished in importance during subsequent phases.

There were also relatively autonomous action subsystems that progressed at their own pace, with timetables more or less controlled by the actors steering the project as a whole. For example, there was an action subsystem for each sports facility (the Olympic swimming pool, the renovation of the Stade de France, each gymnasium in the municipalities hosting training sessions, and so on), with one or more project managers at the heart of the action in each case. The "workshops" organised by SOLIDEO with the developers of the "Athletes' Village" constituted a relatively autonomous mechanism within the action system for the production of facilities and infrastructure. They were regular meetings between project owners, architects, and developers over the course of a year, and sought to finalise the architectural plans as well as concluding the sale of building plots by the SOLIDEO to the developers.

SOLIDEO's social responsibility plan provides another example of a quasi-autonomous action system. Implemented according to a schedule linked to negotiations with employees, it enabled the anticipation of staff reduction procedures after the Games. This project, which was carried out in parallel and independently of the production of facilities, nevertheless had a decisive influence on SOLIDEO's strategy for preparing for this transition.

There were also territorial action systems at the level of the Games' host communities: for example, for the City of Paris, where issues of international visibility were significant and where the transformation of public space constituted a major political challenge. Another example was the Plaine Commune, the inter-municipal authority north of Paris where the Athletes' Village was located, which faced the challenge of reorienting the urban development of an area characterised by significant social difficulties. At a more local level, there were also specific action subsystems for infrastructure production in Saint-Ouen, and Saint-Denis; two municipalities within Plaine Commune Territory, where the configurations of action and the associated issues differed significantly.

The complexity of the Olympic project stems from the fact that it brings together systems of action that are at least partially independent and operate on very different territorial scales (Bourdin et al. 2024b). The same actor/s may be central in one subsystem of action while remaining peripheral in other overlapping subsystems. SOLIDEO, for instance, was responsible for delivering permanent facilities but was a secondary actor in the organisation of the event. Similarly, SOLIDEO did not manage all equipment systems; for example,

the Olympic Aquatic Centre was managed by the Métropole du Grand Paris[5], while the Porte de la Chapelle Arena was managed by the City of Paris. However, In the event of delays, SOLIDEO could also have replaced the contracting authorities. In this sense, the challenge for SOLIDEO in the production of sports infrastructure (and similarly for Paris 2024 in the organisation of the Games) was not to do everything itself, but to manage the temporal uncertainties of all the action systems in which it was not the lead agency.

Finally, the timeline illustrates the temporal dynamics of the evolution of the various action systems, indicating their periods of activity and inactivity. For example, the action system for organising the event, mainly led by Paris 2024, grew in importance until the event itself. It then declined very rapidly after the Games, when Paris 2024 was dissolved. Similarly, the workshops, essential at the time as a means of dialogue with developers, ended with the sale of the building plots. Their existence was very limited in time. Likewise, SOLIDEO set up a site management system during the construction phase (Olympic Village site, media cluster, etc.), which was active only when site-specific coordination issues arose. The timeline thus shows that there is no single method for managing project time, but rather several which varied by the timing and specific issues of each phase of the project.

Interdependencies And Temporal Planning Of Action

The timeline also highlights the dynamics of the sequence of actions over time., and thus allows us to address the forms of articulation that may arise between action systems. Indeed, each system of action has its own trajectory, but temporal articulations sometimes exist between them, and the timeline allows us to formulate hypotheses about this. The temporal succession of actions underlies numerous temporal interdependencies. For example, the organisation of events presupposes the delivery of equipment, which means that the system of actions relating to the production of equipment can block the organisation of events, even if the actors involved are broadly different.

Production processes can sometimes be irreversible, due to interdependencies between systems of action (Midler, 1995). For example, a renegotiation of the Games' financial model took place in 2018, following the designation of Paris as the host city for the 2024 Games. This renegotiation, conducted by a small number of actors, took place very quickly; notably through a financial audit. However, its main result was to firmly define the content of the equipment projects and their mode of production, thereby limiting the possibilities of turning back[6].

Peripheral action systems can sometimes play a decisive role at specific moments. For example, the DRIEAT, the State's technical representative, was responsible for the administrative monitoring of urban planning procedures. However, the DRIEAT was not a central player in the project and did not steer many actions. Nevertheless, its role was crucial, since a failure in the administrative monitoring of procedures could have blocked the entire Olympic project. This is one of the major characteristics of the Games: any element can create a problem along the critical path to their realisation, and the project as a whole therefore depends on numerous action subsystems that have nothing to do with the Games themselves.

We also note that the course of the action is punctuated by events, government decisions, court rulings, and the awarding of contracts—all of which are consequences of the action, but also shape it, give it media attention, alter the positions of the actors, and so on. These events may simultaneously involve several action subsystems, thereby linking them together. The timeline also highlights the impact of external events (such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine), whose effects, although not immediate, can be considerable.

Finally, the timeline reveals that the project had a highly fragmented organisation, with different systems and subsystems of action. Fragmentations that became even more pronounced when examining the project over

5 The Métropole du Grand Paris is a political body that acts as an urban authority but remains less powerful than the City of Paris.

6 For example, these renegotiations led to the planned 17,000-seat Olympic swimming pool being replaced by the Olympic Aquatics Center, which has a capacity of 5,000 seats, given its limited use after the Games. For the Games, the swimming events were therefore split between two venues: the Aquatics Center (in the north) and the Paris La Défense Arena (in the western part of the Paris region).

time. In this context, the overall management of the project consisted of organising the links between these subsystems of action. To this end, the project managers designed and implemented several specific tools, which we present below.

2.2. Creating A Common Cognitive Framework: A Major Challenge

In such fragmented project organisation, the timeline allows us to better understand the temporal dimension of coordination that exists between action systems, and in particular to characterise the horizontal (the narrative of narratives) and vertical (the situation at a given moment) dimensions of the process. However, it takes little account of one essential element: the significant heterogeneity of the timeframes within which the various actors operate; timeframes that must, nevertheless, converge. This heterogeneity has a considerable influence on the organisation of the system.

Whether we are dealing with industrial projects, major infrastructure projects, or urban projects, we are constantly confronted with a diversity of actors who do not share the same timeframes - ie, the same deadlines and stages -, the same ways of perceiving and measuring the passage of time, or more generally, the same frames of reference. But for event professionals, everything hinges on the smooth running of competitions and ceremonies. Before we prepare, and after, everything is over. While the teams that set up venues are mere spectators on the opening day of an event, for those who produce the event, the opening day is the only moment that truly matters: everyone is constrained by the opening ceremony date, but not in the same way. An event is prepared, organised, and takes place. Once it is over, all that remains is the temporal of the next event (e.g, the next games). It is the event programme that structures the actions of those involved (athletes or otherwise), not what happens afterwards. As a result, the temporality (of professionals) of the event is largely disconnected from reality and insensitive to the territory's temporality. If we accept that temporality is defined by measurements, benchmarks, and objectives, the temporality of the event remains fundamentally structured by 'highlights', whether during the preparation phase or during the Games, with the main competitions and the opening and closing ceremonies. This temporality is more akin to a journey between a series of challenges (Martuccelli, 2015), but the dimension of the flow of time loses some of its structuring character – even if it does not disappear entirely.

The temporality of sport has an international dimension, with major events organised on a global scale. Two main principles – championships and records – strongly structure the flow of time in sport. This system also has national and local dimensions. For the Games, athletes' preparation begins well in advance and influences their personal schedules as well as those of the various competitions. Time constraints apply not only to the Games, but to all sporting events. Sporting temporality is thus largely structured by a calendar in which the Olympic Games serve as the main highlight, alongside many other, less important events. The temporality of the territory – the territories and communities that manage them – is characterised in several ways. First and foremost, it involves ensuring the day-to-day functioning of the territory, dealing with issues such as nuisances, construction logistics, employment, and dialogue with the population. The Games can find their place there, as a source of problems, inconveniences, jobs, or equipment, without necessarily being the centre of attention. The daily life of the territory is also marked by this moment of realisation, that of the 'Olympic celebration'. The aim is to ensure that as many residents as possible feel involved and participate, even if they do not attend the competitions. Hence, the importance of 'Fan Zones', which allow residents (and tourists) to join in the celebrations for free, close to home.

This temporality is also long-term. With regard to the Paris Games, most of the 70 sites concerned (almost all of already existed)[7] had minimal impacts on the development of their territory. However, those built or restored in Seine-Saint-Denis, North of Paris, served as a lever for public policy (for example, by promoting children's swimming) and are part of a local development strategy that began more than 25 years ago and will continue for a long time to come. The temporality of territories is also marked by electoral calendars, which differ from the sporting calendar with its peaks and troughs. The temporality of the project (regarding the construction of facilities) is visible in the chronology. Initially, it is led by governance logic and the intensity

7 One exception is the Adidas Arena at Porte de la Chapelle, designed as a catalyst for transformation in a neighbourhood facing serious difficulties. Outside Paris, Châteauroux, Lille and, above all, Marseille have benefited from new facilities, particularly in the hospitality sector.

of the design phases. As it progresses, it increasingly follows an engineering logic and a risk-management approach, particularly through the development of the capacity to decide at the right moment to activate a "Plan B" for a project that, although not doomed to failure, presents certain risk. Three factors reinforce this complexity: the number of sites, working in a dense urban environment with the logistical constraints of construction sites, and the significant attention paid to the long-term consequences (legacy). Finally, the project's timeframe combines control over sequences with the capacity to anticipate. However, this overview suffices for illustrative purposes. These different timeframes exist elsewhere, but it is rare for them to interact with such intensity and complexity.

Each temporality has its own constraints, and although imperfect, they remain significant. Even in large urban projects, such diversity is unusual: certain temporalities dominate, and they are rarely heterogeneous. In particular, an event's temporality is rarely present, notably because of the importance attached to the opening date of the given event. At the same time, sporting constraints apply globally to all Olympic disciplines (which is exceptional), while regional constraints are complicated by the multiplicity of venues, and so on. In short, everyone is subject to the constraints of the Games' dates, but without a common cognitive framework. Hence, the importance of a coordination model that is capable of articulating these different timeframes and integrating them, at least partially, into a shared temporal framework.

2.3. Strengthened Instruments To Structure The Common Cognitive Framework

This coordination model relies on instruments that, for the most part, are not original and are commonly used in large-scale projects, but whose intensity is significantly greater. Indeed, the objective is not merely to establish coordination processes or standards, but to construct a common cognitive framework- a shared vision - including, in particular, a shared timeframe that goes well beyond the alignment mechanisms mentioned above. In other words, the different stages involved make the project's organisation more abstract, in contrast to the usual management of a construction site or even a megaproject, with its inherent uncertainties. The following examples provide an overview of the mechanisms that structure this common cognitive framework.

The first set of instruments are intended to mitigate risks that could compromise the delivery of Olympic facilities within the allotted time frame. This was the objective of the 'supervision' mechanism implemented by SOLIDEO to monitor the construction of permanent facilities and to integrate risk management into the production of Olympic facilities. This system was based on 'target agreements' signed with each project owner. Concluded between 2018 and 2021, these agreements defined the objectives to be achieved by the facility manager and stipulated that compliance with these targets, particularly regarding cost and schedule control, was a condition for the release of SOLIDEO funds.

"Project reviews" were also introduced to enable SOLIDEO to monitor programme progress. The aim was to identify discrepancies between the project's progress and the initial programme and to define corrective actions: either an action plan to return to the initial programme trajectory, or an alternative solution in the event of irrecoverable delays. These reviews could also include a forward-looking dimension, particularly in the event of legal risks.

Paris 2024 also developed a set of instruments which were designed to prevent risks that could have jeopardised the success of the Games. Some of these tools were designed to manage the tensions that arose between the time constraints faced by Paris 2024 and economic markets. This tension first became apparent in late 2021 and early 2022, with the launch of the tendering process for preparing the competition venues. The selection of candidate companies was partly guided by the desire to minimise the risk of default shortly before the opening ceremony. Given the scale of the Games, organisers anticipated potential market saturation and the absence of fallback solutions in certain sectors.

This desire was reflected in several practices that were implemented by Paris 2024 when awarding contracts for the Games: collecting advance information on candidates to assess their capacity to absorb increased workloads; distributing contracts between several service providers to spread risk; and favouring proposals which offered the strongest guarantees of meeting the schedule, even when competing bids were cheaper.

A second category of instruments aimed to optimise the duration of interventions contributing to the preparation of the Games and to generate time savings. These included adapting legal frameworks. The desire to act quickly was evident in the law of 26 March 2018, known as the Olympic Law, which includes various measures designed to accelerate development projects such as: adapting the rules on public information and participation (shorter consultation periods and the use of electronic public consultations); and creating a "dual status" permit which sought to reduce the time taken to process building permits. These changes were implemented by accelerating administrative procedures, particularly at the prefectural level.

Another tool that was used to save time in preparing for the Games was the use of internal organisational structures. This was the objective of the restructuring carried out by Paris 2024 approximately eighteen months before the opening ceremony; shifting from a functional organisation to a site-based organisation (venues), followed by the geographical transfer of teams to the sites once the facilities were available. This reorganisation, which coincided with a change in the departments' activities – from the launch of contracts to the operational configuration of the sites for the Games –sought to optimise time management by simplifying coordination and risk managements).

The local host authorities also set up specific bodies to ensure the success of the Games in their territory. These included the Directorate-General for the Olympic and Paralympic Games which was created by the City of Paris, and the JOP Mission which was set up by Plaine Commune EPT. These relatively small units were positioned above departmental structures, and aimed to streamline decision-making processes while maintaining internal administrative balances. For example, they set up ad hoc committees to involve the departments concerned with the project in the decision-making process, without replacing them. This example illustrates the advantages of comitology, which was widely used in the organisation of the Paris Games as a mode of governance to promote consensus and coordination[8].

Controlling the schedules and timetables of service providers was another lever identified that generated time savings. In most cases, the Games organisers used this method to address the problem of desynchronisation between the project stakeholders. For instance, during the 2022 tendering phase, certain contracts were postponed when requirements were too uncertain, and during the implementation phase, the identification – or anticipation – of a delay in the work could lead to temporary collaboration with the project owner. Early delivery may also be justified when the works include additional infrastructure, such as the International Broadcasting Centre, which the Games' TV producer, Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS), needed to take possession of early enough to finalise its layout (the addition of extra studios, and so on).

In some cases, the control of schedules reflected the organisers' desire to save time by optimising the organisation of the service providers' work. This partly explains SOLIDEO's decision to structure the consultation process for the marketing of the Olympic Village's land charges as a workshop. Conducted over several months in 2019, this consultation enabled the programme to be laid out in record time and move into the pre-operational phase without delay. The organisation of service providers' schedules was also a valuable tool for Paris 2024 when it came to maintaining a high pace of production; both for the teams deployed on site (through reverse planning and countdown tools) and for the functional departments responsible for coordinating the service providers working on all the Olympic facilities. In addition to their other uses, these tools were designed to remove the various players from their own time frames and place them in a common time frame or cognitive framework. While these instruments were not new in themselves, their combination and intensity in this context were distinctive.

8 Comitology aims to prevent disagreements from delaying project implementation by maintaining relationships between participants. The SOLIDEO programme committee illustrates this: it reviews requests for changes and fosters buy-in, while in practice limiting modifications to preserve the initial plan and deadlines.

Conclusion

The analysis presented here focuses on the temporal dynamics of the Olympic programme. Therefore, our attention has been directed less towards material outputs and more towards the organisational forms and instruments developed by the actors, particularly SOLIDEO, as the general supervisor of operations. By looking at the Olympic programme for the Paris Games as a constellation of interdependent projects operating according to a non-negotiable timetable, we have shifted the analytical perspective. The project - here understood as a programme - is no longer analysed as a defined space, but as a configuration of multi-level systems of action, held together by specific coordination mechanisms and shared time frames. What is particularly striking in the case of the Paris Olympic programme is that, unlike the pathologies identified by Hall (1980) in large-scale development projects, there are very few discrepancies between intentions, progress and implementation. The few programme changes were tightly controlled, resulting in what could be described as "managed slippages". This article has sought to explain how uncertainty and misalignment were contained and managed, even though they are not anomalies but rather constituent characteristics of complex urban projects (Flyvbjerg, 2023).

Our research first demonstrated the importance of continuously producing common frames of reference across fragmented actor worlds (Healey, 1997). Although the programme proved relatively stable - even though some authors emphasise the importance of programme adaptability (Ramirez-Cobo and Zepf, 2018) - this was partly because it was stabilised by repeated interactions, deliberative mechanisms, and negotiated routines. The key issue was not the optimisation of a predefined design, but the ability to absorb uncertainty, organise interdependencies and maintain compatible trajectories over time. In other words, control was not exercised over the content of the project, but over the conditions for its temporal coordination. Here, coordination was made possible by repeated negotiation sessions - from the preliminary workshops organised by the promoters to the dense comitology and systematic reporting system throughout the production period. These mechanisms allowed actors to test, stabilise and revise common temporal assumptions, thus enabling collective action in contexts where authority was dispersed, and where Olympic objectives do not serve the same horizons for everyone. Such observations and understanding led to conceptualising the urban project as a temporal coordination mechanism, which consider that the determining characteristic of the project is neither its scale, nor its form, nor even its ambition, but its ability to organise heterogeneous temporalities — political, technical, financial, regulatory, event-related — within a common horizon of action.

From this perspective, the Paris 2024 Olympic programme is not an exceptional or abnormal case. The management of co-temporalities is, in fact, a problem inherent in the system of producing complex projects. With this in mind, we can assume that as urban action systems tend to multiply and interdependencies intensify (Abudjer Ochoa, 2025), the ability to build and maintain shared temporal reference systems could become one of the core skills of urban project developers. This suggests that the successful implementation of an urban project depends largely on stakeholders' ability to build a system to coordinate the multiple timescales of urban action.

For the Paris Games, the works supervisor ensured that this system of temporal alignment was in place. However, one question remains: was this the only reason for the project›s success? As we understand from the survey, what was coordinated here was not only the action itself, but also the meaning given to that action. Belief systems and urban imaginaries undeniably played a role in aligning the temporal representations, priorities and horizons of the actors involved. From the moment the event was secured, it established itself as a meta-event (Hiller, 2000) with a symbolic significance that far exceeded the mere completion of the Olympic facilities. The stakeholders, therefore, did not just coordinate around a schedule and operational objectives: they were also caught up in a regime of symbolic legitimation (Suchman, 1995) which helped to make the programme both desirable and, ultimately, relatively uncontested. In line with Healey's work on shared meanings (1997), we understand the importance of actors' adherence to the values of Olympism in this alignment. The promise of global hyper-media coverage and the narrative of 'legacy' functioned as normative references that stabilised the action. These symbolic registers - from the 'Olympic truce' to the torch relay - constituted a form of mobilising mythology (Flyvbjerg, 2023), which acted as a political and moral resource to legitimise the commitment of the territories and maintain the alignment of actors over time. They produced what could be described as the symbolic surplus of the project: the Games were not just a development programme, but a higher cause that reconfigured local priorities and reinforced collective temporal discipline.

In this sense, these belief systems contributed to governance through adherence (Innes and Booher, 2018), reducing resistance, facilitating cooperation, and helping to stabilise the timelines of the Olympic programme. The collaborative rationality observed in the organisation of the Paris Games thus confirms that, in complex urban projects, it cannot be reduced to either technical efficiency or formal hierarchy (Innes and Booher, 2018). So, what was the recipe for success for the Paris Games? A great deal of engineering, and a pinch of magic, enabled all stakeholders to align to a shared project timeline.

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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.

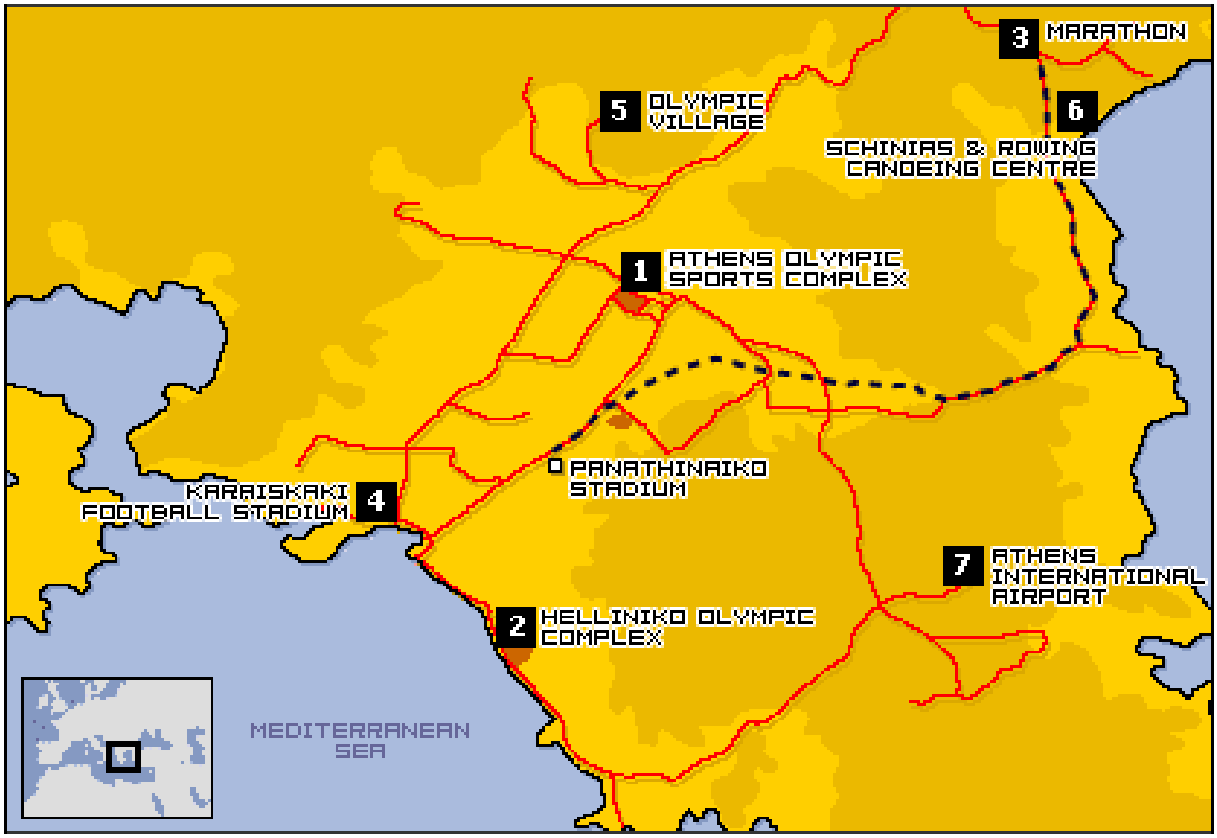

Figure 1: Athens 2004 Venues Guide. Source: BBC SPORT | Olympics 2004 | Athens Venues Guide

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.

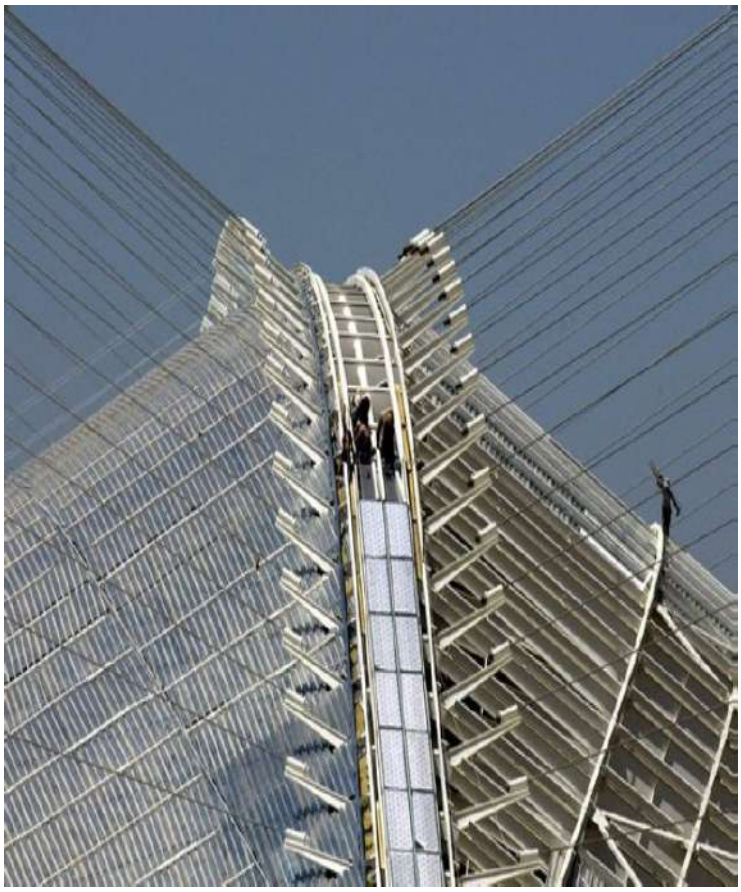

Figure 3: Athens Olympic Stadium. Constructions in the steel dome after its closure in September 2023.
Source: *Monocle Minute*, 04/10/2023

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.

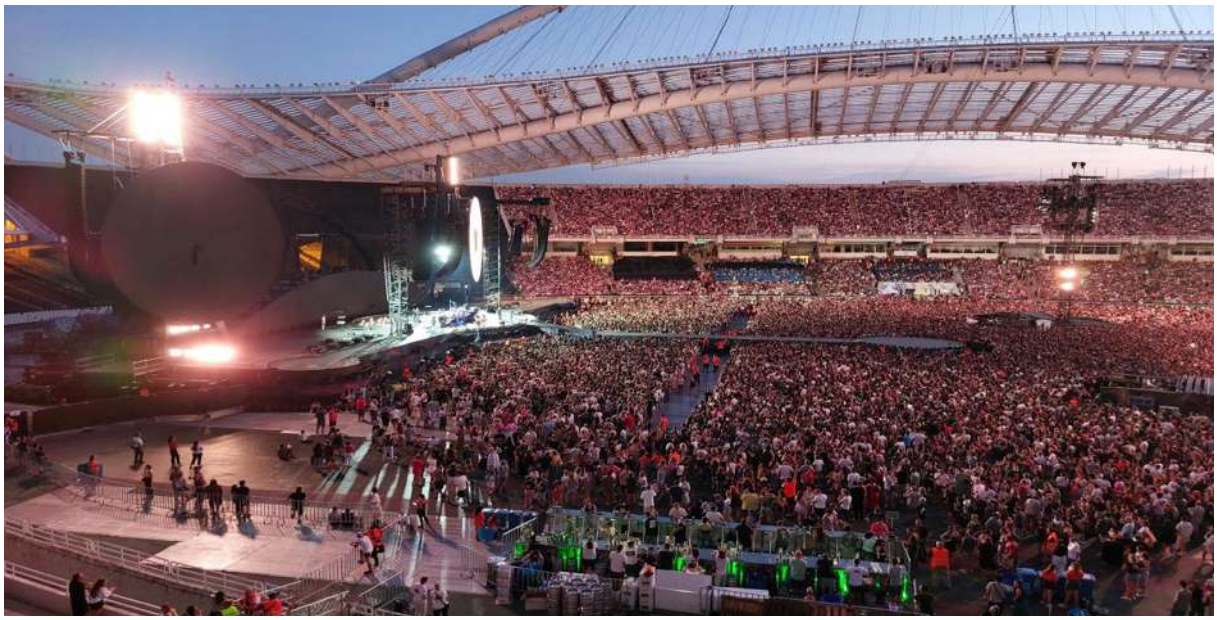

Figure 12: Athens Olympic Stadium, 6 June 2024, Coldplay concert. Source: author

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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SPATIAL PLANNING AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE APPLICATION OF THE OLYMPIC AGENDA 2020: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARIS 2024 AND MILANO CORTINA 2026

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Abstract

Growing concerns over the sustainability of sports mega-events have reduced the number of cities willing to host them. In response, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) launched Agenda 2020 in 2014 to reform the extant Olympic bidding process. It aims to encourage the use of existing or temporary venues and adaptive spatial strategies which minimize environmental and financial burdens.

This paper investigates how Agenda 2020 has reshaped the spatial and environmental dimensions of Olympic planning by comparing Paris 2024 and Milano Cortina 2026; the first Summer and Winter Games fully organized under this framework. Through comparative case study analysis, the paper examines the relationship that exists between global sustainability goals and local planning practices, focusing on the spatial logics, legacy strategies, as well as the plans of the Saint-Denis and Porta Romana Olympic Villages.

The study demonstrates that while Agenda 2020 promotes more flexible and territorially distributed configurations–diffused and constellation models–in its two applications, it tends to favour already well-equipped regions and produces uneven environmental and social outcomes. Despite the progress achieved through the new Agenda, the findings highlight the contradictions that exist between the IOC's sustainability discourse and the territorial realities of host cities and regions. In so doing, it offers insights for future mega-event planning and policy design under conditions of environmental pressure and hosting-requirement constraints.

Keywords:

Mega-events; Olympic Games; Spatial Planning; Paris 2024; Milano Cortina 2026; Agenda 2020.

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1. Introduction – Mega-events landing in place

Mega-events have long functioned as catalysts for urban and regional transformation, yet their forms (e.g., sport vs. cultural), scales (e.g., mega vs. giga vs. hallmark), and legacies (e.g., positive vs. negative; tangible vs intangible) vary widely (Müller, 2015). They can be concentrated in compact clusters, diffused across metropolitan areas, or distributed over vast region; each configuration generates distinct environmental, economic, and social consequences (Bortolotti *et al.*, 2024a; Jones, 2024; Ponzini et al., 2024).

Over the last two decades, the escalating costs, environmental risks, and political contestations surrounding such events have led to a decrease in the number of cities bidding to host the games (Lauermann, 2020; Oliver and Lauermann, 2017). The IOC's Agenda 2020, introduced in 2014, sought to restore the legitimacy of the Games by prioritizing sustainability, cost-efficiency, and flexibility in host-city/region selection and planning (International Olympic Committee, 2014).

Paris 2024 and Milano Cortina 2026 are the first Olympic editions–Summer and Winter–to implement these reforms from the earliest stages of the bidding process through to both the planning and eventual delivery of the respective Games. Both games reinterpreted the IOC's sustainability narrative which focused mainly on maximising the use of existing or temporary infrastructure, and both produced different spatial configurations:

- **Paris 2024** adopted a diffused model, dispersing events across historic urban sites and the city's existing metropolitan infrastructure;
- **Milano Cortina 2026** employed a constellation model, spanning more than 400 km between the urban centre of Milan and the Alpine regions of Cortina d'Ampezzo, Livigno, and Val di Fiemme (Jones, 2024).

These spatial configurations draw on an emerging typology in mega-event urbanism (Jones, 2024; Bortolotti *et al.*, 2024a). The traditional 'platform' model (Anchored and Satellite) concentrates venues within a purpose-built, bounded precinct, a dedicated Olympic park or zone, maximising logistical efficiency but also generating large-scale new constructions and, potentially, post-event white elephant risks (e.g., London 2012, Sochi 2014). In contrast, a 'diffused' model disperses events across existing urban fabric and pre-existing infrastructure within a metropolitan area; thereby minimising new construction while leveraging the given city's existing spatial assets. This model was not common for the Summer Olympics prior to the Agenda 2020, but it is common to the Winter Olympics and other large events. A 'constellation' model extends this logic further, distributing event locations and clusters across multiple cities or regions–often spanning hundreds of kilometres–to embed the Games within heterogeneous territorial systems. These cases embody a major shift from previous 'platform' models (e.g., London 2012, Sochi 2014) toward territorially extended approaches that try to embed Olympic projects into pre-existing urban systems and morphologies. Whether this spatial spread truly delivers sustainability or merely redistributes costs and impacts across wider territories remains an open question.

This paper asks: How has the IOC's Agenda 2020 influenced the spatial strategies and sustainability outcomes of recent Olympic Games, and what do the cases of Paris 2024 and Milano Cortina 2026 reveal about the evolving relationship that exists between global Olympic agendas and local planning practices?

By comparing two events of different categories, scales, geographies, and governance systems, the paper makes three interconnected intellectual contributions. First, it advances existing mega-event urbanism literature by empirically observing how Agenda 2020's spatial reforms translate–or fail to translate–into sustainability outcomes in distinct territorial contexts. Second, it contributes to spatial planning theory by examining how global policy frameworks interact with local governance arrangements and planning cultures to produce divergent outcomes even under the same normative agenda. Third, it develops spatial justice as an operational analytical lens for evaluating mega-event planning; moving beyond infrastructural efficiency metrics toward questions of territorial equity, displacement, and long-term accessibility.

To address the paper's primary research question, the paper first traces the theoretical intersection between mega-event spatiality and sustainability (Section 2). It then outlines a comparative methodology and criteria for analysing planning documents and urban legacies (Section 3). Finally, it examines how each host city/region

operationalised Agenda 2020 through its spatial configurations as well as the design and transformation of an Olympic infrastructure: the athletes' villages. In particular, sections 4 and 5 discuss the cases of Paris 2024 and Milano Cortina 2026. Section 6 offers a cross-case analysis and synthesis table. Section 7 concludes with reflections for future policy and planning.

2. Mega-events, spatial strategies, and sustainability

2.1 From mega-event spatiality to planning theory

Scholars have conceptualised mega-events as 'exceptional planning regimes' that compress time, mobilise extraordinary resources, and often suspend ordinary governance in order to meet the event's deadline (Basso, 2017; Flyvbjerg & Stewart, 2012; Gaffney, 2013; Müller, 2015). Within this context, spatial configuration–the territorial arrangement of venues, infrastructures, and supporting urban projects and developments–plays a decisive role in shaping environmental, economic, and social outcomes (Essex & de Groot, 2017; Gold & Gold, 2008).

Historically, and for matters of logistical efficiency, Olympic models privileged compactness and visibility: monumental clusters designed as icons of national prestige (Kassens-Noor, 2012). However, this approach often produced long-term liabilities and negative legacies – "white elephants" – and extensive ecological disruption (Müller, 2015). Compact Olympic models tended to encourage the production of white elephants because they centralise a large number of highly specialised venues into a single purpose-built park. This concentration inflates the scale of facilities beyond everyday local demand, limits flexibility for adaptive re-use, and encourages monumental construction driven by political visibility rather than long-term viability. As a result, post-Games maintenance costs often exceed operational capacities, leaving many venues underused or abandoned. Athens 2004, Rio 2016, and Sochi 2014 are cases in point. The conception of Agenda 2020 reframed this logic by promoting flexibility and reuse, aligning, in theory, Olympic delivery with principles of sustainable urbanism and context-sensitive planning.

In this paper, sustainability is not understood merely as the environmental efficiency of buildings–such as energy performance, material consumption, or certification standards at the venue scale. Rather, it is approached through three interrelated dimensions: (i) environmentally sound spatial decisions, including site selection, prior land use, and whether development would have occurred independently of the Olympics; (ii) socio-spatial equity; and (iii) the long-term adaptability of event-related infrastructure. From a spatial perspective, sustainability concerns not only the reduction of new construction, but also the territorial distribution, siting, and post-Games transformation of facilities, including athletes' accommodation.

In planning theory, the above-mentioned shifts can be interpreted through three overlapping analytical lenses. First, spatial planning is conceived as the coordination of sectoral policies and spatial interventions across multiple scales (Healey, 2006). Second, sustainability transitions emphasise adaptive, long-term governance arrangements and resource-efficient socio-technical change (Geels, 2010). Third, spatial justice foregrounds questions of equity in the distribution of benefits, burdens, and risks (Soja, 2010).

Taken together, these perspectives provide a robust theoretical foundation for examining how mega-event planning engages with territorial transformations and sustainability. It also helps to clarify how the IOC's reforms intersect with local governance capacities. The spatial configurations of mega-events help show the different institutional and non-institutional actors mobilized by event-related projects and effects. In this sense, the observation of a 'spatial turn' in Olympic policy entails not only technical adjustments to venue location but also a reconfiguration of power, structure, responsibility, and legitimacy in the governance of mega-events. From this perspective, this contribution seeks to provide understanding as to whether the spatial turn of the Games enables a stronger connection between the mega-event and the local needs of the host cities and regions to be realised. This is a relevant challenge for evaluating the effects of the new Olympic Agenda, which risks generating multiple contradictions. Spatial justice, as deployed here, refers specifically to the equitable territorial distribution of the benefits, costs, and risks generated by mega-event investments–including affordable housing provision, transport access, community displacement, and the long-term

usability of converted infrastructure (Soja, 2010). Rather than treating spatial justice as an abstract normative horizon, this paper uses it as an empirical lens through which to assess whether Agenda 2020's spatial reforms narrow or widen territorial inequalities in host cities and regions. The two cases examined here allow us to test whether diffused and constellation configurations advance spatial justice in practice, or whether they merely relocate and redistribute its contradictions across larger territories.

2.2 Agenda 2020 and the evolution of spatial strategies

The IOC's Agenda 2020 and the subsequent Agenda 2020 + 5 (International Olympic Committee, 2014, 2021) seek to transform the bid process from a competitive race between candidate cities into a continuous dialogue between potential host cities and regions, and the IOC. According to the Agenda 2020+5:

- no new venues are needed, and the use of temporary venues is encouraged;
- sport can take place outside one single host city, where appropriate, and;
- from the candidature onwards, the Olympic Games are based first and foremost on long-term sustainability, including from an economic standpoint (International Olympic Committee, 2021).

It follows that the new framework encourages host cities and regions to maximise the use of existing or temporary venues, to reduce both financial and environmental costs, and to integrate Olympic-related projects within established planning frameworks. This model allows multi-city/region or even cross-border events; thereby breaking with the historical requirement of there being a single host city. At the same time, however, it also risks privileging well-equipped metropolitan regions with robust infrastructures and governance capacity (Lauermann, 2020).

This change in process has resulted in spatial dispersion becoming a new sustainability narrative: the Games can now be spread over broader territories; justified on the basis of its being more resource-efficient and context-sensitive. However, diffusion across multiple sites introduces logistical complexity, higher transport-related emissions, and fragmented governance. Relations with pre-existing infrastructure and facilities as well as the descending spatial effects of the same, have received limited attention so far. The Paris 2024 and Milano Cortina 2026 Games exemplify these tensions, which reverberate on the sustainability of such processes.

Through the lens of spatial planning, Agenda 2020 represents an attempt to reconcile global sustainability norms with local territorial realities–but it also exposes the contradictions between symbolic 'green' commitments and uneven spatial development.

3. Comparing Paris 2024 and Milano Cortina 2026

3.1 A comparative case-study approach

This research employs a comparative case-study approach to examine how the principles of the IOC's Agenda 2020 have been interpreted and operationalised in two distinct contexts. The cases were selected because they were the first Summer and Winter Olympic Games fully shaped by Agenda 2020. Study of the same therefore allows an in-depth comparison of spatial planning strategies under the same global policy framework but in contrasting geographical, governance, and seasonal conditions. The methodology and discussion of the two cases acknowledge the substantial differences between Summer and Winter Games in terms of size, budget, attendance, media visibility, and sustainability records (Müller *et al.*, 2021).

The study relies primarily on document analysis, drawing on IOC policy materials (including Agenda 2020, Agenda 2020+5, sustainability reports, and host-city/region contracts); official planning and design documents produced by SOLIDEO for Paris 2024 and by the Fondazione Milano Cortina 2026; municipal and metropolitan spatial plans, environmental impact assessments, and governmental communications; as well as secondary academic literature on Olympic urbanism, mega-event governance, and sustainability.

Additionally, comparative site visits were conducted at both locations on multiple occasions, often in collaboration with student groups - enabling closer observation of the development processes. These visits also facilitated informal exchanges with local stakeholders and actors, which provided supplementary contextual information, even though this was not attained through formal interviews.

Documents were reviewed for the period 2014–2024 which covered the bidding, planning, and pre-implementation phases of both Games.

3.2 Analytical dimensions

Four analytical dimensions guided the interpretation of the cases. The first concerns spatial configuration; namely, the degree of concentration or dispersion of venues. The second relates to governance structure and focused on coordination mechanisms across institutional scales and policy sectors. The third addresses sustainability strategy, and encompasses environmental, economic, and social objectives, as well as the instruments deployed to achieve them. The fourth examines legacy projection, including anticipated post-Games uses and longer-term territorial integration.

Each dimension was coded qualitatively to identify convergences and divergences between the two cases.

3.3 Limitations

No structured or planned interviews were conducted; findings are based mainly on secondary sources and documentary evidence. This limitation is acknowledged; however, it is mitigated by the authors having cross-checked several authoritative documents, relevant peer-reviewed literature, and the personal familiarity of the authors with both contexts. The comparative design enables the extraction of analytical insights rather than causal generalisations. In the empirical sections that follow (Sections 4 and 5), each case is examined in light of all four dimensions: spatial configuration is addressed in the planning rationale and spatial strategy subsections; governance structure is explored through the delivery and implementation subsections; sustainability strategy is assessed through the specific features and framing of each Village; and legacy projection is discussed in the legacy subsections. The comparative synthesis in Section 6 then applies these dimensions symmetrically to both cases through a structured table and cross-case narrative.

4. Paris 2024 Summer Games

4.1 Spatial configuration and planning rationale

Paris 2024 marks a milestone in the IOC's reform era as the first Summer Olympics fully structured around Agenda 2020. The diffusion strategy in Paris was framed as a sustainability measure that reduced new permanent construction and embedded Olympic venues into existing metropolitan infrastructures. However, the extent to which dispersion alone produces environmental or social sustainability remains contested. The bid capitalised on the ongoing *Grand Paris Express* infrastructure programme and embedded the Games within France's largest metropolitan development initiative. Although a number of competitions were held in other French cities (e.g., Lyon, Lille, Bordeaux, Nantes) and overseas territories (Tahiti), the Paris masterplan was organised around two complementary zones. The Paris Centre Zone showcased iconic landmarks–such as the Eiffel Tower, Champ de Mars, and Place de la Concorde–through temporary installations. The Grand Paris Zone, centred in Seine-Saint-Denis, provided a concentrated zone for the main permanent facilities, including the Aquatics Centre, the Media Village, and the Olympic Village.

Within the Grand Paris Zone, the venues were situated within a 10-kilometre radius of the Olympic Village in Saint-Denis (see Fig. 1). Approximately 95 percent of venues were existing or temporary; an unprecedented figure in Olympic history (Lopes dos Santos & Delaplace, 2024). The spatial spread was framed as a sustainability strategy, reducing new construction while extending the Games and investing in development projects beyond the capital's historical core. The number of visitors was 11.2 million and these persons were distributed on multiple locations (Paris 2024 Organising Committee, 2024).

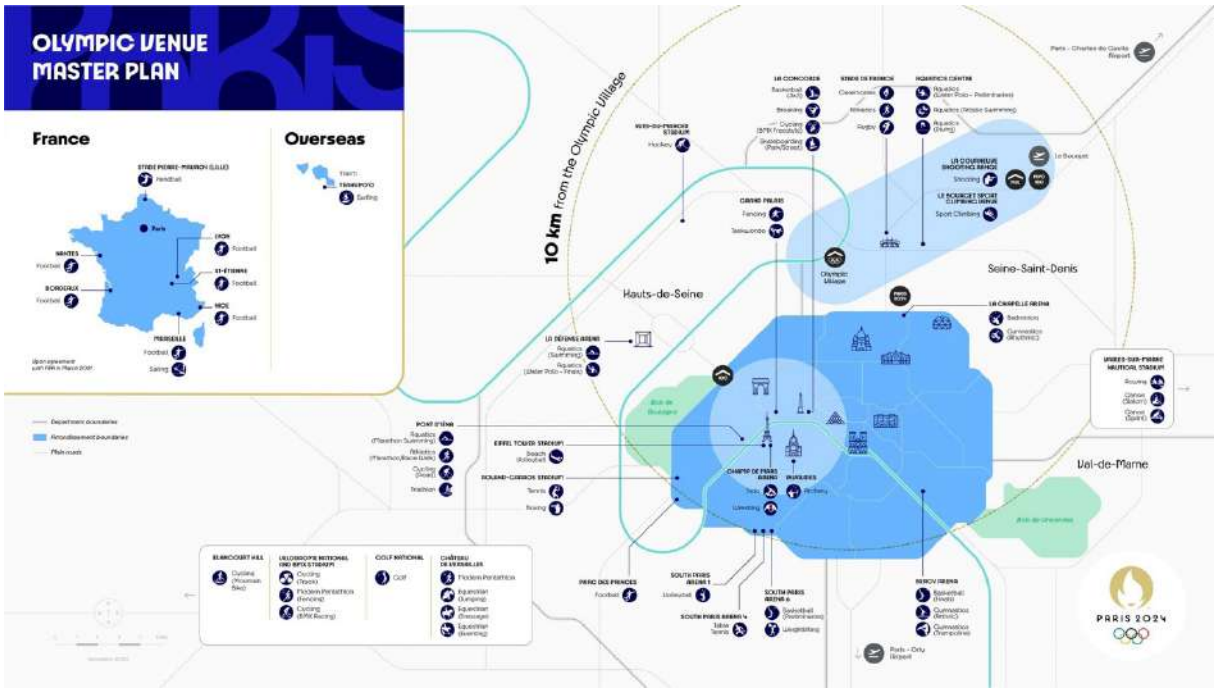

Fig. 1. The official Paris 2024 Olympic Venue Masterplan. *Source: Olympic Games Paris 2024*

4.2 Governance and implementation

Planning responsibilities were distributed across both national and metropolitan bodies. SOLIDEO oversaw the delivery of Olympic infrastructure in the Paris 2024 cluster, including construction programming, and cost and schedule control. The Métropole du Grand Paris acted as the project owner for major metropolitan-scale venues (such as the Olympic Aquatics Centre) and coordinated metro-scale planning. Local municipalities, most notably Saint-Denis, maintained municipal planning responsibilities and participated primarily in a consultative capacity rather than functioning as principal decision-makers (Faure, 2021).

This multilevel structure enabled coordination but also generated fragmentation and limited local participation–typical of 'exceptional planning regimes' (Wolfe, 2023).

4.3 The Saint-Denis Olympic Village

The Village, spanning 52 hectares across Saint-Denis, Saint-Ouen, and L'Île-Saint-Denis, was both the emblem and the test of Paris 2024's sustainability claims. Although Agenda 2020 prioritises venue reuse, athletes' villages remain the most structurally transformative Olympic infrastructures and raise questions about whether long-term housing conversion should be evaluated as a sustainability outcome or primarily a legacy outcome.

Designed for 14,000 athletes, it will be converted post-Games into a mixed-use neighbourhood with roughly 2,200 housing units (half social or affordable), offices, schools, and public amenities (SOLIDEO, 2023; Lopes dos Santos and Delaplace, 2024). Sustainability features include low-carbon materials, energy-efficient envelopes, and climate-resilient design calibrated for 2050 climate scenarios. The development will also pilot a 48-hour autonomous energy system. However, critics note that there are contradictions between the (SOLIDEO, 2023) *green* narrative and local realities: the displacement of vulnerable populations, temporary closure of public spaces, and speculative pressure on land values (Faure, 2021; Wolfe, 2023).

Fig. 2. The Saint-Denis Athletes' Village seen from the Louafi Bouguera Olympic Bridge, 2025. *Source: Authors*

4.4 Legacy and contradictions

Post-Games, the Village is expected to contribute to urban regeneration in the under-invested northern periphery of the city. The redevelopment will accommodate approximately 6,000 residents and 6,000 jobs, along with schools, a gymnasium, and commercial services along the banks of the Seine. Yet socio-spatial risks remain acute. Rising property values and gentrification in Saint-Denis could erode the intended social legacy. Moreover, the Aquatics Centre–built with exceptional state funding after being rejected in the 2012 bid–illustrates the persistent tension that remains between Olympic image-making and long-term viability. These risks are consistent with broader scholarship on mega-events and urban displacement, which document patterns of socio-spatial polarisation, rent escalation, and community exclusion in host neighbourhoods, and how these often persist irrespective of stated social housing commitments (Lenskyj, 2008; Müller *et al.*, 2021; Shin et al., 2016; SOLIDEO, 2023; Lopes dos Santos and Delaplace, 2024).

The extensive use of central urban space, while celebrated as democratic and inclusive, also produced temporary exclusion: large areas of central Paris were fenced for security during the Games; limiting access for residents.

Despite these controversies, the Games acted as a catalyst for significant transport investments. These included the opening of the Line 14 extensions to Saint Denis and to Orly Airport–providing direct connections between the Athletes' Village, three major Paris stations, and the second airport of the city–and the advancement of Metro Lines 16 and 17. Collectively, these interventions contributed to the legitimisation of long-standing strategic metropolitan projects (Lopes dos Santos and Delaplace, 2024; Faure, 2021).

The Paris model thus combines dense urban reuse with targeted urban regeneration. However, the social value of the interventions or their risks of gentrification can be properly investigated only in the years following the event celebration and the post-event reconversion of the main venues and sites, in particular, the Olympic Village.

5. Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Games

5.1 Spatial configuration

The Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics encompassed two regions (*Lombardy* and *Veneto*) and two autonomous provinces (*Trento* and *Bolzano*); forming the most territorially spread Winter Games in Olympic history.

The overall spatial configuration is structured around four main clusters. The Milan Cluster hosted indoor events–such as ice hockey and skating–in existing or privately developed facilities including the Rho fairground of Fiera Milano, and the two arenas of Palaltalia Santa Giulia (new) and Unipol Forum (existing). The Valtellina Cluster accommodated Alpine ski disciplines in Bormio and Livigno. Beyond Alpine ski competitions, the Cortina Cluster focuses on historic venues (inherited by the 1956 Winter Olympics), including the reuse of the existing Stadio Olimpico del Ghiaccio and the highly contested reconstruction of the abandoned bobsleigh track. Finally, the Val di Fiemme Cluster hosted Nordic skiing and biathlon competitions.

The overall distance between the farthest venues exceeds 400 kilometres; challenging logistics and coordination yet aligning with Agenda 2020's flexibility for multi-city/ region hosting (Di Vita et al., 2024; Jones & Vigotti, 2022).

Fig. 3. Map presenting the Geography and the 4 clusters of Milano Cortina 2026. *Source: https://fan26.olympics.com/en/fan26*

5.2 Governance and delivery

The Games are overseen by the Fondazione Milano Cortina 2026 (FMC 2026), a private-law foundation whose founding members include the Italian national government (through the Minister for Sport), the Italian Olympic and Paralympic Committees (CONI and CIP), the Regions of Lombardy and Veneto, the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, and the Municipalities of Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo. The FMC 2026 operated under the Host City Contract and the Olympic Charter and thus remains subject to IOC oversight.

Milan's municipal strategy for the Games is consistent with the rationale of its long-term urban plan, approved in 2019 (Bazzanella et al., 2022). The Expo 2015 in Milan and the problematic and lengthy post-event transformation of the site induced more cautious decisions (Gaeta and Di Vita, 2021). Rather than building new infrastructure, the city focused on accelerating already existing redevelopment projects through public-private partnerships.

5.3 The Porta Romana Olympic Village

The Porta Romana Railway Yard redevelopment in the southern part of the city of Milan is a major urban transformation project, of which the Olympic Village represents only one component. Within the wider masterplan designed by OUTCOMIST together with Diller Scofidio + Renfro, PLP Architecture and Carlo Ratti Associati, and ARUP and managed by COIMA SGR, with Covivio and Prada Holding as partners, the Olympic Village constitutes the first portion to be developed, and its progress was accelerated specifically to meet the requirements of the Milano Cortina 2026 Games. Designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), this section of the site will accommodate athletes during the Games before being converted into a student housing complex as part of the long-term redevelopment strategy (Di Vita et al., 2024).

Key features of the project include the construction of mid-rise timber buildings arranged around a central park, an integration with the surrounding rail- and metro-based mobility network, and the post-Games conversion of the Olympic Village into approximately 1,700 student-housing beds (Di Vita et al., 2024; Raco and Di Vita, 2024). However, the project also exemplifies Milan's financialised urbanism – a reliance on private capital to deliver public objectives. Planning permits were expedited to meet IOC deadlines, and this raises questions about the effective social equity of the intervention especially when one considers the high costs for renting future student housing in the site (Raco & Di Vita, 2024). This approach reflects broader patterns within existent literature on urban financialization, which documents how public-private partnerships in event-driven regeneration tend to accelerate real-estate valorisation while limiting redistributive outcomes (Raco, 2014; Weber, 2010; Aalbers, 2016).

Fig. 4. The construction site of the Athletes' Village at Porta Romana in December 2025, two months prior to the opening of the Games.
Source: Authors

5.4 Legacy and critique

The *Porta Romana Village* reflects Milan's broader urban model: incremental regeneration driven by real-estate valorisation. While positioned as low-risk with minimal environmental impact since the development is taking place on a brown field, this approach reinforces market-driven logics and might intensify gentrification in surrounding districts already transformed by *Fondazione Prada*.

Across the wider Olympic territory, the reliance on dispersed venues reduced new construction but increased mobility-related emissions and fragmentation. Moreover, some conflicts arose when, due to technical reasons, the reuse of existing venues ended up implying high environmental impacts: for instance, the decision to rebuild the existing *Cortina bobsleigh track*, despite expert criticism, exposed the tension that exists between environmental responsibility and local prestige politics (Jreij, 2026). Originally built for the 1956 Cortina Winter Olympics and decommissioned in 2008 due to safety concerns and prohibitive maintenance costs, the track's reconstruction was opposed by environmental groups, the Italian Alpine Club, and several IOC advisors who argued that rebuilding a facility in a protected Alpine landscape contradicted Agenda 2020's commitment to avoiding unnecessary new construction. The decision was nonetheless advanced under pressure from local authorities, at an estimated cost exceeding €80 million. Moreover, the delays in event planning led the decision makers to focus primarily on the Olympic venues by: (i) derogating ordinary procedures of environmental assessment, in contradiction with the sustainability goals of the new Olympic Agenda; and (ii) postponing the discussions on the territorial legacy of the Games (beyond the single event venues), also in contradiction with the legacy requirements of the new Olympic Agenda (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2024).

It follows, that Milano Cortina's constellation model demonstrates both the adaptability of Agenda 2020 and its limitations when sustainability is filtered through uneven governance and private-led planning.

6. Post-Agenda 2020 – Comparison of Paris and Milan

This article presents for the first time two instances of the application of the Agenda 2020 and systematically compares them. The comparison of Saint-Denis and Porta Romana as the central Olympic Villages of these two Olympic games offer analytical value that exceeds what either case could reveal in isolation. Saint-Denis represents a state-led, socially ambitious legacy model embedded in an urban regeneration programme targeting a historically under-invested periphery, with strong central governance and an explicit social housing mandate. In contrast, Porta Romana represents a privately-led, financialised model within a brownfield redevelopment strategy, where the Games accelerated a pre-existing urban project shaped primarily by market actors and public-private partnerships. Together, the two Villages illuminate how Agenda 2020's flexibility can interact with radically different local governance traditions, planning cultures, and socio-economic contexts –producing divergent sustainability and legacy outcomes whilst operating under the same global policy framework. Both Paris 2024 and Milano Cortina 2026 exemplify how Agenda 2020 has redefined Olympic spatial strategies. Each interprets the IOC's sustainability discourse through locally specific planning frameworks —yet their outcomes diverged substantially.

Dimension	Paris 2024 (Diffused Model)	Milano Cortina 2026 (Constellation Model)
Spatial configuration	Metropolitan diffusion within the Grand Paris area; 95 % existing or temporary venues.	Dispersed over 400 km across Lombardy, Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige; multi-cluster system; 85 % existing or temporary venues.
Governance model	Centralised delivery through SOLIDEO and strong state coordination; limited municipal autonomy.	Polycentric and Multilevel governance via Fondazione Milano Cortina; Simico; reliance on regional cooperation and PPPs.
Infrastructure strategy	Integration with Grand Paris Express and Seine-Saint-Denis regeneration; modest new construction (Aquatics Centre, Village)	Reuse of existing Alpine venues; selective new projects in redevelopment areas (Santa Giulia Arena, Porta Romana Village) or controversial sites (Cortina bobsleigh).

Dimension	Paris 2024 (Diffused Model)	Milano Cortina 2026 (Constellation Model)
Sustainability framing	'Greenest Games' narrative; emphasis on carbon neutrality, cleaning of the Seine River, and social legacy through affordable housing.	'Low-impact' Games; focus on cost control, reuse, and regional cooperation, but limited holistic environmental assessment.
Social impact	Risk of gentrification and displacement in Saint-Denis; uneven benefits across Île-de-France.	Market-driven regeneration; potential gentrification and exclusionary effects and spatially uneven investment.
Legacy vision	Urban transformation and housing supply in Seine-Saint-Denis; transport modernization and upgrade.	Facility re-use and enhanced urban connectivity in Milan; uncertain Alpine legacy and governance.

As summarised in Table 1, several comparative insights emerge from the analysis. First, in terms of scale and spatial configuration (Table 1, row 1), Paris demonstrated the feasibility of dense yet regionally integrated Olympic planning, whereas Milan extended spread to a macro-regional geography; with the latter largely due to the geographic constraints of the Winter Olympics and their reliance on natural resources. While this reduced the imbalance of urban concentration, it also amplified logistical and ecological issues, as well as planning challenges. Second, the governance structures of the two Olympic games editions differed markedly (Table 1, row 2): both operated through exceptional planning regimes, but Paris benefitted from strong national oversight, whereas Milan-Cortina's polycentric arrangement complicated accountability and monitoring. Third, sustainability contradictions persisted in both cases (Table 1, rows 4-5). Despite commitments to reuse and low-carbon development, neither event fully addressed systemic impacts such as long-distance mobility or speculative real-estate pressures, and sustainability remained framed primarily through infrastructural efficiency rather than socio-spatial equity. Both cases also illustrated a noticeable expansion in temporary venues and temporary housing, which has enabled new spatial configurations to emerge. Although these interventions have been frequently presented as inherently sustainable, they raise important questions about whether, how, and where such structures are actually reused after the Games.

In particular, these questions are evident in the case of Milan-Cortina. While the Milan urban cluster relied on existing planning approaches in which the private-led conversion of industrial brownfields tended to induce gentrification rather than social inclusion, the three Alpine clusters of Cortina, Val di Fiemme, and Valtellina were supported by an implicit spatial vision that sought to reduce distances between the main urban areas at the foot of the Alpine space and related fragments of urbanity made by international Alpine resorts, within a process of mountain metropolisation (Perlik, 2011). It follows, that this implicit spatial vision was focused neither on specific cultural and natural resources of local landscape, nor on those specific issues of territorial fragilities and disparities which characterize Alpine areas. As a result, it was not able to invert traditional processes bringing city into mountain areas (Dansero, Mela, 2016; Dematteis, 2018; Perlik, 2018).

The legacy planning of both Paris and Milan-Cortina included the conversion of their Olympic Villages into long-term housing. While athletes' accommodation is generally more adaptable after the Games – especially when compared to specialised sporting venues that are difficult to reconvert, carry high maintenance costs, and risk becoming white elephants –questions of affordability and accessibility remain unresolved, even in cases of social housing redevelopment programs. Moreover, although diffused and constellation models mitigate concentrated construction pressures, they may also transfer new burdens onto local communities.

Overall, the comparison reveals that Agenda 2020 has succeeded in reducing material excess but not necessarily in ensuring territorial justice or environmental coherence. The reform privileges resource-rich metropolitan regions, and the metropolisation of high-end Alpine areas which are capable of mobilising existing infrastructures and governance capacity, thereby reinforcing spatial inequalities in Olympic hosting.

7. Conclusions and Policy Reflections

7.1 Reassessing Agenda 2020 through spatial planning

The Agenda 2020 reforms, as illustrated through examination of the Paris 2024 and Milano Cortina 2026 cases, pushed spatial models from centralisation toward greater spatial spread. Yet, spatial diffusion which seeks to maximise the use of existing facilities and infrastructure and does not in itself equate to sustainability, remains a controversial concept when applied to mega-events (Müller *et al.*, 2021). IOC prescriptions seek to restore the Games' appeal to cities and regions by improving the planning and design of related single venues. However, this does not necessarily correspond to the achievement of broader socio-spatial balances between the (given) mega-event and host cities and regions. At the same time, when global frameworks meet heterogeneous territorial systems, outcomes depend less on IOC prescriptions through Agendas and related recommendations than on local governance capacity, existing planning tools, and socio-economic contexts.

Spatial planning theory helps unpack the sustainability and socio-economic contradictions of such mega-events. Strategic coordination remains essential to integrating Olympic projects into long-term spatial visions, while strong planning capacity is needed to prevent event-driven exceptionalism from overriding ordinary planning processes and values.

In the Paris and Milan cases, we noticed the existence of different governance styles and varying connections with existing territorial visions, infrastructural, and development projects. The strategic coordination between the Olympic Games and the existing spatial planning of host cities and regions is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve specific goals.

The following reflections can be drawn from the cases examined.

First, as the Olympic Agenda 2020 allows unprecedented multi-city/region hosting, the strategic coordination between multiple planning levels becomes more challenging. Second, a spatial vision that connects the Olympic configuration with long-term plans of different regions can support decision-making from the early bidding stages. Third, governance practices respond to IOC principles but are embedded locally while facing contextual sustainability challenges. Fourth, in each Olympic cluster, the level of inclusiveness of spatial planning makes the difference in integrating the temporary use of existing venues and brownfields, promoted by the Olympic Agenda 2020, with the development of permanent spaces and facilities for local communities. Finally, in order to avoid the limitation of potentially positive socio-spatial effects in the medium-long term, and the risks of exacerbating already existing territorial disparities, the legacy focus should extend to broader urban and regional scales rather than to the only reuse of individual venues. In this regard, and in light of the prospect of anti-fragility (Blečić, Cecchini, 2020), trans-scalar and cross-border territorial visions and scenarios could help reinforce connections between Olympic clusters and the surrounding or intermediate territories in the post-event period (Arcidiacono et al., 2024, Bortolotti et al., 2024b).

Since the introduction of Agenda 2020, Athletes' Villages have remained one of the main urban investments pursued by host cities, often using the Games as a catalyst for broader urban development—despite the Agenda's stated preference for reusing existing facilities. A broader comparative study of Olympic Villages—from past games to recent ones—and their post-event reconversion would be particularly valuable in assessing whether they constitute successful and sustainable investments. In this regard, the sustainability of an Olympic Village depends less on its construction footprint during the Games than on its long-term use, accessibility, and affordability in the years that follow.

7.2 Policy implications for future Games

Several policy implications emerge for future Olympic editions. First, context-sensitive and multi-scale evaluation is essential: IOC assessments should consider not only environmental performance but also governance effectiveness and social equity across the host territory, distinguishing strategies and actions for cities from those for non-urban areas. Such evaluation should not be derogated but extended from single venues to broader regions involved. Second, given that the sustainability and socio-spatial effects are

often uneven, the peripheral and 'in-between' areas should not be approached in terms of redistribution or compensation but rather integrated into spatial planning practices. Third, integrated territorial governance is increasingly necessary, as multi-city/region and potentially cross-border Games require permanent supra-local bodies capable of coordinating investments, mobility, and environmental monitoring. Fourth, legacy accountability must be strengthened through mechanisms that verify the actual post-event conversion of Olympic Villages and venues, thereby ensuring accessibility and long-term community benefits, as well as the post-event effects in surrounding regions. Finally, the experiences of Paris and Milan underscore the importance of systematic knowledge transfer, including the creation of an open, continuous database of spatial and environmental data to support subsequent hosts.

7.3 Final considerations

Given the methodology adopted, our findings cannot be generalized but can lead to critical observations. The post-Agenda 2020 Olympics show a potential paradox: while they reduce construction footprints and embrace adaptive reuse, they also imply spatial and governance arrangements that risk institutionalizing spatial unevenness within their configurations between central and peripheral areas, and more broadly favouring more equipped cities and regions. The transition from iconic centralisation to distributed constellations marks progress in environmental intent but not necessarily in social or territorial outcomes. The latter depends on how global recommendations translate into contextualized planning practice (Ponzini, 2020).

The comparison of Paris and Milano Cortina under Agenda 2020 offers the following to each of the three fields it engages with. For mega-event studies, it provides empirical evidence that policy reform at the international level without contextual spatial governance risks inducing uneven sustainability outcomes. Second, it provides a systematic insight into the same principles applied to Summer and Winter Games and confirms the value of comparative analysis across mega-events of different sizes, budgets, and so on. In addition, it urges mega-event research that centres on spatial configurations and planning. Regarding spatial planning theory, it shows how global normative frameworks are filtered through and transformed by local planning cultures and institutional capacities and also explores the relations between spatial configurations implied by mega-events and sustainable planning practices. For sustainability research, it challenges infrastructural definitions of sustainability by showing that environmental efficiency and territorial justice are not equivalent–and that the latter remains largely unaddressed by recent Olympic reforms.

Our contribution compares two individual cases, acknowledging their differences. Future research could build on this comparative foundation to deepen other instances of implementation or other specific goals of Agenda 2020 and its legacies. As more Games will be delivered based on the same agenda, multi-case and longitudinal studies can further contribute to the international debate.

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THE OLYMPIC VILLAGE AS A CATALYST FOR URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN THE SOUTH OF BUENOS AIRES

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Abstract

Urban developments resulting from mega-events have generated divergent territorial outcomes, ranging from market-driven restructuring to more integrated forms of urban regeneration. In Buenos Aires, the 2018 Youth Olympic Games led to the development of the Olympic Village in Comuna 8, a historically disadvantaged and fragmented area of the city. This article examines how the Olympic Village was reinterpreted as a catalyst for a broader territorial vision of the city's southern area. Using a qualitative, interpretative, and ex post case-study approach, it analyses planning documents and empirical materials produced during the formulation of strategic visions between 2022 and 2025. The paper defines a catalyst as an intervention that enables the development and scaling of planning frameworks and institutional arrangements, rather than one that directly produces spatial transformation. From this perspective, the Olympic Village functioned as a methodological and institutional pilot case. The findings indicate a partial and conditional success: while the experience contributed to reframing planning approaches, its spatial effects remain limited and dependent on ongoing implementation capacity and metropolitan coordination. The article shows that catalytic interventions in fragmented contexts operate primarily through institutional and methodological transformation rather than immediate territorial change.

Keywords:

Mega-event, urban planning, urban catalyst, transformation, vision.

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1. Introduction

Urban planning for mega-events, including the Olympic Games and Football World Cup, has been conceptualised in various ways. The notion of the 'city of exception' (Friendly, 2020) highlights instances where large-scale projects, such as Rio de Janeiro's Porto Maravilha for the 2016 Olympics, are market-driven and facilitate state-assisted privatisation to advance capital interests. In contrast, Barcelona's 1992 Olympics demonstrated a strong territorial commitment, which utilised Olympic urbanism to revitalise distressed suburbs. The development of new urban spaces in residential areas served as a catalyst for the emergence of new urban centralities (Muñoz, 1997).

In the Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (CABA), efforts to integrate the Olympic Village-Barrio Olimpico (*BO)*, constructed for the 2018 Youth Olympic Games, have been insufficient. Sports facilities have been underutilised, and urban infrastructure remains disconnected from the broader urban context and is rarely accessed despite their scale and significance in addressing climate change challenges (Marconi, Perelman and Salgado, 2022). Fragmented and sporadic interventions have produced limited positive outcomes, such as increased housing through the *BO* legacy and the integration of *Villa 20*, a nearby informal settlement. Enhancing the effectiveness of these initiatives required a reconsideration of conventional approaches, and makes the adoption of a sustainability-oriented model and a renewed vision for the area imperative.

This article examines how the *BO* was subsequently reinterpreted as a catalyst for a broader territorial vision –not because it directly transformed the southern area of the city, but because it functioned as a pilot case through which new diagnostic approaches, institutional arrangements, and spatial strategies could be tested and later scaled up.

In this article, a "catalyst" is understood not as a project that directly produces territorial transformation, but as an intervention that enables the development of diagnostic frameworks, institutional arrangements, and spatial strategies that can subsequently be scaled up. From this perspective, catalytic effects are assessed primarily in methodological and institutional terms, and more cautiously in spatial terms. Rather than assessing the "success" or "failure" of the Olympic Village as an isolated urban project, the paper analyses the processes through which a mega-event intervention originally framed within fragmented planning logics came to support a wider multiscalar strategy for urban transformation.

The article adopts a qualitative, interpretative and ex post case-study approach. The analysis is based on documentary and regulatory review, planning policy analysis, and the examination of empirical materials produced during the formulation of the Vision for the *BO* (2022) as well as the subsequent Vision for the Southern Area of the City (2025)[5]. The production of both visions combined three main components. First, a documentary, cartographic, and statistical review was undertaken which included planning instruments, policy documents, demographic and socio-economic data, land-use patterns, accessibility conditions, infrastructure networks, and environmental constraints. Second, the planning processes incorporated empirical materials generated through fieldwork and stakeholder engagement, including site visits, direct observation, perception surveys, interviews with institutional actors and local stakeholders, and records from participatory processes conducted during the formulation of the visions. Third, these findings informed a projective phase in which spatial scenarios, strategic priorities, and policy proposals were developed through a research-by-design process. These materials are examined retrospectively in this article; no additional interviews, surveys, or fieldwork were undertaken specifically for the purposes of the paper.

Although the vision plans were originally produced through a research-by-design methodology, this article does not seek to present or validate those proposals in normative terms. Instead, it adopts an ex post analytical perspective on that experience, treating the design outputs and empirical materials generated during the planning process as situated sources that make it possible to reconstruct how the Olympic Village was reframed from an isolated legacy project into a broader strategic vision for the south of Buenos Aires.

5 The vision plans analysed here were originally developed through an applied research and research-by-design approach promoted by the Centro de Estudios Económicos Urbanos (CEEU) of the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, in collaboration with public actors, and with contributions from graduate students from Harvard University. In 2022, an interdisciplinary team examined the Olympic Village and its surroundings through a multiscalar and participatory assessment of the territory.

This methodological position also entails limitations. The empirical materials used in the article were not originally produced for academic research purposes, but as part of a planning process oriented toward intervention. Moreover, the planning process analysed was developed within a limited time frame and without a fully institutionalised participatory process. Finally, because the broader vision remains only partially implemented, the article cannot assess long-term outcomes. For this reason, the paper focuses on the conceptual, institutional, and territorial logics through which the vision was constructed, rather than on its definitive impacts, and considers the conditions under which such impacts may emerge. This methodological approach informs Sections 3 and 4 which analyse the empirical materials and reconstruct the planning processes to assess the extent and limits of the catalytic effect.

2. From Public Actions to the Mega-Event

2.1 A Planning History for the Revitalisation of the City's South

Urban planning in the Global South has long used models from the Global North, including technocratic-rational, strategic, and regional forms. These models often fail to fit Latin American cities facing rapid urban growth. They miss issues like widespread informality, deep-rooted inequalities, and unique local socio-economic conditions (Watson, 2009). It is critical to reassess these approaches and shift planning towards local adaptation and inclusivity.

In Buenos Aires City, planners and managers have long repeated a sharp divide between the north and the south. Public and private investors have favoured the north, making it a symbol of a modern, globally integrated city, whilst the south has fallen behind in terms of infrastructure, services and opportunities. These territorial dynamics have remained fragmented and segregated, while also being subject to sporadic interventions (Gorelik, 2013) as well as several urban plans and projects (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Main projects, plans, and regulations of CABA over the past 30 years, presented in chronological order. Source: Authors.

The city is divided into fifteen communes; administrative units created in 2005 under the city's autonomy framework. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, successive but fragmented and discontinued planning initiatives have shaped the southern area of CABA, particularly *Comuna 8*. These initiatives deepened territorial inequalities (Roitman, 2016).

During the late 20th century, processes of forced displacement, environmental degradation, and informal urbanisation further reinforced fragmentation and inequality in the southern area (Torres, 2001; Zapata, 2013). Over the past three decades, successive administrations responded with a sequence of regulatory and institutional instruments[1]. Each instrument addressed a real problem; none, however, was articulated with the others as part of a sustained territorial strategy.

1 The Urban Environmental Plan Council (Law No. 71/1998), the Corporación Buenos Aires Sur (Law No. 4706/2000), the Urban Environmental Plan (Law No. 2930/2008) and the Territorial Model 2010–2060, more recently complemented by the 'District Laws' and by socio-urban integration programmes such as Villa 20 (Law No. 5705/2016).

Within this context of fragmented and discontinuous planning, the *BO* emerges as a recent intervention with transformative potential. Unlike the preceding instruments of ordinary planning, it was derived from the compressed institutional window that was opened by the mega-event. Its built outputs, housing connected to the surrounding fabric through public spaces and community facilities - with units subsequently allocated to middle-income families through an affordable housing scheme (IVC, 2025) - are the visible expression of a less visible operation: the testing, within a bounded territory and a constrained timeline, of a form of coordination between public, academic, and private actors that decades of fragmented planning had been unable to produce. This accumulated fragmentation is precisely the institutional gap to which the Olympic intervention responded.

2.2 Public Infrastructure for Hosting the Olympic Games

Comuna 8, located in the southern area of CABA, is characterised by the coexistence of low-density residential areas, industrial zones, large-scale social housing complexes, informal settlements, and extensive green spaces. The presence of large infrastructure –such as wide avenues, logistics warehouses, large public parks, and sport venues – poses barriers that hinder its urban potential, either due to its scale or its lack of accessibility. As Watson (2009) noted, sporting events often represent a strategic opportunity to renew infrastructure and foster local economic development through planned urban transformation interventions. This is the case of *BO* in *Comuna 8*.

Following a competitive selection process in which Buenos Aires competed with Medellín and Glasgow, the city was announced as the winner in July 2013. Several regulatory and economic measures were implemented to provide context for the designation. The first of these, in 2014, was the creation of the Sports District through Law No. 5235, which was designed to encourage economic development by granting tax benefits to companies related to the sports sector. The initiative aimed to attract manufacturers of sporting goods, service providers specialising in sports, and builders and developers. To enable this, infrastructure investment was a fundamental requirement, with key interventions including the *Metrobus Sur*, which was intended to improve transport connectivity with the *Constitución* Transfer Hub and benefit 250,000 people, the Dellepiane Bus Terminal, and the *Centro de Transferencia de Cargas* (CTC by its Spanish acronym, Cargo Transfer Centre) (Carmona, 2017) (Figure 2).

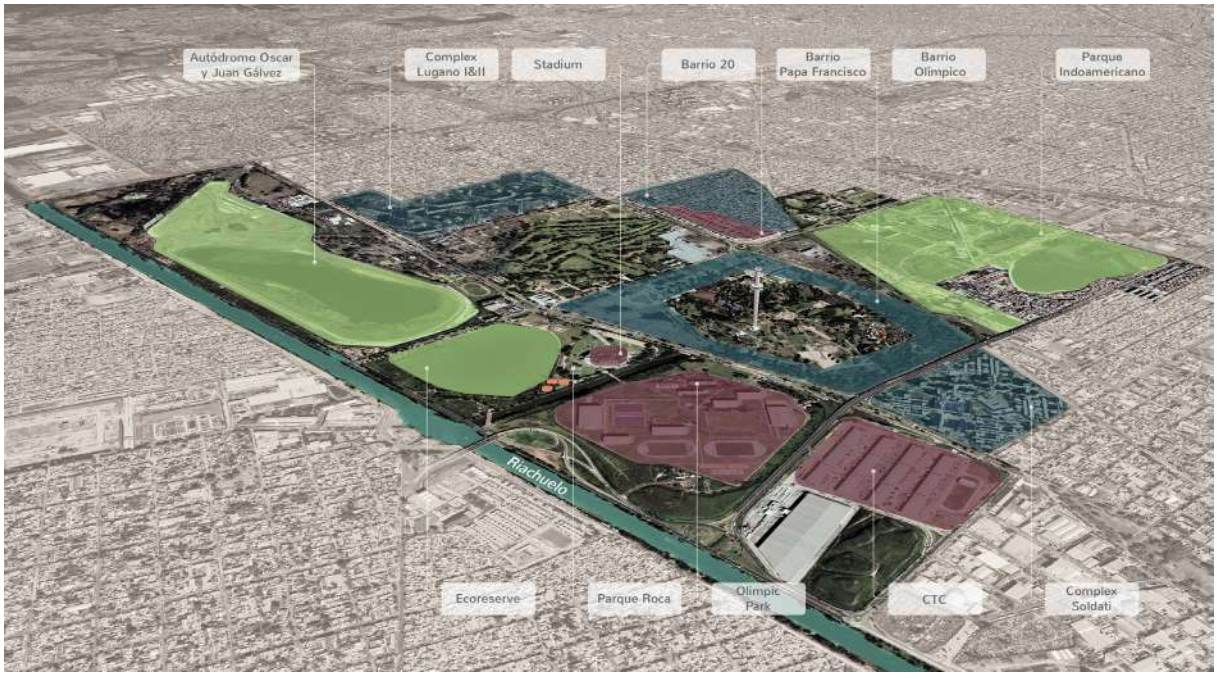

Figure 2: View of the surroundings of Olympic Village in *Comuna 8*, showing major facilities with diversity of uses and barrier effects. From left to right, "Oscar and Julián Álvarez" racetrack, Lugano I and II housing complexes, Lake Lugano Ecological Reserve, Mary Terán de Weiss stadium, Parque Roca, Barrio 20 (informal settlement), Barrio Papa Francisco (social housing), *Barrio Olímpico* next to Parque de la Ciudad, Parque Indoamericano (public space), CTC logistics and freight infrastructure, and Riachuelo river in the lower front. Source: CEEU (2023)

In view of this opportunity, the Government of CABA coordinated efforts across various governmental departments, the private sector, and local stakeholders to develop new infrastructure that was intended to generate lasting territorial impacts. When analysing investment processes in other mega-event host cities (Zhang and Wu, 2008), the basic needs for Olympic infrastructure were seen to be defined around certain common facilities: sports venues, athlete accommodation, transport improvements, and upgrades to surrounding urban environments.

Subsequently, in 2016, Law No. 5704 was passed. This authorised the urbanisation of 100 hectares of the *Parque de la Ciudad* and 51 hectares of *Villa Soldati*, with funds allocated to improve infrastructure in the *Comuna 8* - including the socio-urban integration process of *Villa 20*. In the same year, the *Puente Olímpico Ribera Sur* (Olympic Bridge) was constructed over the Riachuelo River, connecting CABA with the municipality of Lanús in the Buenos Aires Province. This road crossing is suitable for light vehicles, passenger transport, and heavy traffic, and also includes pedestrian walkways as well as a cycle lane. The main objective of its construction was to improve connectivity between the city and surrounding municipalities, and through doing so it also contributed to the creation of a new urban centrality (GCBA, 2025a).

With regard to the Olympic Games themselves, specific facilities were created, including a high-performance sports complex, an Olympic and diving pool, a tennis stadium, five subdividable pavilions, and two athletics tracks (GCBA, 2025b). To accommodate the athletes, a competition was held to design twenty-nine nine-storey buildings grouped into five blocks, providing 1,370 residential units (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Collective housing buildings in the Olympic Village, characterized by medium density and a perimeter block configuration that integrates green spaces and active ground-floor uses, supporting urban continuity and community life. infrastructure. Source: Buenos Aires City Government, 2019.

3. The Olympic Legacy

3.1 Socio-Economic Context of Comuna 8

Before analysing the externalities produced by Olympic infrastructure, it is necessary to understand the socio-economic context in which these interventions were situated. The historical lack of a cohesive urban strategy for the area, combined with fragmented and poorly coordinated interventions, has produced persistent territorial inequalities. The territory comprising *Comuna 8* has historically been the most disadvantaged area of CABA in terms of urban development (Cortés and Elinbaum, 2019).

This structural disadvantage was reflected across virtually every indicator of urban development, housing quality and access to services, positioning *Comuna 8* consistently below the citywide average (INDEC, 2024; Carmona, 2017). A second defining feature was the territory's structural fragmentation: approximately 43% of *Comuna 8*'s surface was affected by urban barriers, large-scale infrastructure, transport corridors, industrial facilities and discontinuous open spaces, that fragmented internal connectivity and isolated the area from the rest of the city (CEEU, 2023).

A third feature, more recent but analytically central, is the persistence of 205 vacant plots in the immediate surroundings of the Olympic perimeter, seven years after its completion. These plots are the empirical signature that the housing project alone did not generate the urban dynamics it was expected to trigger. Together, these three conditions, structural disadvantage, urban fragmentation and vacant land in the post-Olympic perimeter, define the problem which the Olympic experience sought to respond to; not to be another instrument added to the series, but to be a catalytic device that would articulate what previous interventions had left disconnected.

3.2 Tools for Accessing Affordable Housing

The planning actions deployed for the Youth Olympic Games were framed within a set of instruments which sought to facilitate access to housing through the residential units originally built to accommodate athletes. These instruments, not the buildings themselves, constitute the housing dimension of the Olympic device.

The *BO* project was framed under City Law No. 6137, the Affordable Housing Plan, which targets middle-income families that are able to allocate up to 30% of their income to housing. The *Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad* (IVC) launched the *BO* programme to allocate the units, with a distribution scheme designed to encourage local rooting: 50% for residents of *Comuna 8* with over five years of residence (with priority extended to other southern communes if the threshold was not met), 10% each for teachers and police officers employed by the City Government, and 30% for the broader CABA area (IVC, 2025)[2]. Taken together, Law 6137, the IVC programme and the UVA instrument constitute a single operational architecture: a housing device specifically configured for the post-Olympic transition.

The Olympic device did not, however, operate in isolation. Adjacent to the Olympic perimeter, and within the same administrative window, the socio-urban integration of *Villa 20* was advanced under Law No. 5705 (2016) (Figure 4). The *Mesa de Gestión Participativa* established in 2016 anchored a process-oriented methodology; what Motta and Almansi (2017) describe as a "project-process": a project logic in which the project evolves as the process advances, and a procedural logic in which the process is redefined as the project takes shape. This effort gave rise to the *Proyecto Integral de Reurbanización* (PIRU) and to the *Barrio Papa Francisco* public housing complex of 904 units which is located on a plot adjacent to the Olympic Village.

2 Access operated through Unidades de Valor Adquisitivo (UVA) mortgage loans, an indexation mechanism created by the Central Bank of Argentina in 2016, adjusted daily through the Reference Stabilisation Coefficient to preserve the real value of capital over time (Observatorio Económico Social, 2018).

Figure 4: View of *Villa 20 (bottom)*, social housing in *Barrio Papa Francisco (lower middle), a large grocery store (upper middle) surrounded by a private Golf Club (green area), Barrio Olimpico buildings and the roof-top of Mary Terán stadium (upper left side)*. The image illustrates housing and urban quality differences between the informal settlement, the social housing development and surrounding infrastructure. Source: Matias Beccar Varela Arquitectos Asociados, 2024.

Villa 20 was not catalysed by the Olympic experience. Rather, it followed an autonomous trajectory which was anchored in pre-existing community organising and a regulatory framework that was distinct from Law 6137. Its analytical relevance lies elsewhere: in its simultaneity. The coexistence of two contemporaneous housing operations on adjacent plots, one targeted at middle-income families through market-indexed mortgages, the other at residents of an informal settlement through participatory reurbanisation, made it possible, for the first time, to think of the south of the city as a system rather than as a juxtaposition of disconnected interventions. *Villa 20* is, in this sense, the boundary condition without which the catalytic reading of the Olympic Village would lack territorial scaffolding.

3.3 Assessment of the Impacts of the Olympic Project in Comuna 8

The interventions implemented in the context of the Youth Olympic Games generated both positive and negative externalities, and revealed pre-existing tensions and limitations within traditional approaches to urban planning rather than constituting a direct causal challenge to them.

According to a report produced by the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ, 2023), the construction of 1,665 new housing units in *Barrio Papa Francisco* has provided permanent housing solutions for 18 percent of the neighbourhood's families. 99 percent of surveyed residents stated that the construction of new housing and housing improvements were necessary interventions. Among respondents who were allocated new housing units, 70 percent reported an improvement in housing quality following their relocation. At the same time, the proportion of families relying on informal connections to public utility networks decreased by more than 60 percent (ACIJ, 2023). With regard to the specifics of the *BO* accommodation units, 30 buildings comprising 1,159 housing units were developed and are currently occupied through UVA mortgage loans. It should be noted from an urban development perspective, however, that seven years after completion 205 plots remain available for development. This stagnation in market dynamics suggests that these plots are not attractive for commercialisation, partly due to the characteristics of the immediate surrounding environment.

While the housing projects promoted in the *BO* and in *Barrio 20–Papa Francisco* can be considered successful in facilitating access to affordable housing for low- and middle-income social groups, they were not accompanied by a comprehensive reassessment of the surrounding urban environment (CEEU, 2023). This omission has had direct consequences for the quality of life of both long-standing residents and new inhabitants. The physical context includes factors such as environmental legacies, transport infrastructure, access to public green spaces, and long-established land uses. To examine these issues in greater detail, perception surveys were conducted among residents of the *BO* and users of the surrounding public spaces. The questionnaires covered a broad range of topics related to everyday life in the neighbourhood, and sought to capture perspectives from the local community (CEEU, 2023).

Among the issues raised by residents, environmental legacies emerged as the first concern. The area currently occupied by the *BO* originated as a municipal landfill in the late 1940s, generating negative externalities for the surrounding territory. The closure of the landfill during the last civic–military dictatorship (1976-1983) led to the planning of large semi-public green spaces in its place, such as *Parque Roca* and *Parque de la Ciudad*. This legacy has been compounded by the mixed residential–industrial profile that characterises much of *Comuna 8,* and entails specific requirements related to freight transport. As a logistics-oriented area, it exhibits deficiencies in the number and routes of bus lines, which negatively affects its connectivity with the rest of the city. In addition, shortcomings in the design of bus stops and shelters discourage the use of public transport. The Premetro light rail service has also not undergone any substantive improvement in terms of service provision and frequency; it is widely perceived not only as unreliable and, at times, unsafe. Public space likewise requires substantial revision, particularly with respect to walkability. A lack of pedestrian-oriented design in streets and sidewalks is evident, and makes even short-distance trips difficult. Accessibility barriers are also present for people with disabilities and for users of all ages and physical conditions because of the absence of accessible crossings, adequate minimum widths, and tactile and auditory elements. These shortcomings are especially pronounced along Avenues Fernández de la Cruz, Escalada (the immediate urban surroundings of *Villa 20* and *Barrio Papa Francisco*), and Roca (CEEU, 2023). As a result of deficient connectivity and limited access to public transport, the use of private vehicles is essential for residents.

Residential developments have also failed to adequately account for the increases in car ownership and parking demands that generated by the new housing stock. This has resulted in a high occupation of public space by parked vehicles. The streets of the *BO* were not designed for this sort of demand and it has led to an undermining of the quality of the urban environment. Large-scale public transport options, as well as active mobility infrastructure such as cycling lanes, also remain incomplete and there is also a lack of transfer hubs that would facilitate intermodality.

Regarding land uses, the area has not been subject to systematic evaluation processes or adjustment strategies throughout the presentation of plans and programmes that would guide it towards a configuration compatible with emerging residential dynamics and mixed-use development. Residents have expressed the need for neighbourhood-scale commercial services for the purchase of everyday goods (CEEU, 2023). At present, there is a noticeable scarcity of accessible local retail options, either due to low occupancy rates or high prices. At the same time, large-scale infrastructure such as the sports complex in *Parque Roca* and the tower[3] in *Parque de la Ciudad* remain underutilised. Although the sports complex is of metropolitan scale, neither it nor the *Parque de la Ciudad* are currently open to the public.

Finally, despite the abundance of green spaces in the area, their management is fragmented across multiple jurisdictions and agencies, hindering the consolidation of a coordinated and effective governance framework for this socio-environmental resource (CEEU, 2023). Although *Comuna 8* has the highest amount of green space per capita in the city, access to its 285 hectares of publicly owned green areas remains limited for a large proportion of residents. These parks are largely underutilised; difficult to access due to physical, regulatory and safety barriers; and lack unified management and programming oriented towards community needs (CEEU, 2023).

3 The tower in the Parque de la Ciudad (Villa Soldati, Buenos Aires) is officially known as the Torre Espacial (Space Tower). Manufactured in Austria in 1980, it stands as the tallest structure in Argentina and features a 360-degree observation deck offering unparalleled views of the city. It is considered one of the most iconic landmarks of the southern area of CABA.

The challenges identified through the diagnosis of *Comuna 8*, together with the limited impacts of Olympic infrastructure, reveal a territory that continues to face significant socio-economic disadvantages, particularly in terms of employment and poverty, as well as challenges related to urban barriers and access to urban resources. Nevertheless, the presence of substantial underutilised areas, as well as the area's existing infrastructure, strategically designated districts (such as the Sports District), and the urbanisation of *Villa 20* (later renamed *Barrio 20–Papa Francisco*) constitute key opportunities for future development and urban integration (Arqueros, and González Redondo, 2017). In addition, the availability of 205 vacant plots represents a concrete opportunity to promote new urban developments aligned with the needs of current and future residents.

These conditions help explain why the Olympic Village was subsequently reframed not only as a housing legacy, but also as a potential entry point for a broader territorial strategy in the south of the city.

4. A Vision for the South of the City

4.1 Scope, Status, and Analytical Standpoint of the Scheme

This section examines a set of strategic visions and guidelines developed between 2022 and 2024 for the *Barrio Olimpico* and, subsequently, for the southern area of CABA. These schemes neither constituted a statutory urban plan in the strict sense, nor corresponded to a single document formally approved by the city government. Rather, they emerged from processes of applied planning and strategic reflection promoted by local public actors, and also benefitted from the participation of academic institutions and contributions from other relevant stakeholders.

In particular, the so-called *Vision for the BO* (2022) was developed through a planning process which lasted approximately eight months, and combined technical analysis, background review, surveys, interviews, and spaces for exchange with local actors. The authors of this article, acting from a technical-academic position, participated in this process through a technical assistance programme provided to *Corporación Buenos Aires Sur*, a public development corporation established in 2000. Their contribution focused on territorial diagnosis, information systematisation, and the formulation of strategic guidelines for the southern part of the city. Subsequently, some of the lessons derived from this experience informed a broader Vision for the Southern Area of the City (2025), which was promoted by the local government towards a wider territorial scale (CEEU, 2025).

The analysis that follows adopts a critical ex post perspective on these schemes. Subsections 4.2 to 4.4 primarily employ a descriptive and analytical register, that seeks to reconstruct the content of the visions, their multi-scalar logic, spatial mechanisms, and intervention guidelines. Subsection 4.5 develops a critical assessment that identifies strengths, limitations, and conditions for implementation, as well as introducing analytical distance from the documents and processes under review. This framing seeks to avoid a normative reading of the text, and instead positions it as an academic reflection on an experience of applied planning.

4.2 A New Multiscale and Sustainable Vision for Bo

The *Vision for the BO* (2022) was conceived as a strategic framework that would capitalise on the infrastructure legacy of the mega-event while addressing persistent urban deficits in its immediate surroundings; deficits aggravated and made more visible by the pandemic. This vision was neither a statutory urban plan nor a closed set of projects. Instead, it operated as a conceptual structure that organised priorities, intervention sequences, and scales of action. Its objective was to move beyond the logic of fragmented and episodic interventions that have historically characterised the southern part of the city, and establish a pathway of sustained actions over the medium and long term.

From an analytical standpoint, the vision was structured around three core components. First, it adopted an articulated planning approach that combined the actions of local public actors with contributions from academia, the private sector (including urban developers, builders, and local retailers), as well as organisations

and residents from the area. Within this framework, citizen participation, through surveys, interviews, and experiences of community organisation, played a relevant role as a mechanism for producing territorially grounded knowledge and for making everyday issues visible. However, these participatory instances were not conceived as binding decision-making mechanisms. Instead, they functioned primarily as inputs for diagnosis, legitimacy, and the prioritisation of interventions (Campos-Sánchez, Abarca-Álvarez, and Domínguez, 2018).

Second, the vision was organised as a roadmap that distinguished between different levels of definition. The pillars articulated long-term guiding principles; the themes delineated strategic fields of intervention; and the concrete projects translated these guidelines into actions situated in both territory and time. This structure was intended to facilitate temporal sequencing, adaptation to changing contexts, and the progressive accumulation of impacts, while avoiding the assumption that complex structural problems could be resolved simultaneously.

Finally, the vision did not seek merely to maximise the use of what had already been built, but rather to activate the potential of the neighbourhood and its surroundings as an emerging centrality in the southern part of the city. To this end, it adopted a multiscalar approach (Figure 5), understood as the simultaneous consideration of the geographical and governance scales relevant to urban planning (Campos-Sánchez, Abarca-Álvarez, and Domínguez, 2018).

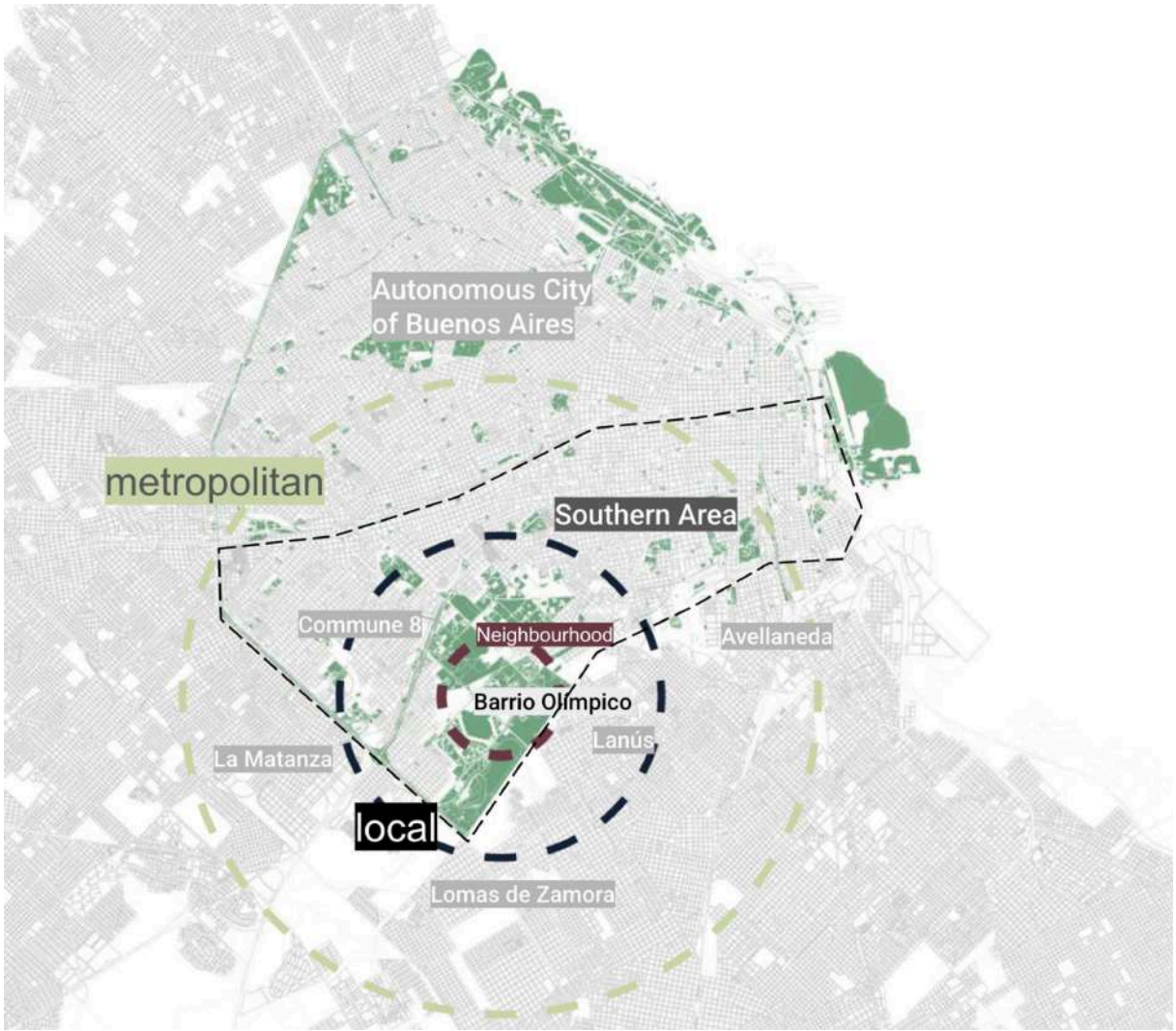

Figure 5: Multiscale Urban Vision Map. Source: CEEU (2023).

At the neighbourhood scale, the vision prioritised the consolidation of the *BO* as a "complete neighbourhood", and sought to improve access to green and public spaces; ensure transport provision and connectivity; promote leisure and community-oriented activities; enable proximity-based retail; and secure close access to healthcare and educational services. This approach sought to ensure that most daily needs could be met on foot or by bicycle, in line with the principle of proximity. Community sustainability, in this sense, derives not only from material urban conditions but also from social interaction, local collective institutions, trust, safety, and a positive identification with place (Dempsey *et al.* 2011).

At the commune scale, the vision sought to reinforce territorial identity by valuing the social, cultural, environmental, and economic assets of *Comuna 8*. It acknowledged the need to articulate the neighbourhood with broader centralities, facilities, and territorial dynamics, particularly those associated with *Villa Soldati* and *Villa Lugano*.

At the metropolitan scale, the vision assumed that several of the area's structuring conditions, such as everyday mobility, access to employment, and socio-environmental barriers, extend beyond the administrative boundaries of the city; thereby anticipating the need for interjurisdictional coordination mechanisms. *Comuna 8* borders four municipalities in the Province of Buenos Aires (Lomas de Zamora, Lanús, Avellaneda and La Matanza) and is located along a historical edge shaped by the Riachuelo River and its associated environmental liabilities. In this context, the vision articulated the aspiration to transform the *BO* into a metropolitan centrality "at a human scale", and thus sought to leverage the area's ecodiverse character, preserve neighbourhood identities, and promote more inclusive forms of economic development whilst reducing the gap between the southern part of the city and the citywide average.

Taken together, these scales provided an orienting framework for public action. Their effectiveness depended on its translation into operational instruments, institutional arrangements, and management capacities; all critically examined in the following sections.

4.3 Formulation Process and Participation: Contributions, Scope, and Limitations

The *Vision for the BO* was structured around five pillars, conceived to respond to the needs and challenges of the neighbourhood and its immediate surroundings, with territorial cohesion being the central premise. In this paper, cohesion is understood as the reduction of spatial inequalities in access to services, facilities, and urban opportunities, operationalised through accessibility criteria (Dempsey *et al.* 2011). These pillars emerged from an eight-month collaborative planning process that combined quantitative and qualitative analyses, a background review, and inputs from various key stakeholders.

To understand the role played by participatory inputs in the design of the vision, including surveys, interviews, and experiences such as *Mesa Activa*, it is necessary to clarify their functions within the process. Surveys and interviews made it possible to identify everyday problems, perceptions of safety and mobility, barriers to facilities, and intervention priorities from the perspective of residents and users. In parallel, experiences of community organisations such as *Mesa Activa* contributed to the production of local knowledge about urban projects and helped make visible territorially grounded demands that do not always emerge through formal technical instances.

Taken together, these instruments operated primarily as tools for diagnosis and prioritisation, and provided relevant information for the construction of the strategic vision as well as the strengthening of its social legitimacy. However, their translation into binding decisions and stable co-implementation mechanisms was heterogeneous, varying across thematic axes and project types. In most cases, participation was not institutionalised as a permanent governance arrangement but rather remained limited to the formulation stage of the process.

This clarification is central to enabling maintenance of an analytical distance from the process under examination. Participation is not assumed here as an "automatic" attribute nor as a guarantee of outcomes, but rather as a component with concrete scope and verifiable limits; shaped by institutional frameworks, management capacities, and pre-existing power relations. In turn, acknowledging these limits enabled a more rigorous assessment of both the potential and the tensions inherent in participatory approaches to applied urban planning.

4.4 The Scheme for the Southern Area of the City: Scale Expansion and Spatial Mechanisms

The formulation process of the Vision for the *BO* highlighted a recurrent finding: many of the issues addressed, such as urban barriers, connectivity deficits, functional fragmentation, and limited access to opportunities, exceeded the boundaries of the neighbourhood scale. Materials generated through the planning process, including interviews and surveys, pointed to the need for a broader territorial scope and an adaptive approach that was capable of engaging with the heterogeneous realities of the immediate surroundings as well as the dynamics operating at urban and metropolitan scales.

This diagnosis prompted a strategic expansion of the approach. Rather than consolidating as a standalone project, the *BO* was integrated as a reference point within a larger-scale vision. As a result, its role was, in this sense, defined less by direct territorial effects than by its condition as a methodological and institutional pilot case, through which diagnostic approaches, actor articulation, and project structuring methods were tested and subsequently used to inform a broader strategy. The catalytic effect lay in the transfer and scaling of these frameworks rather than in the immediate spatial transformation.

Following the 2022 vision plan, the development of a Vision for the Southern Area of the City was promoted with the involvement of public sector actors and academic institutions. The vision seeks to foster more balanced territorial development, stronger metropolitan connectivity and improved conditions for quality of life, within a long-term sustainability framework (CEEU, 2025). Its strategic guidelines build upon and expand the pillars developed for the *BO*, and seek to organise intervention across three integrative urban sectors: Southwest, South-Central and Southeast; each address a distinct territorial logic. The Southwest Sector reconfigures a territory of large, fragmented projects into an urbanism of proximity; the South-Central Sector consolidates the southern area as an articulating node within a more integrated metropolis; and the Southeast Sector reconverts fragmented and isolated ecosystems into an articulated network of mixed-use labour markets (CEEU, 2025). The three sectors are unified by the multiscalar logic and the project-process roadmap originally developed in the *BO*. This is the same device, now operating at a territorial scale roughly five times larger.

The scheme also incorporates a multisectoral governance approach which recognises the role of the private sector in terms of capital, innovation, and operational capacity, as well as the contribution of the academic sector to the production of informed, evidence-based planning. In addition, it introduces the principle of temporal continuity: while the vision operates with a long-term strategic horizon, certain interventions take the form of targeted projects that have been designed for specific areas within this broader framework. An example of the same includes the Sáenz–Parque Patricios Walkability Axis (CEEU, 2025). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this articulation between temporal horizons depends on the capacity of the city government to translate these guidelines into operational instruments and stable institutional agreements, an issue that is critically examined in the following section.

4.5 Critical Assessment of the Scheme: Contributions, Risks, and Conditions of Feasibility

Compared to earlier approaches that were characterised by fragmented interventions, weak intersectoral coordination, and limited temporal continuity, the scheme introduces several relevant contributions. Notably, it proposes a multiscalar architecture that links neighbourhood-level proximity, urban connectivity, and metropolitan relationships, while explicitly acknowledging territorial heterogeneity as a starting point. The organisation into complementary sectors avoids homogeneous responses to diverse challenges, and the definition of a roadmap combining long-term strategic objectives with short-term projects suggests an intention to sequence interventions and enable the cumulative build-up of impacts over time.

These strengths, however, coexist with significant implementation risks. There remains a clear imbalance between the ambition of the scheme's principles, particularly those related to integration, coordination, and sustainability, and the degree of development of the operational mechanisms required to make them effective. Issues such as institutional responsibilities, financing instruments, management capacities, and coordination across government levels remain insufficiently specified. In a territorially fragmented context with overlapping jurisdictions (Pírez, 2005), implementation is not a secondary concern but a central condition of feasibility and one of the scheme's main vulnerabilities.

Regarding participation, the process incorporates consultation mechanisms and forms of local knowledge production, such as surveys, interviews, and community-based experiences, that informed diagnosis and prioritisation (CEEU, 2025). Nevertheless, a key challenge lies in translating these inputs into verifiable decisions and sustained co-implementation arrangements. From a critical perspective, participation contributes to legitimacy, but its effectiveness depends on institutionalisation through clear rules, continuity, traceability of contributions, and accountability mechanisms. Where these are weak or absent, the transformative potential of participation is limited.

The notion of the *BO* as a "catalyst" also requires clarification. In this analysis, its catalytic role is understood primarily in methodological and institutional terms. The *BO* functioned as a pilot case through which diagnostic approaches, actor coordination, and a portfolio of projects were tested, with lessons subsequently scaled up to the wider southern area (CEEU, 2025). Spatially, its role is, however, more constrained. Its catalytic effectiveness lies precisely in not directly structuring the territory, but in having enabled the development of the frameworks, instruments, and coordination mechanisms through which broader territorial structuring can occur. While a counterfactual assessment remains limited, the absence of such a coordinated intervention would likely have reinforced existing patterns of fragmentation.

Finally, given *Comuna 8's* location along the boundary with Lomas de Zamora, Lanús, and La Matanza, the scheme's effectiveness also depends on how metropolitan dynamics, such as daily mobility, access to employment, consumption circuits, and urban continuity, are addressed. Without interjurisdictional instruments or stable coordination agreements (Pírez, 2005), there is a risk that metropolitan integration will remain as solely a guiding principle rather than an operational mechanism. Recognising this dimension does not dilute the focus on the southern area of Buenos Aires but rather acknowledges that many of its territorial dynamics are shaped in relation to adjacent municipalities and the Matanza–Riachuelo basin as a shared socio-environmental structure.

In sum, the scheme for the whole southern area articulates a plausible hypothesis for territorial transformation, grounded in a multiscalar design and a nuanced reading of territorial heterogeneity. At the same time, it faces critical challenges related to implementation, the institutionalisation of participation, and metropolitan coordination. Making these tensions explicit is a necessary condition for assessing the scheme's viability and long-term scope. In this sense, the case demonstrates both the capacity to reframe territorial planning approaches as well as the limits of translating strategic visions into sustained material outcomes.

5. Conclusion

Urban planning in CABA, and particularly in its southern area, has historically produced limited structural impacts, largely due to fragmented implementation, episodic interventions, and weak temporal continuity. The infrastructure developed for the 2018 Youth Olympic Games largely reproduced this pattern: while it generated both positive and negative externalities, its impacts have been uneven. Despite the provision of affordable, good-quality housing, the Olympic Village continues to face significant deficits in access to urban amenities, proximity-based services, and articulation with metropolitan centralities and opportunities. In this context, the Vision for the *BO* represents an effort to reorient mega-event-related investments and address persistent inequalities through a more integrated and multiscalar approach, while also providing an opportunity to critically reassess the Olympic experience within broader debates on the 'city of exception' (Friendly, 2020). In this sense, the case can be understood as a partial and conditional success, in which methodological and institutional advances coexist with limited territorial transformation.

From the perspective developed in this article, the *BO* functioned as a "catalyst" primarily in methodological and institutional terms. Rather than operating as a single structuring centre for the southern area of Buenos Aires city, it served as a pilot case through which diagnostic frameworks, planning instruments, and modes of actor articulation were tested and later scaled up within the Vision for the Southern Area. However, the feasibility of this agenda depends less on the quality of strategic design than on its translation into sustained public action. Clear institutional arrangements, operational instruments, metropolitan coordination mechanisms, and the institutionalisation of participation are essential to avoid reproducing the historical gap between integrative principles and implementation capacity. Making these conditions explicit does not weaken the

article's argument; rather, it strengthens its contribution to debates on urban planning, mega-event legacies, and territorial transformation in complex metropolitan contexts.

The analysis shows that catalytic interventions in fragmented metropolitan contexts operate less through immediate spatial effects than through the generation and scaling of planning frameworks, institutional arrangements, and coordination mechanisms.

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FRENCH DOUBLE BIND: RECONCILING PLANNING AND PROJECT

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Abstract

French planning is characterized by a persistent duality, wherein a centralized regulatory framework coexists with flexible, design-driven, project-based practices. The analysis in this paper situates these developments within the broader evolution of French planning, tracing the transition from postwar centralization to decentralization and ecological transition. It addresses the separation which exists between statutory planning and project delivery via Zones d'Aménagement Concerté (ZACs), the emergence of the projet urbain as a negotiated design practice, and the rise of tactical urbanism since the 2000s. By engaging with five contemporary trajectories in architecture and planning—from post-urbanism to political contextualism—the paper contends that effective planning must integrate spatial rationality, local specificity, and political agency, while acknowledging power and resource asymmetries. The conclusion advocates for strategic incrementalism, suggesting that the future of French planning relies on transforming the plan-project duality from a structural constraint into a productive tension that supports adaptive, equitable, and democratic urban development.

Keywords:

French urban planning, projet urbain, tactical urbanism, PLUb Paris, Paris 2024 Olympics, urban governance, contextualism, ecological transition.

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French planning follows a hybrid trajectory, blending distinctive national characteristics with practices common to other advanced economies. Understanding the origins of current dualities requires acknowledging that, despite substantial postwar transformations, this approach has yielded relatively stable policy outcomes. It also acknowledges that the state of French theoretical debate is inadequate to map and represent the actual practices or to compare and defend them within the international debate. The aims of this paper are to set the field of this tension, to show what is vital in French debates and what needs to be positioned, as well as illustrate, how the international debate can learn from France.

Surprisingly, while international scholars have enormously exploited French theories to understand postwar urbanization process, and even more, French theories do not weigh in the world of planning (Allmendinger 2002) and international 'planning theories' do not feature much in France (Maulat, 2020; Bognon *et al.*, 2020). When it comes to the divide between plan and design, French planning literature is either conservative, claiming continuity with the glorious past (Merlin 2007) or defending the ruins (Desjardins 2020) against rampant invaders; or self-critical, celebrating the innovative turn (Novarina 2003; Ingallina 2013). In between, a rich field of interdisciplinary empirical research deploys critical, sociological and ethnographic analyses that illuminate both practices and theories. This corpus fails, however, to invigorate the academic international debate.

This paper analyses this cleavage by first setting the scene: planning practice in France is highly innovative, although encounters some institutional freins. The new urban plan and the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris provides a dual lens to revisit French planning traditions and theoretical frameworks.

The *Plan Local d'Urbanisme bioclimatique* (PLUb) in Paris confronts statutory planning with the limits of dominant international planning theories and reopens long-standing debates within French scholarship on the political nature of regulation, negotiation, and incremental change. The PLUb exemplifies an intermediate and deeply political form of urbanism (Cremaschi, *forthcoming*), in which regulatory tools are explicitly recalibrated to address highly specific local conditions, including climate vulnerability, uneven heat-island effects, high office vacancy rates, tourism pressure, and pronounced territorial inequalities. Rather than pursuing comprehensive transformation, the plan relies on negotiated, incremental adjustments within existing institutional and regulatory constraints, and seeks to maintain spatial coherence over time. In doing so, the PLUb foregrounds planning as a structured field of negotiation shaped by unequal distributions of resources, authority, and legitimacy. These features challenge long-standing assumptions underlying French planning and point towards a context-aware rationality that selectively integrates elements of the *projet urbain* into statutory planning processes.

The planning and implementation of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games magnify both the system's capacity for centralized coordination and controlled experimentation, and its limits in terms of democratic accountability and social equity (Delaplace, 2026; Jreij, 2026, this issue). Importantly, Paris 2024 was framed not as a standalone event but as a catalyst for sustainability, territorial rebalancing, and long-term metropolitan transformation. Simultaneously, Paris 2024 deployed a strongly place-oriented, design-led approach in the historic core. The Olympic Village in Saint-Denis further illustrates the interplay between top-down strategy and place-based objectives: conceived as a flagship regeneration project, the 51-hectare development is intended to be converted into a mixed-use neighbourhood with substantial social and affordable housing and climate-resilient design features (Lopes dos Santos, Delaplace, 2024). However, critics argue that narratives of sustainability and legacy risk are obscuring displacement, social disruption, and gentrification pressures in already vulnerable territories (Faure, 2021; Wolfe, 2023).

The two Parisian cases—one exemplifying a context-sensitive response to the climate crisis, the other involving the time-bound management of a mega-event—underscore ongoing tensions within the Planning system in France: plan versus project, centralisation versus local adaptation, and regulatory stability versus design-led experimentation. Starting from these examples, the paper re-examines France's planning tradition, its ongoing transformation and dilemmas, and potential exit routes.

Section One follows the French shift from a centralised, redistributive system to a fragmented, multi-level governance structure shaped by decentralisation, globalisation, and ecological imperatives. This evolution has been marked by a persistent tension between regulatory planning and project-based practices, which continues to influence debates regarding the planning system's capacity and the planning agency's role in addressing contemporary social and environmental challenges.

Section Two delves into the tool *Zones d'Aménagement Concerté* (a mixed development tool: ZACs), which institutionalize a functional separation between statutory planning and project delivery via negotiated, publicly led development processes. While this model allows for coordination among public authorities, developers, and civil society, it also constrains ecological ambition and long-term coherence. Financial pressures, extended implementation timelines, and the challenge of reconciling multiple, often competing objectives limit the transformative potential of ZAC-based development.

Section Three analyses the emergence of the *projet urbain* as a negotiated, design-led response to the limitations of centralized and regulatory planning. This approach offers flexibility, contextual sensitivity, and opportunities for political negotiation. However, its partial and uneven integration into statutory planning frameworks contributes to institutional fragmentation and perpetuates enduring tensions within French urbanism.

Section Four discusses the expansion of tactical urbanism in France since the 2000s, focusing on temporary uses, co-production, and experimental interventions. While these practices foster participation and innovation, they also raise unresolved questions regarding value creation, power asymmetries, and the extent to which such interventions generate substantive and lasting urban change.

Finally, contemporary debates in architecture and planning are discussed, identifying five principal trajectories as potential exit strategies from the current theoretical impasse. Three of these either reinforce dominant paradigms or remain marginal, while two—contextual material rationality and politically informed planning—are best positioned to address structural urban challenges. Collectively, these approaches emphasise the integration of spatial logic, local specificity, and political agency as foundations for more equitable, adaptable, and democratic urban development.

The conclusion proposes strategic incrementalism as a pathway forward: regulatory frameworks establishing binding ecological and social objectives that also enable context-sensitive implementation through projects and experimental practices. French planning's future depends on institutionalising the political literacy and contextual sensitivity exemplified by the PLUb and Paris 2024: transforming the plan-project duality from a structural constraint into a productive tension that sustains adaptive, equitable, and democratic urban development.

1. A rigid planning legacy

A comprehensive assessment of contemporary French planning necessitates analysis of its long-term institutional transformation and the underlying tensions that influence its current operational modes.

Since the mid-twentieth century, French planning has undergone a significant transformation. Initially conceived as a centralised, technocratic mechanism for redistributing national growth, it has gradually evolved into a decentralised, multi-level governance system. Currently, it confronts the challenge of reconciling ecological imperatives with entrenched local autonomy. This evolution demonstrates both the adaptability of a traditionally hierarchical planning structure and the inherent limitations of decentralisation within a system originally designed for centralised control. Consequently, French planning now faces the challenge of achieving greater flexibility while maintaining effectiveness.

The historical development of French regional planning illustrates a distinctive trajectory of institutional change and political culture. This trajectory reflects both structural discontinuities in the rationale for regional planning and the persistence of a strong localist political culture. French regional planning has evolved through three principal "ages" (Desjardins and Estèbe, 2021):

- The first age (1947–1980) defined by postwar modernization and a Fordist-Keynesian approach to redistribution and state-led territorial cohesion. Within an urban hierarchy dominated by Paris, planners sought to mitigate excessive centralization by promoting industrial decentralization and establishing *métropoles d'équilibre*;

- The second in the 1980s emerged from the interplay between decentralisation and globalisation. Cities received significant authority and became increasingly involved in global competition for investment and skilled labour. Planning adopted a more entrepreneurial orientation; marking a shift from redistributive territorial policies to urban branding and competitiveness.

- after 2010, a third age is increasingly being defined by the ecological imperative influenced by laws in 2014 and 2015 that strengthened metropolitan bodies and regions. This approach emphasises coordination rather than hierarchical control, and signals a broader transition from government to governance.

From a comparative standpoint, the French system operates under a 'decentralised imperative.' While the central state keeps strategic authority, operational power is widely distributed. Municipalities and inter-municipal bodies are responsible for legally binding plans. This fragmentation leads to competition for tax bases and development projects. It often undermines territorial coherence (Demazière, 2019).

The centralised planning system supported mass housing, new towns, and major infrastructure networks, playing a decisive role in national modernisation and, more recently, in reducing Paris's dominance in favour of secondary metropolitan centres (Veltz, 2017). However, rational–comprehensive planning has faced substantial criticism for its technocratic orientation, disregard for local contexts, and reinforcement of structural power imbalances (Desjardins, 2020). In response, critical urban sociology and grassroots movements advocated for participatory, conflictual, and deliberative approaches, though these initiatives primarily addressed distributive conflicts rather than fundamentally altering planning instruments. French practices and debates frequently addressed issues such as participation, negotiation, and contextualism prior to their international prominence, yet these contributions often struggled for recognition within comparative planning theory. While international discourse shifted toward abstraction, French scholarship remained grounded in operational practice and institutional arrangements, reflecting its unique intellectual history (Cremaschi, 2023).

The planning of the Games illustrates the distance travelled from this age-old model, and reflects compromises within the municipal coalition, conflicts with economic stakeholders, and (limited) forms of citizen participation. This political rationality is somehow suspended between renovated technocratic approaches that depoliticise planning decisions and proclaimed consensus-based models that assume deliberation alone can resolve structural conflicts. The ambiguity is structural, and it follows that analytical attention should shift to the processes through which coalitions and oppositions are formed, the relative weight of formal participation versus informal political and economic influence, and the ways in which planning instruments redistribute regulatory burdens and benefits among social groups, property owners, and developers. Somehow these processes are governed (Borraz, Le Galès, 2010; Le Galès, Vitale 2015), though the shape and perimeter keep changing (Artioli, Le Galès 2025).

Despite multiple reforms, the French system still faces persistent structural challenges. First, the decentralisation process created a disconnect: local plans frequently promote land development, whereas national objectives seek to limit it. Second, the proliferation of planning tools increases procedural complexity and obscures accountability, resulting in what some term strategic inflation. Third, the transition to ecological policies raises issues of distributive justice. Measures such as fuel taxes, land-use restrictions, and densification have uneven social impacts, as evidenced by protests such as the *Gilets Jaunes* movement[2].

However, focusing exclusively on regulatory frameworks and institutional constraints risks overlooking the most dynamic aspect of French planning: its project-based practices and experimental approaches, which are examined in the following section.

2 The *Gilets jaunes* ("Yellow Vests") movement emerged in France in late 2018 as a decentralised protest against rising fuel taxes. Initially rooted in rural and peri-urban discontent over mobility costs, it quickly expanded into a broader movement demanding greater social justice, purchasing power, and fiscal fairness.

2. Public-led Mixed Developments

Urban projects in France are mainly organised through ZACs (*Zones d'Aménagement Concerté*) and public development agencies, with some participation from private operators. These initiatives are collective efforts, typically started by public authorities such as local governments, inter-municipal entities, or, in some cases, the national government, and are frequently carried out through inter-administrative cooperation. Although private initiatives are becoming more common, they are most common in the United Kingdom and are only slowly expanding across continental Europe.

The institutional framework of French urban planning is characterised by a distinct separation between regulatory planning and project implementation, primarily facilitated through ZACs, which are managed by public development agencies often structured as public firms. The implementation of ZACs and urban projects involves negotiations among public authorities, private developers, and, occasionally, civil society actors. This separation is a defining characteristic of French planning practice. Urban projects are governed by negotiated contracts and specific agreements while integrating regulatory and project-based approaches. Such reforms might include amendments to existing laws to harmonise planning and development processes, thereby enabling more cohesive project execution. Legislative changes could involve establishing unified frameworks to streamline negotiation requirements, thereby enabling more flexible regulatory planning while maintaining oversight and accountability. Municipal officials aim to maintain both regulatory authority through local urban plans and the capacity to pursue flagship projects via ZACs, yet they express concerns that greater integration could diminish political flexibility during project negotiations. Ensuring financial viability is critical for ZACs; they must balance revenues from land sales and developer fees with expenditures for infrastructure and social housing.

Stringent bioclimatic requirements can threaten the financial viability of urban projects, reinforcing the rationale for maintaining the separation between regulatory planning and project implementation. Paris currently contains several active ZACs, including Chapelle-Charbon, Gare des Mines–Fillettes, and Bercy-Charenton. These projects involve comprehensive redevelopment encompassing infrastructure, public spaces, housing, economic activities, and social facilities; coordinated by the municipality, public development agencies such as SEMAPA (*Société d'étude, de maitrise d'ouvrage et d'aménagement parisienne*) or *Paris and Métropole Aménagement*, and private-sector partners. Many of these initiatives integrate ecological features, such as parks, green roofs, and renewable energy systems. They often exceed minimum social housing requirements.

However, several challenges persist. First, ZAC timelines generally span 10 to 15 years and are often set before the adoption of local urban plans (PLUs). Second, although ecological features are included, few projects surpass minimum regulatory standards. This struggle to exceed minimum standards stems from several barriers. Financial constraints often play a significant role, as more extensive ecological measures can be costly and may exceed budget limitations. Regulatory hurdles may also limit innovation in design and implementation. Additionally, stakeholder resistance arises when interests conflict, leading to compromises that prioritise more immediately impactful objectives over ecological goals. Third, ZACs frequently seek to balance multiple, and sometimes conflicting, objectives, including housing, office space, retail, cultural facilities, transportation, and environmental improvements. These competing priorities result in complex trade-offs, with bioclimatic objectives often competing against other goals (Arab, 2018).

The sociology of urban projects highlights the complexity of these processes, their intermittent nature, and the roles of diverse stakeholders. The shift from intentions to realisations creates a tension between desirable outcomes and practical feasibility, and may lead to ongoing negotiation and adaptation that vary by context and project phase. Civil society plays a critical role during consultation phases by advocating for community needs and ensuring that public interests are reflected in project outcomes. Private developers are pivotal during the design and construction phases, bringing both technical expertise and financial resources to the table. Public agencies coordinate these efforts and align them with regulatory requirements, ensuring compliance with broader planning goals. Numerous studies have analysed the trajectories of urban projects (Arab, 2018; Arab, Dang Vu, 2019) and emphasised the interplay between 'hard' instruments, such as land management, and 'soft' instruments, such as coordination among economic actors during implementation.

Project activities encompass a wide range of operations, from conceptual development and strategic objective setting to functional programming and spatial design. These processes also require stakeholder consultation, technical and administrative management, and operational coordination. The objectives are ambitious and include remediating contaminated soils, revitalising marginal or polluted areas, creating high-quality public spaces, ensuring access to housing to promote social diversity, and providing planned public facilities. The ecological transition introduces additional challenges, such as creating open and permeable spaces; establishing efficient heating and cooling networks; generating energy; implementing nature-based solutions (NBS) for water filtration, collection, and recycling; and achieving sustainable waste management.

3. The Urban Project turn

Since the 1980s, decentralisation, neoliberal reforms, and strategic urbanism have further reshaped the planning landscape. Urban projects have proliferated as instruments of competitiveness and place branding, frequently prioritising efficiency and market rationales over social justice (Pinson and Morel-Journel, 2016). This tension demonstrates that the urban project emerged not merely as a stylistic trend, but also a response to the persistent dominance and critique of the state-led system which followed World War II.

Recent developments in architecture, planning, and urban theory have increasingly positioned the *projet urbain* as a strategic response to the limitations of postwar regulatory planning, particularly in the French context. This renewed focus on the urban project must be understood within the distinct trajectory of French planning, which diverges from Anglo-American developments (Idt, 2020). In both architecture (Devillers, 1994) and critical urbanism, the urban project is conceptualised as a flexible, negotiated, and context-sensitive intervention that emphasises co-production, adaptability, and the rehabilitation of public space (Ingallina, 2008). Drawing on typomorphological traditions (Mangin and Panerai 1994), the concept integrates spatial form and social process, and promotes reversible urban configurations that address economic uncertainty and changing lifestyles. Notable projects such as Portzamparc's Paris Rive Gauche, Chemetoff's work in Nantes (Didelon, 2024), and Michelin's interventions in Bordeaux (Pauchon, 2018) illustrate this doctrinal shift through their having combined design experimentation with innovative forms of urban governance. However, the influence of this debate warrants caution, as its theoretical momentum has diminished while its practical outcomes remain inconsistent.

In this context, the project gained significance from the mid-1980s as both an alternative and a corrective to regulatory planning. This shift represented a partial return to design, though it did not fully resolve the relationship with statutory planning. From the 1990s onward, social science research reconceptualized urban projects as forms of collective action and negotiations of public policy, rather than being merely technical instruments (Arab, 2001; Pinson, 2009). Projects increasingly came to be seen as processes that reshape power relations, mobilize symbolic resources, and yield outcomes that may be unpredictable and only partially consistent with formal plans. The convergence of project-based approaches and urban governance introduced greater flexibility and horizontal coordination but also resulted in new forms of fragmentation.

Empirical research indicates that urban projects and ZACs are most effective when public authorities maintain control over land access, while their influence declines in contexts marked by market dominance, fiscal austerity, and diminished public coordination (Arab and Dang Vu, 2019). In these circumstances, projects often operate outside the PLU framework, and result in 'punctual and disjointed' urban landscapes. Additionally, ZACs face internal challenges, including programmatic inflation, rising transaction costs, and greater organizational complexity.

As consultation mechanisms diverge from the original project doctrine, the risk of fragmentation is heightened. These dynamics reveal enduring tensions at the heart of French urbanism: regulation and design, efficiency and justice, market rationalities, and collective rights. It follows, that the *projet urbain* cannot therefore be reduced to a simple alternative to planning; rather, it functions as a complementary mode of action , the integration of which into statutory frameworks remains unresolved. This unresolved relationship between project-based urbanism and regulatory planning provides the conceptual foundation for the analysis presented in the following sections.

4. Performative urbanism

The emergence of tactical urbanism as both a set of practical interventions and a conceptual framework helps in understanding broader shifts in planning theory and practice. Tactical urbanism is situated within ongoing debates on co-production, governance, and everyday urban life.

Since the early 2000s, tactical or transitional urbanism has emerged as a prominent paradigm in contemporary planning practice. Unlike approaches that rely exclusively on permanent interventions, tactical urbanism emphasises temporary actions to activate underutilised land and buildings and engage local communities before comprehensive redevelopment. These initiatives are distinct from spontaneous or informal occupations, as they are frequently supported by temporary contracts negotiated with public authorities. Such arrangements grant access for cultural, entrepreneurial, or socio-economic activities designed to stimulate revitalisation. In their more institutionalised forms (Cremaschi 2021; Cremaschi and Lucciarini 2022), tactical urbanism practices are integrated into co-production processes, in which public, private, and civil society actors collaboratively provide services and construct common goods. These arrangements intentionally foster direct citizen engagement and frame tactical projects as experimental settings for developing new forms of collective action.

The implementation of tactical projects generally follows an incremental approach. An initial actor—whether public, private, or non-profit—initiates the first intervention, after which additional participants are incorporated through formal invitations or informal networks, coordinated by a site manager. Each stakeholder contributes specific interests, such as economic return, social advancement, training, property enhancement, or community cohesion, which collectively influence the spatial and symbolic dimensions of the intervention. The primary policy challenge is to ensure that these interactions produce enduring public value rather than leading to the privatisation of space or new forms of social exclusion. In this context, tactical urbanism serves as a laboratory for examining agency in urban co-production and enables scholars to investigate how objectives and practices develop through interaction, as well as how local dynamics can shape broader development strategies.

In certain contexts, tactical projects have functioned as platforms for experimenting with the concept of 'open programming'. Traditional urban planning typically relies on interventions that are guided by predetermined objectives and programs. In contrast, participatory practices reveal how small-scale, provisional actions can activate dense networks and facilitate collective learning. Bouchain (in Manelli, 2019) emphasises both a methodological strategy, contending that democracy must question authority, and a 'republican' imperative, stating that public space is a shared space. His notion of 'open programming', as demonstrated in the Marseille *Belle de Mai* project, exemplifies how tactical urbanism can support gradual, incremental, and participatory change (Cremaschi *et al*., 2021). Unlike fixed plans with set timelines and budgets, such as those found in ZACs, open programming initiates site activation through temporary uses, involves residents and users in identifying needs, allows programs to evolve through ongoing learning, and integrates physical infrastructure with social processes. These initiatives frequently leverage regulatory gaps or exemptions, maintain activity during extended development periods, engage communities in neighbourhood renewal, and promote innovation related to urban commons.

Paris provides numerous examples of tactical urbanism that the new PLUb puts at the forefront, including temporary uses of vacant sites, community gardens, pop-up cultural venues, and experimental public-space interventions. Within these activities, new professional actors have emerged, such as NGOs, consultants, and planning firms specializing in the management of temporary occupation contracts and the activation of vacant buildings for artistic, social, or entrepreneurial purposes prior to redevelopment. These practices exemplify flexibility, experimentation, and community engagement; qualities that are frequently absent from regulatory planning.

Scholarly perspectives diverge regarding the transformative potential of tactical urbanism. Some emphasize its capacity for social innovation, while others argue that it remains superficial and primarily serves market interests (Adisson 2017). Critical approaches (Bragaglia and Rossignolo, 2021) concur that everyday practices should not be viewed as alternatives to top-down policies. This perspective is symbolically affirmed by the Austrian pavilion at the 2025 Venice Biennale (Obrist et al., 2025).

From this vantage point, challenges identified by the sociology of urban projects (Arab, 2018) are also evident in tactical urbanism. Both domains emphasize co-production and the public value of space, albeit at different scales and temporalities. The associated risks differ: tactical urbanism may legitimise market-driven transformations, whereas urban projects are constrained by institutional and financial limitations. In both cases, the principal challenge is to balance participation with structural constraints, experimentation with project duration, and immediate action with long-term programming. Rather than being oppositional, tactical urbanism and urban projects are complementary. Tactical urbanism introduces adaptability and innovation, while urban projects offer strategic and institutional coherence. When transition is understood as a process of gradual change and reuse, the intersection of these approaches becomes both relevant and essential.

5. Five Exit Routes

Within the overall context of architecture and planning, five principal pathways currently shape debates and practices. The first three largely reinforce dominant macro-trends, and either advocate impractical forms of withdrawal, or remain peripheral to planning institutions. In contrast, the final two pathways offer greater promise by integrating spatial rationality with political agency and institutional accountability. This paper contends that only a politically literate contextualism can guide cities toward equitable futures. This frames the subsequent analysis of these pathways.

The first way accepts postmodern fragmentation and the emergent hierarchies of post-industrial values without addressing their consequences. Often termed Post- Urbanism and exemplified by the work of Koolhaas, this approach embraces contingency within neoliberal frameworks and treats context as largely inconsequential. Planning practices in regions such as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Russia frequently align with this paradigm, which currently dominates globally. Notable projects, such as Boeri's *Vertical Forest*, Gehry's formal innovations, and the proliferation of waterfront developments which often neglect the threat of rising sea levels, illustrate a significant abdication of responsibility for long-term urban change. According to a UN-Habitat report, urban areas in Asia and Africa face heightened flood risks due to unchecked development and climate change; highlighting the consequences of neglecting sustainable planning (UN-HABITAT 2024). In this framework, urbanism is reduced to spectacle and private consumption, thereby abandoning the goal of shaping collective futures.

The second, New Urbanism, is advanced by proponents such as Andrés Duany, King Charles, and Léon Krier. This approach is defined by formal idealism and a reformist, integrative political orientation. Space is conceptualised as an ordered, normative framework that shapes behaviour through predetermined schemas. The resulting environments are coherent and legible, often manifesting in neighbourhood- and community-oriented designs. Exemplary cases such as Poundbury in the United Kingdom and Seaside in Florida illustrate principles of pedestrian centrality, architectural harmony, and human scale. Nevertheless, this pathway represents a conservative and regressive response which is rooted in a nostalgic invocation of purportedly universal and timeless values.

The third way, Everyday Urbanism, is associated with scholars such as Kalinsky and Crawford, as well as various artistic and activist practices. This approach is driven by a utopian belief in bottom-up activation, which emphasises improvisation, informality, and the presumed equality of spatial uses. The resulting urbanism is dialogic and non-authorial, and prioritises contextual interaction over explicit causal reasoning. It is manifested through temporary, informal, and transitional practices, and often favours unregulated or residual spaces. Consequently, Everyday Urbanism represents a lateral strategy: rather than confronting the constraints and responsibilities inherent in planning, it tends to circumvent them, thereby avoiding the compromises required by institutionalised action. This raises the question of when informal interventions succeed or fail in specific urban contexts, encouraging critical reflection on the practical implications of Everyday Urbanism.

These three pathways are prevalent amongst architects and are often mixed within individual practices. However, they offer limited potential for addressing the structural challenges facing contemporary cities. Two alternative pathways, which may be combined, are better positioned to revitalise planning's relevance.

The first seeks to identify an internal rationality in the spatial arrangement of urban elements over time and across territories. While acknowledging the influence of socio-economic structures, the first pathway investigates whether material constraints, spatial rules, and typological continuities possess a degree of autonomy from purely economic logics. This orientation is closely linked to the work of Bernardo Secchi, who inserted morphology into a political economic understanding of urban change (Secchi 2002). Its outcomes are incremental and context-sensitive, attentive to languages, materials, and existing forms, whilst not resorting to imitation or historicism. Beyond certain formalist tendencies and an emphasis on self-organisation, the central contribution of this approach is its conception of context as the localised articulation of global networks and structural relations that shape, while not fully determining, urban configurations (Kudva and Forrester 2023).

The second conceptualises planning as fundamentally political. Here, politics is not defined by sovereign will or class teleology, but by the interplay of diverse forms of knowledge and power among actors with varying levels of influence and position. This approach explicitly rejects reducing politics to consensus-building, which is increasingly unstable and often arbitrary. Any intervention that engages systems of interaction and power within public space is inherently political. According to the Sciences Po Urban School, planning is 'profoundly' political because it operates through dynamic interactions among actors and produces outcomes that are not predetermined. These outcomes depend on which actors participate and how they act; necessitating empirical examination of their diversity, contingency, and non-linearity (Le Galès andVitale, 2015).

As Palermo (2022) suggests, these two routes can be effectively combined. Integrating contextual materiality with explicit recognition of actor constellations allows planners to acknowledge both the limited autonomy of local configurations and the inherently political nature of spatial intervention. This middle ground, though modest, offers a concrete space for reform-oriented planning that can produce incremental, context-specific results without reverting to modernist abstraction or postmodern fragmentation.

6. Conclusion: Navigating the Double Bind

The contrast between the *Plan Local d'Urbanisme bioclimatique* and the Paris 2024 Olympic Games highlights the ongoing duality at the core of French planning: a centralised, regulatory system confronting the need for flexibility, context awareness, and design-oriented experimentation. Rather than representing incompatible approaches, these two cases illuminate complementary aspects of a planning system in transition; each responds to different timelines, scale challenges, and political rationalities.

Both cases resist fitting into the first three pathways. Neither condones postmodern fragmentation (the first route) nor retreats into nostalgic formalism (the second), nor avoids institutional responsibility by resorting to informal or temporary measures (the third). Instead, they show that effective planning operates at the intersection of spatial logic, local specificity, and political agency—understanding material constraints and typological patterns while actively engaging with power dynamics and contested futures.

The PLUb exemplifies what could be called politically informed contextualism—the fifth pathway identified in this analysis. It functions through negotiated, incremental adjustments of regulatory tools to address highly localised conditions: climate risks, spatial inequality, vacancy issues, and heritage conservation. Its strength lies not in sweeping change but in the selective integration of *projet urbain* principles into official planning; showing that regulation need not be rigid or detached from context. By explicitly emphasising the political nature of planning—acknowledging disparities of power, resources, and legitimacy—the PLUb challenges both technocratic depoliticisation and consensus-based models that conceal structural conflicts. It reflects an intermediate urbanism that maintains spatial coherence while allowing for adaptation over time.

In contrast, Paris 2024 leverages elements of the fourth pathway, contextual material rationality, within an accelerated, centralised governance framework. The Games demonstrate the system's ability for strategic coordination and controlled experimentation, which integrates Olympic infrastructure into long-term metropolitan goals through the Grand Paris Express and territorial renewal strategies. The targeted use of design-led interventions in the historic centre as well as the legacy-focused vision of the Olympic Village in Saint-Denis show attention to place-specific conditions and typological continuities. However, the exceptional regulatory framework, tight timelines, and hierarchical coordination also expose the limits of democratic accountability and the risks of displacement in vulnerable areas.

Together, these cases suggest that French planning is moving toward a hybrid model that combines regulatory stability with project-based flexibility, although this integration remains incomplete and uneven. The PLUb hints at institutionalising negotiated, context-aware regulation that can address ecological transitions without sacrificing statutory coherence. The Games illustrate that exceptional circumstances can accelerate delivery and innovation, but also reveal the dangers of governance arrangements that bypass sustained negotiations and community participation.

The evolution of French planning will depend on its ability to address three interconnected challenges. First, it must achieve greater integration of regulatory planning and project delivery without sacrificing the political flexibility necessary for complex negotiations among diverse stakeholders. This requires not just technical harmonisation but also constitutional and legislative reforms that recognise the complementarity of plans and projects. Second, it must ensure that ecological goals do not reinforce territorial inequalities. The ZAC model's difficulty in exceeding minimal bioclimatic standards and the uncertain distribution of Olympic legacy benefits show that sustainability goals remain vulnerable to financial pressures and competing priorities. Third, it must embed participation that goes beyond mere consultation, thereby creating mechanisms that redistribute not only symbolic but also material resources and decision-making power. Tactical urbanism and open programming, discussed in Section 4, offer valuable insights for this evolution—not as alternatives to formal planning but as experimental labs for co-production, adaptive programming, and community engagement. Their transformative potential depends on integrating them into strategic frameworks that ensure long-term coherence and prevent the privatisation of public value. The challenge is to scale their lessons without losing responsiveness and innovation.

Ultimately, the future of French planning lies in embracing what could be called 'strategic incrementalism': regulatory structures set binding ecological and social goals while allowing for negotiated, context-sensitive implementation through projects, ZACs, and transitional practices. It would require recognising planning as an inherently democratic activity that mediates between expertise and participation, between vision and uncertainty, and between collective ambition and localised knowledge.

The PLUb and Paris 2024, despite their differences, share a key insight: planning's legitimacy depends not on the completeness of its vision or the efficiency of its delivery, but on its ability to foster justice, inclusion, and shared urban agency. Whether French planning can realise this potential depends on its willingness to embed the political literacy and contextual sensitivity exemplified by these cases and thereby transform isolated experiments into systemic practice. Only then can the persistent duality between regulation and project cease to be a barrier and instead become a productive tension that fosters adaptive, equitable, and democratic urban development.

Looking ahead, the purpose of planning remains ambiguous, positioned between two seemingly conflicting objectives. On the one hand, planning seeks to preserve environmental resources, landscapes, and heritage; on the other, it must address rapid, unpredictable social, economic, and ecological changes.

To reconcile these aims, one potential solution is to assign plans a primarily conservative function focused on safeguarding resources and preventing irreversible harm, while making multi-level spatial projects responsible for shaping future development; a division of responsibilities that has not yet been fully articulated within European planning systems.

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VARIA
SPATIALISING STRATEGIES FOR SHRINKAGE IN MEDIUM-SIZED SHRINKING CITIES: THE ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING

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Abstract

While the need for shrinking cities to adapt their infrastructure to smaller populations is widely recognised, there is still a lack of understanding as to how such policies translate into spatial strategies. Different approaches for urban spaces as well as coordinative strategies at the city scale remain to be clarified from the perspective of urban planning. To understand the spatialisation of strategies for shrinkage, this study investigates two medium-sized cities and identifies their strategies with spatial characteristics at different scales. The findings show local factors that are key to the spatialisation of strategies for shrinkage and how localised growth and shrinkage are leveraged for long-term development. It follows, that urban planning can play a unique role in managing urban shrinkage through its competences in terms of spatialisation and spatial visions.

Keywords:

Shrinking cities; spatial strategic planning; revitalisation.

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1. Introduction

Population shrinkage has implications for infrastructural efficiency, social stability, and economic development through its impacts on infrastructure supply and labour markets (Moss, 2008, Hackworth, 2014, Kabisch et al., 2018, González-Leonardo et al., 2021). Shrinking cities research has revealed the inefficiency of growth-oriented policies (Sousa and Pinho, 2015, Hirt and Beauregard, 2019, Wiechmann and Bontje, 2015); identified alternative socio-ecological approaches to urban development (Herrmann et al., 2016, Murtagh, 2016, Matyushkina et al., 2023); and examined instruments to adapt urban infrastructure to shrinkage (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012, Bernt, 2009). Compared to studies of 'urban shrinkage' as a geographical phenomenon, 'shrinking cities' evokes a holistic, integrative, and place-based conceptualisation of urban development (e.g. Bernt et al., 2014; Haase et al., 2014; Pallagst et al., 2017) that draws attention to the challenges of local policy-making.

An under-researched aspect of local policymaking for shrinking cities is spatial planning. While the need for shrinking cities to adapt their infrastructure to smaller populations has been recognised, there is still a lack of understanding as to how such policies translate into spatial strategies for heterogeneous territories. Shrinking cities do not shrink evenly across their territories (Wiechmann, 2008b, Couch et al., 2011, Moss, 2008). Areas of shrinkage and areas of growth can co-exist under overall trends of shrinkage (Silverman, 2018, Slach et al., 2019). Where do planners counter shrinkage, and where do they adapt to shrinkage? Where do they 'restore' spaces and where do they fundamentally re-imagine them? Finally, in view of other essential goals for urban development, such as revitalisation and regeneration (Sousa and Pinho, 2015, Bernt, 2009), the question arises as to how they are integrated, next to objectives of shrinkage and growth, into actual spatial transformation.

The importance of the spatial dimension has been highlighted in many studies. Unsteered shrinkage can lead to sporadic erosion of urban fabric (Daniel, 2010). Centralisation policies might not apply to car-dependent cities (Wiersma et al., 2017), or may have negative impacts on social sustainability (Kirkpatrick, 2015). The degrowth alternatives to traditional use-intensifying development, given their conflicts with urban development capital, only work in specific contexts (Hackworth, 2018). Addressing shrinkage in one area affects its neighbouring areas, and may accelerate their decline (Strauß, 2012), or bring the benefits associated with renewed infrastructure (Slach et al., 2020, Tighe and Ganning, 2016, Ehrenfeucht and Nelson, 2020). New ecological functions generated in the shrinkage process also need to be integrated at multiple levels to be effective (Herrmann et al., 2016). However, despite the attention to the spatial dimension, there is still a research gap with regard to theorisation between the empirical results and utilising them for strategic spatial planning.

Against this background, this research addressed the following questions through a qualitative, comparative case study: (1) How does urban planning in shrinking cities spatialise strategies for shrinkage? (2) How do spatial strategies leverage growth and shrinkage to achieve planning goals? (3) What is the (unique) role of urban planning in making spatial strategies?

2. Literature review

2.1. Shrinking city planning

The challenges of urban shrinkage are rooted, first, in the supply of public services and infrastructure, where the mismatch between a smaller population and the established pattern of infrastructure threatens the financial viability of the infrastructure (Moss, 2008), which could trigger a downward spiral in which shrinkage and the declining quality of infrastructure reinforce each other (Haase et al., 2014, Hartt, 2018). The second source of challenges is the structural change of the local population due to the selective nature of outmigration, which eventually leads to a 'brain drain' for the economy as well as demographic and social vulnerability — in other words, an increasing percentage of elderly and lower-income groups (Strohmeier and Bader, 2004, González and Vigar, 2010). Policy responses that offer more, cheaper infrastructure and land, or launch 'flagship projects' to attract businesses and residents often prove counterproductive (Pallagst et al., 2017, Hartt and Warkentin, 2017, Hospers, 2014). 'Smart' approaches to manage shrinkage are downsizing, consolidating existing infrastructure, and substituting with other less resource-intensive forms of service supply (Pallagst and Wiechmann, 2004, Herrmann et al., 2016, Murtagh, 2016).

The form of urban development under shrinkage should not be taken for granted. Certain transformations of local spaces aimed at dealing with shrinkage may lead to gentrification or long-term burdens for public finances (Rink et al., 2012, Fol, 2012, Montgomery, 2015, Slach et al., 2019). Innovative forms of development could achieve sustainable ecological and social advancements that are needed in a global context of sustainability transition (Herrmann et al., 2016, Reverda et al., 2018, Hirt and Beauregard, 2019). Yet these new forms of development cannot replace existing forms of development overnight (Hackworth, 2018). It follows, that the form of development needs to be strategically considered within the existing socio-spatial dynamics of urban development.

In view of this, spatial planning as a multi-scale instrument is important for shrinking cities to steer the transformations of local spaces as well as the transformation of the overall urban spatial structure. For example, a sole focus on prime sites for economic development may have negative impacts on other areas and social groups (Kirkpatrick, 2015, Berglund, 2020). When uncoordinated, the improvement of some areas might destabilise other less attractive areas (Strauß, 2012). The redevelopment of one area could also, however, benefit surrounding shrinking areas through new infrastructure if the connections between them are strengthened (Tighe and Ganning, 2016). It follows, that there is a need to discuss local transformations in the context of coordinative strategies to establish more balanced approaches.

2.2. Strategic spatial planning and strategy-making

To address spatial planning in a context of shrinkage, one needs to understand 'spatial strategies'. What sets strategic planning aside from day-to-day planning work is that it selectively addresses the key issues that have a long-term impact (Sorkin, 1984, Friedmann, 2004, Albrechts and Balducci, 2013). To approach these decisions, the planning process considers the latest internal and external factors, and systematically evaluates the situation as well as reframing perspectives (Albrechts, 2004). True strategic planning brings about a 'paradigm change' by critically questioning conventional paths and assumptions (Healey, 1997). Spatial strategies are:

- Based on relational conceptualisation of space. Space is conceptualised as socio-spatial relations rather than as objects defined by physical dimensions and density (Healey, 2004). The experienced qualities of urban environment are as important to planning as physically measurable attributes.
- Not rigid blueprints. They allow for flexibility and social co-production (Albrechts and Balducci, 2013). The products of strategic planning — goals, visions, (metaphorical) concepts, images, and so on — mobilise and fix the attention of diverse actors and provide 'frames of reference' and 'justifications for coherent actions' (ibid.).
- Action-oriented. Strategies bridge the gap between an abstract framework and the actual actions, including the creation of institutional instruments and strategic projects, the results of which showcase the intended changes to convince actors (Albrechts and Balducci, 2013). It is therefore essential to find 'effective connections between political authorities and implementation actors' (ibid.).
- The result of social processes. Strategies integrating participants' values, agendas, knowledge, and resources, enable the integration of investments and agendas to avoid fragmented urban development (Healey, 1997, Albrechts et al., 2003). Through this approach public interest can also be directly involved (Albrechts, 2006).
- Innovative and transformative. Not only can strategic planning be used to create change by traditional planning actors, it can also be used by new actors to contest mainstream visions (Kunzmann, 2013, Albrechts, 2015).

However, strategic planning is not the only avenue for making (spatial) strategies. In practice, strategies of large organisations come from different actors and streams of decisions over time, without ever being centrally integrated into a coherent framework (Mintzberg, 1994). In other words, the strategies of a group of actors are actions from different levels, sectors, public and private domains and so on, which are guided by shared fundamental goals; and these strategies should be understood as emergent patterns (Wiechmann, 2008a). This conceptualisation of strategy broadens the scope for the study of strategies beyond the articulated official strategies that are made within a given arena and for a given time frame.

3. Research method

A qualitative case study method was used to answer the primary research question: how does urban planning in shrinking cities spatialise strategies for shrinkage? This question was further broken down into two objectives: first, describing their strategic rationales and their spatial characteristics and second, identifying the local factors that are key to their spatialisation.

For each case, the strategies for shrinkage were analysed at two scales. At the scale of the city, coordinative spatial approaches and high-priority strategic projects were identified. The scale of the neighbourhood was examined to describe how these approaches/projects had been realised. Both scales were examined to account for the 'emergent patterns' of strategies (Wiechmann, 2008a). To focus the analysis, not all neighbourhoods of the city were analysed in-depth. Here the second research question, how spatial strategies leverage growth and shrinkage to achieve planning goals, regarding localised growth and shrinkage led to the selection of two focus areas in which the most obvious population dynamics were observed, namely the city centre and a large housing estate on the city's outskirts.

The reasons to compare two cases was two-fold: first, whether the description of spatiality works for various strategies across different cases, and secondly, what local factors are key to the spatialisation of strategies. The fundamental variables of the selected cases should be aligned, so that the comparison can effectively isolate the variable of interest (Gerring, 2016). Given this, two cases with similar spatial structures and internal population trends, but contrasting severity of shrinkage were selected to show various strategies for different situations of shrinkage. The research was conducted with the awareness of the two case studies' other differences in, for example, national planning systems and local actor constellations; these were balanced with a holistic, context-sensitive approach (Yin, 2017). Through this, the factors that were relevant for spatial planning were identified. The case selection did not consider large cities, or cities in polycentric metropolitan areas because their spatial structures are too complex for qualitative comparison. Another important criterion for the purpose of this study was the willingness of local administration to acknowledge and plan for shrinkage, since the acceptance of shrinkage is considered a critical factor for carefully considered, informed strategy-making in shrinking cities (Pallagst et al., 2017). The cases selected here were cities with long-lasting shrinkage, where policy-learning cycles have shaped a pattern of strategy-making, in which shrinkage is accepted as the outset of urban development.

The cases of Den Helder (The Netherlands) and Zwickau (Germany) were chosen. Both cities have long experience of planning under shrinkage, with a relatively 'synchronised' timeline: they have undergone steady shrinkage since before the 1980s, and it became more pronounced after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. The cities started to address the issue with city-wide policies from around the year 2000 and established their latest spatial frameworks in the early 2010s. They have similar spatial structures, in which the city centres have grown and the outskirts have shrunk. Finally, the two cities exhibit contrasting paces of shrinkage.

Table 1 Basic statistics of the two cities

	Population (2020)	**Population change (2010–2020)**
Zwickau [1]	88,690	**City** absolute: 94,340 to 88,690; relative: -0.6% p.a. **Centre** absolute: 3,280 to 3,474[3]; relative: 1.0 % p.a. **Outskirts** (peripheral, detached settlements excluded) absolute: 29.338 to 25,485[4]; relative: -1.3 % p.a.
Den Helder [2]	56,305	**City** absolute: 57,403 to 56,305; relative: -0.2% p.a. **Centre** absolute: 1,175 to 1,405; relative: 2.0% p.a. **Outskirts** (peripheral, detached settlements excluded) absolute: 22,230 to 21,705; relative: -0.2% p.a.
[1] Unless otherwise specified, Statistisches Landesamt Sachsen; [2] unless otherwise specified, the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS); [3] statistics only available for 2010–2016, from the city (Statistische Information 2010-1and 2016-1); [4] statistics only available for 2009–2019, from the city's 2021 update to the housing downsizing plan.		

Data was collected from late 2019 to early 2022. First, official statistic portals and regional planning documents were used to understand the demographic and socio-economic contexts of local planning. Secondly, 30 local documents including planning frameworks and sectorial plans relevant to the quality of the urban environment were analysed (Appendix 1), complemented by publications, news articles and official statistics on specific areas. The document analysis focused on the spatial strategies for shrinkage and the transformations of focus areas. Specifically, the analysis first identified the policies aimed at (1) addressing the results of shrinkage and (2) proactively addressing the demographic challenges in the future. Then the spatial aspects of these policies were analysed. In addition to this conceptual level, the transformations of the focus areas were examined to reveal their effects. In parallel to the document analysis, 21 actor interviews were conducted with public planners, representatives of housing corporations, and civic actors (for further details see Appendix 1). The interviews were intended to (1) guide the search for and interpretation of the textual data, and (2) find out about actors' perceptions of urban development under shrinkage. Their perceptions were used to aid reflection on the findings. The interviews were first recorded and then transcribed so that they could be analysed as texts. Consent of the interviewees was obtained using consent forms that clarified the objectives of this project, the use of their data, and participants' rights. Finally, field trips lasting one-and-a-half weeks were conducted for Den Helder in October 2021 and for Zwickau in July 2021; both focused on the selected areas to observe the local conditions and the effects of their respective spatial transformations.

4. Case studies

4.1. The case of Zwickau, Germany

4.1.1. City-level policies

Zwickau is home to both a car manufacturing industry — with Volkswagen being the local leader — and an applied sciences university. A decade of drastic shrinkage that was driven by the outmigration of young people took place after German Reunification in the 1990s. Currently, urban shrinkage has slowed down because of in-migration from the city's hinterland. However, the previous loss of a young generation has now manifested itself in the form of negative natural balance, which indicates a further sustained shrinkage process.

In the 2013 integrated plan of development 'INSEK' (Stadt Zwickau, 2013), the city-level spatial strategy takes a differentiated approach to three types of areas (Figure 1): (1) 'restructuring' areas, in which spatial and functional changes are on the agenda due to severe shrinkage; (2) 'consolidating-worth' areas, in which only physical improvements but no functional changes are necessary because of a milder level of shrinkage; and (3) 'consolidated' areas, in which the need for intervention is limited because the population is stable or even increasing. The approach originated from the 2006 urban spatial plan 'SEKo', when there was a city-wide vacancy of 18.8 percent that mainly affected the properties of local housing corporations. In response to this, the city and the housing corporations drew up the plan in 2006, based on vacancy and population growth trends, and later updated it in 2013. This plan was necessary for the application for state subsidies and thus represented more of an agreed allocation of resources than a future vision. The swift downsizing and restructuring paid off: by 2019, the city-wide vacancy rate had was 12.1 %.

The 2016 housing report drew attention to the extremely low stock renewal rate: 0.03 per cent per year; normally, 1 per cent per year is necessary in order to replenish the existing stock over the span of a century. Besides consistent downsizing, diversification and qualitative development of the housing stock was recommended, including measures such as modern floor plans, senior-friendliness, and energy efficiency. The report also highlighted vacancies and signs of blight in the inner city that had arisen from traffic pollution. It recommended partial building downsizing because population ageing was causing a dispersed pattern of natural deaths that — given a lack of move-ins — resulted in scattered vacancy. While a monitoring and guiding role was recommended to the city, housing developers complained that suitable locations for higher-quality development in the inner city were lacking, indicating that the urban environment in general needed strengthening. Instead, the housing corporations went on to divert their energy to their existing stock in the large housing estates, where they have been gradually adding higher-quality units to their stock by refurbishing housing units in partially downsized buildings. The slow pace of regeneration was viewed by public planners

as a wasted opportunity for retaining higher-income employees of the local industry. Finally, the 2021 update to the housing downsizing plan revealed severe future challenges for the large housing estates on the city's outskirts; these cumulatively account for one-third of the city's housing stock. Here the vacancy rate was, on average, 17 percent; and 46.5 percent of the resident population was over 60 years of age. Such statistics reaffirmed the common priority for all actors: further downsizing in these areas.

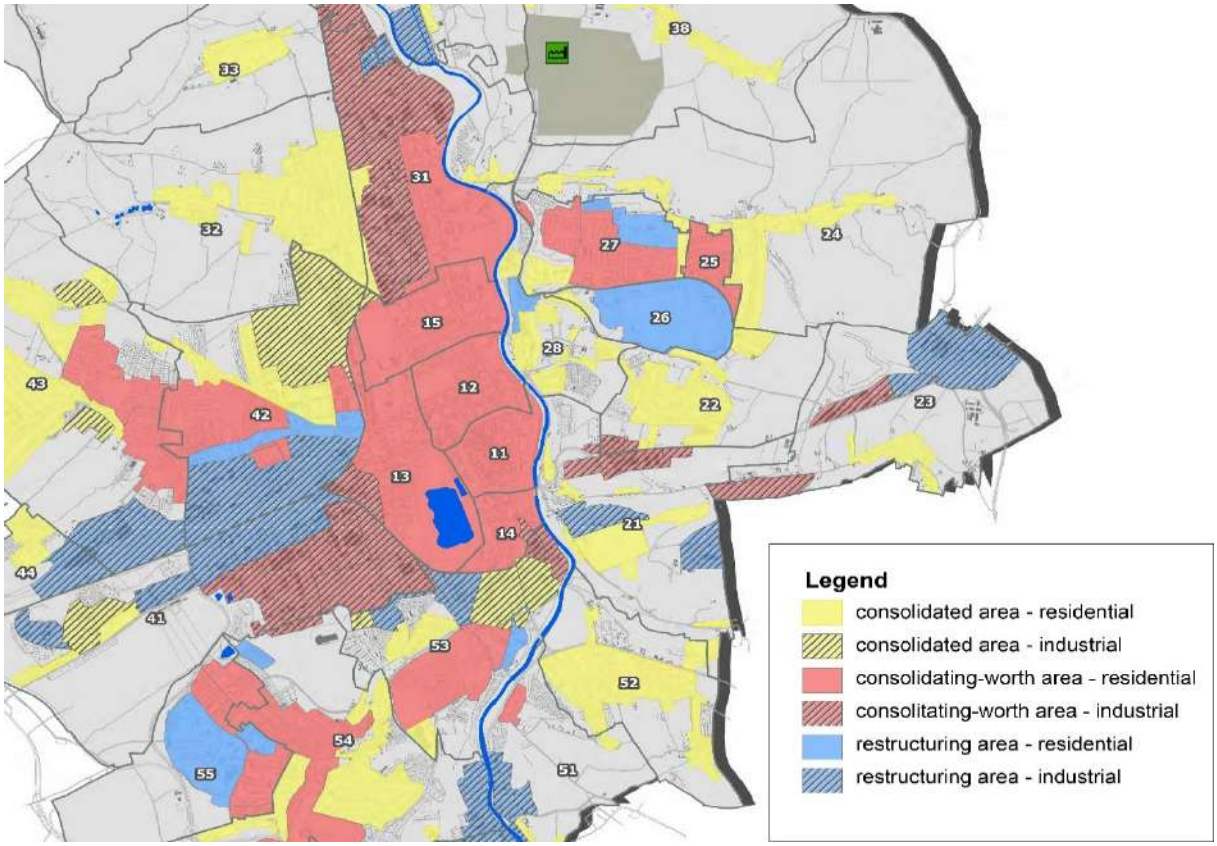

Figure 1 shows a zoomed-in section of the plan for urban development strategy from the year 2013, with the city centre as Area 11 and Eckersbach E5/2-3 as Area 26; legends translated by author

Retail and urban centre development is visibly a major challenge to the city. Shops near the city centre had a high vacancy rate (ca. 30 percent) due to poor building conditions and traffic pollution (Friedrich and Hahn, 2013). Abandoned shopping facilities were present in many housing areas, which was caused by decreasing revenue as the population shrank. The retail planning report (GMA, 2011) found a 33 percent oversupply of retail floor space, and noted five shopping centres, six district shopping zones, and the city centre shopping zone. The car-oriented shopping centres on the outskirts offered a more attractive shopping environment and were positioned to profit from wealthier customers from the hinterland (ibid.). However, a lack of effective instruments for actively reducing the oversupply of retail space and revitalising retail space in the inner city was considered by local planners as the main challenge, whilst the instruments that the municipality could apply mainly included the promotion of public events and the beautification of the public space to make the urban centres more attractive and preserve the inner-city economy.

4.1.2. Areas of growth and shrinkage

Figure 2 (left) shows the city centre characterised by its restored heritage architecture; Figure 3 (right) shows the recreational space in Eckersbach E5/2-3 which was created through the demolition of several buildings.

A typical 'restructuring' area is Eckersbach E5/2-3. It is owned by large local housing corporations and had a vacancy rate of 42 percent in 2001. Its unpopularity was attributed to poor design — crammed layout, minimal green space, and out-of-date floor plans. To improve the area in the 2000s, the original 7,000 building units were reduced to 1,000. The freed-up space was turned into playgrounds or renaturalised. A fast connection to the city centre by public transport was also created. In the nearby 'consolidating-worth' parts of Eckersbach, whole buildings were demolished to make space for new parking lots and green space. The fields in E5/2-3 did not stay empty for long before a new use was found for them — a new football stadium was built here by the city's housing corporation. This, paradoxically, expanded sport infrastructure despite the trend of shrinkage, because restoring the old stadium would have cost more. Later, the public planners initiated a strategic project to create a new, energy-efficient neighbourhood on the remaining vacant land. This project was motivated by the expected expansion of the nearby university and state subsidies for energy-efficient housing. This development would have supplied single-family houses, modern apartments, and knowledge facilities. However, external experts argued against it because, for compact shrinkage, the inner city needed redevelopment more than the outskirts. The city council also declined the project citing the high vacancy rate in general as the reason.

In the first decade after Reunification, the city centre underwent comprehensive renewal: infrastructure provision, the removal of industrial contamination, building restoration and modernisation, public space improvement, and so on. Since then, several high-profile projects have introduced more urban qualities, including the creation of a riverside park by rerouting a federal road via an underpass, as well as the conversion of a former grain storage warehouse into a new city library. The area has become the centre of retail and service businesses, cultural facilities, and is also home to a university campus, and heritage architecture — albeit against a dissonant background of the large housing estates that were developed in the soviet period. Residential vacancy dropped from 27.2 percent to 9.8 percent (2000–2012). This lowered the priority status of the area in the new ISEK agenda, but an expert-led visioning process, Zwickau 2050, argues for further use-intensifying transformations. The experts were critical of how public investment had mainly been focused on outskirt districts and saw redevelopment of the city centre as the fundamental solution to revitalising the inner city, increasing urban attractiveness, and ensuring a compact shrinkage. Although the visioning process was supported by the municipality, the results were controversial, mainly because of the fear of displacing lower income groups living in the large housing estates. This vision also implied the loss of revenue and difficult tenant relocation for the housing corporations, which would have been unacceptable, because they would rather follow a strategy of preservation for this area.

4.2. Den Helder, The Netherlands

4.2.1. City-level policies

Den Helder is home to a maritime and offshore industry as well as coastal tourism. The Dutch navy operates a base here and plays a vital role in its economic development as an employer and contract giver. The city started to shrink towards the end of the Cold War due to defence budget cuts. In the last decade, the shrinkage — driven by the outmigration of young people — has stabilised at a moderate rate, but the number of households has not yet decreased. The city has been regarded as a 'problem case' because the whole region has grown. The loss of young people combined with a coming wave of retirement among the baby-boomer generation is perceived as a serious future problem for the social infrastructure and the labour market of the city.

The strategic visions of the years 2000 and 2007 emphasised population regrowth targets and quick economic revival. In the wake of a critical report commissioned by the state (Deetman and Mans, 2010), policy-making looked beyond population goals in its next round of strategic planning (Gemeente Den Helder, 2012). The framework defined three 'domains' for strategic urban development — the residential domain, the maritime domain, and the visitors' domain. Each domain was analysed based on its connections to global or regional networks and the relevant local spaces — areas, nodes, and connections — that together form the basis for the domain function (see Figure 4 for an example). Projects transecting domains were identified as strategic projects for the city. Given this, the framework clarified the spatial structure for long-term development as well as key measures. Various other policy fields have referred to this spatial framework in the design of their own policy measures.

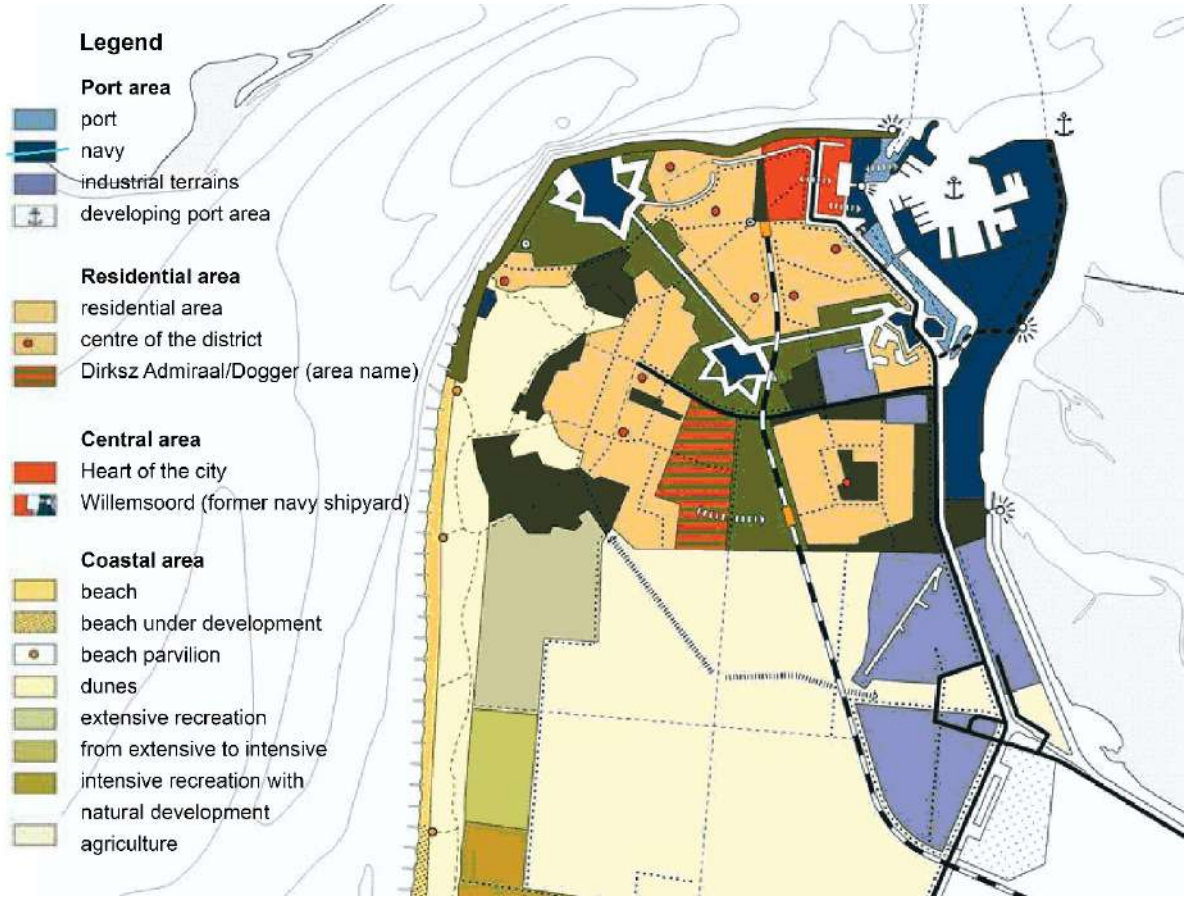

Figure 4 a zoomed-in section of the spatial vision from the year 2012; legends translated by author.

The housing policies were first established in 2003 and regularly updated; with the latest housing vision produced in 2016. The essential spatial strategy was to de-densify the outskirts and densify the inner city, with the goal of achieving a compact form under shrinkage. A main objective for the housing stock was

diversification and modernisation, especially to make housing units more senior-friendly. A particular target was the downsizing of outdated social housing stock that could not be modernised in a cost-efficient manner. A minimum supply of social housing based on socio-economic statistics was to be ensured. A further objective was improving and diversifying the residential environment to create place attachment amongst residents. Another main objective was to strengthen 'social mix'. New housing for higher-income groups was introduced into areas previously dominated by lower-income groups, and new social housing was realised at locations spread across the city to prevent a concentration of vulnerable groups. The housing supply for young people and career starters was promoted with a spatial focus on central locations. Most of these policies have been realised through the cooperation between the municipality and the city's largest housing corporation Woningstichting Den Helder (WSDH).

Retail policies were first established in 2007 and though these have been updated over time, the essence of the policies remains unchanged. The main spatial approach was the restriction of retail activities to central locations, and it was supported by regulative instruments. Accompanying this was investment in improving the business environment in these zones. The policies gave the highest priority to the city centre and argued that it should be strengthened and made more compact. Other areas with business functions, for example, the de-industrialised former shipyard were required to design their programmes so that they did not compete with the city centre. Within existing retail zones, expansion and restructuring for economic efficiency and experience-oriented shopping were promoted.

4.2.2. Areas of growth and shrinkage

Figure 5 (left) shows a renewed shopping street in the city centre; Figure 6 (right) shows landscape created as part of a redevelopment after demolition in Nieuw Den Helder Oost

The city centre is surrounded by diverse urban functions: the railway station, the redeveloped shipyard with cultural and office buildings, the seafront, and residential areas. In the 2000s, the city centre had one of the highest vacancy rates in the city. A fifteen-year-long project was launched in 2008 to transform the spatial structure, functions, and public space. First, the main streets and the railway station square were renovated. Second, retail and catering were gradually concentrated into the pedestrian zone near the railway station by converting peripheral shops to residential units. Last, a park was built on the vacant plots that were created by relocating public facilities to form a green axis that connects the centre to the seafront. The projects on public space strengthened spatial connections to surrounding areas and functions and the improvement of the city centre in general contributed to local quality of life through its impacts on leisure and shopping experiences. The city centre was also addressed as a key residential location. Specifically, the city and WSDH planned that, for the period 2016–2022, some 380 new housing units would be constructed with 27 percent comprised of social housing. Between 2013 and 2020, the housing vacancy dropped from 16 percent to 10 percent, while the number of homes grew by 12 percent. The next stage is the development of a compact neighbourhood on the seafront that will create mixed-use blocks and 200-300 new housing units.

Nieuw Den Helder Oost, a district on the outskirts primarily consisting of large housing estates, was designated as the place to 'capture shrinkage'. Already in the 1980s, the district was an island of severe population shrinkage and social problems. This decline was attributed to the densely built low-quality housing stock of

the areas as well as its social structure. At the end of the 1990s, the most problematic blocks (372 units) were demolished. In 2012 as part of housing planning, some 1,000 unpopular social housing units were identified for long-term downsizing. The following redevelopment was built at a rate of one-third of the original density, thereby making room for a generous amount of park landscape. Old blocks and new developments were bonded through this new green infrastructure. In addition, plots where previously hundreds of apartments had existed, were leased out to make way for a dozen autonomous tiny houses with large gardens. This attracted new middle-class residents to the area, whilst the district centre and social infrastructure was also renewed. The renovation of the remaining industrial housing continues as a long-term policy. As a result, the vacancy rate reduced and stabilised at 6 percent, while the population has slightly increased since 2015.

5. Analysis and findings

5.1. Planning goals

The rationales in the two cases as to why substantial measures are necessary for shrinkage can be grouped under two main planning goals:

- Adaptation to shrinkage as the 'defensive' goal — reducing and adjusting infrastructure supply to the shrinking population size as well as decreasing consumption capacity. A byproduct of such adaptations is higher environmental quality; but a key characteristic differentiating this goal from the next goal is the relatively little investment in follow-up development to create new urban functions and shape new urban qualities in the space freed up through downsizing.
- Revitalisation as the 'offensive' goal — transforming urban spaces in order to create or enhance functions and attractive qualities that go beyond those which the existing population is accustomed to. The reason for this is that, as planners in both cities emphasise, revitalisation under shrinkage must be based on social revitalisation, i.e. attracting and retaining younger people and people with higher incomes through the provision of higher-quality urban environments.

5.2. Strategic area transformations

In both cities, strategic projects were the main approach adopted to regenerate urban functions and spatial qualities in areas. One reason for this, as actors in both cities indicated, was the need for 'model projects' to showcase that new standards were possible in communities with stagnated development.

Some of these strategic projects are relatively more embedded in broader urban development strategies and integrate objectives from different policy sectors in order to foster overall urban attractiveness. For example, the city centre renewal in Den Helder gave critical impetus in issues such as regional connection, public space network, retail space restructuring, and housing restructuring. The transformation of Nieuw Den Helder reduced the housing quantity to balance out growth resulting from regeneration in the city centre, while exploring a degrowth form of residential development in a pilot project.

Other strategic projects are relatively isolated in the sense of strategy-making, such as the idea of a new neighbourhood in the post-demolition area in Zwickau. Other than attracting new residents, it would not have a broader impact on urban infrastructure and overall environment. The redevelopment of the city centre suggested by Zwickau 2050 has the potential to revitalise the inner city as an important node in the public space network, thereby improving an important aspect of local quality of life and visitors' experiences.

The ongoing downsizing on the outskirts of Zwickau are a continuation of previous strategies mainly because of the ongoing, severe shrinkage. The increasingly routinised characteristic is the opposite to the 'paradigm change' that Healey (1997) emphasised as part of strategic planning. This shows how severe shrinkage can diminish room for innovative strategy-making. Yet given the expected scale and sporadic pattern of shrinkage under demographic ageing, the downsizing routine could increasingly struggle to keep up with emerging vacancies.

5.3. Coordinative strategies

The coordinative spatial framework in Zwickau is comprised of a system of downsizing zones. There are no interactive elements between the areas, which means that they are not viewed as a relational network with synergy. The strategies are determined by the severity of shrinkage — the most urgent present issue — rather than holistic spatial goals for the city. With the advantage of less severe shrinkage, Den Helder coordinates measures based on a vision of spatial structure. This is aimed at producing stronger urban functions and a compact urban form, which is meant for proactively increasing resilience against further shrinkage.

The approach applied in both cities to address the retail infrastructure is a systematic, relational one, which takes inventory of retail facilities and the declining overall consumption capacity and clarifies the interactions between different shopping locations. This is aimed at concentrating businesses and consumption in urban centres, in order to reduce vacancy and to maintain (commercial) service supply as well as public space. For example, Den Helder launched long-term investments in the urban centres to increase the 'pull', and placed restrictions outside urban centres to exert the 'push'. Both instruments are lacking in Zwickau.

Den Helder approached housing and social development via an overarching strategy, 'social mix'. The strategy was not only about increasing more expensive housing in lower-income neighbourhoods but also about distributing social and affordable housing into higher-income neighbourhoods as well as areas with better infrastructure. The strategy has been implemented as strategic projects, in which properties were acquired and redeveloped by a partner of the municipality. In Zwickau, housing development has not been guided by any overarching strategies or city-wide framing. Housing corporations admitted that they cannot strategically plan more than five years ahead. Introducing housing of better quality is essentially a matter of tactics, whenever and wherever resources are available. The deconcentration of housing for lower-income households has not been specifically mentioned.

6. Conclusion

This research answers three questions: (1) How does urban planning in shrinking cities spatialise strategies for shrinkage? (2) How do spatial strategies leverage growth and shrinkage to achieve planning goals? (3) What is the (unique) role of urban planning in making spatial strategies?

The answer to the first question is that it can help fill an important research gap: the vast range of empirical findings on strategies for shrinkage need to be framed with spatial thinking to be systematically considered for strategic spatial planning. This is because cities are more complex (multiple scales) than areas in which specific policies are studied (single scale). The case studies above demonstrate how, aside from strategic concepts such as goals, means, and actors, strategies can be systematically described in their spatiality with spatial concepts (scale, bounded space, place, and network), which can provide a tool for comparing and conceptualising spatial strategies for shrinkage.

However, not all strategies that are articulated come into implementation, whilst others may, for a lack of implementation tools, never even be articulated. One key factor constraining the spatialisation of strategies is the severity of shrinkage. The constantly increasing housing vacancies, compounded by sporadic patterns as a result of the population ageing, pose tricky challenges for making long-term visions and paradigm changing strategies. Other goals, such as social development, quality of life, and inner-city environmental quality might become secondary criteria in city-wide planning. Furthermore, two institutional factors essentially constrain urban planning:

- Development competences at the city scale. In Den Helder, the urban development company, Zeestadt, and the housing corporation WSDH represent such competences because they actively invest in, respectively, the public and private aspects of the urban development city-wide. In contrast, the local housing corporations in Zwickau are interested mainly in their properties on the outskirt. The lack of such competences and partners with whom to make strategies for the inner city hampers the making of coordinative strategies at the city scale.

- A lack of political perception as to the need for new urban qualities. The main argument in the political debate against building new housing units based on high vacancy rates indicates that decision-makers might not have considered the difference between quantitative growth — which exacerbates vacancies — and qualitative growth — which aims to diversify the stock and improve place qualities. Meanwhile, younger residents migrate out of the city to seek attractive environment elsewhere, making political support for qualitative regeneration weaker.

With regard to the second research question, shrinkage and growth in local planning needs to be considered with more nuances as interlocked socio-spatial dynamics. Such dynamics can be leveraged by strategic planning for spatial transformations:

- Growth in terms of use-intensifying development, when carefully designed, can introduce housing and public space that is of better quality for existing communities. Strategic projects can inspire other property owners to improve their properties and may result in further positive developments. However, the scale and pace of such developments have to be carefully planned to prevent gentrification (Tighe and Ganning, 2016).
- Shrinkage plays a key role in renewing spatial resources. On vacated plots new visions can emerge. But whatever the new functions — be they landscape, a tiny house settlement, or a new compact neighbourhood — they need to be integrated into the urban environment and community to have strategic meaning for the future of the city.
- Localised shrinkage could be accelerated by growth developments elsewhere, as residents willingly move to the new locations. Such a process can reduce displacement and conflicts, and thereby make the area available for future restructuring.

With regard to the third research question, the case study has illustrated how urban planning plays a key role in spatial strategy-making in shrinking cities, especially if conditions allow it to fulfil its potential. This research considers all actors who contribute to relational planning in policymaking as 'planners'. Their most important roles include:

- Identifying and shaping innovative forms of development to improve the resilience of urban spaces to shrinkage. Because strategic projects and experiments (even degrowth projects) need to be positioned in specific local contexts to succeed and thrive, planners play a unique role in the selection of, connection to, and further cultivation of the urban context to support such innovations.
- Coordinating localised growth and shrinkage for greater spatial sustainability. Relational planning leverages the interactions or interdependencies between urban spaces for synergy, and finds the suitable spatial context for innovations such as degrowth experiments. Spatial frameworks as the coordinative instrument not only integrates different policies but also channels them into concrete projects.
- Reframing the task of urban development to bring about a 'paradigm change' to direct attention towards addressing spatial shrinkage. Such a paradigm change can occur with regard to both the functions and qualities of a local area as well as the spatial structure of a city. As the example of Zwickau 2050 demonstrates, conceptual strategic planning can provoke dialogues on the long-term spatial strategies of the city, encourage hopes and dreams, and challenge existing knowledge (Kunzmann, 2013; Albrechts, 2015).

Finally, the primary limitation of this case study is its sole focus on medium-sized cities with a population trend of centralisation. The findings about strategic content could differ if researchers were to look at large cities with complex spatial relations that extend beyond the local scale, or spread-out American cities with less distinct urban centres, where interdependencies between areas and processes might be configured differently. The description of spatial strategies should be tested in these cases. In addition, it should be noted that this paper's findings might not fully apply to cities with a trend of hollowing out — whilst the question, whether the spatial vision of compact shrinkage should/can be realised against the growth of suburbs, remains to be studied. Furthermore, both cases studied here are situated in western European countries with state-subsidised local development. It follows that further studies that focus on cities with different spatial structures, different types of shrinkage and/or different institutional contexts would help to create a more comprehensive theory of spatial strategies for shrinking cities.

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