

The Olympic (Affordable) Housing Legacy and Social Responsibility

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj — Canada

In the last two decades, a number of global trends have had the effect of increasing the gap between North and South, have and have-not countries, and have and have-not populations within western countries. These trends are reflected in the growing global problem of homelessness in some of the most economically prosperous countries in the world, including the United States, Canada and Australia.

The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC), a grassroots group established in 1998, convincingly documented its claim that homelessness in Canada should be considered a national disaster.¹ Included in their evidence was the fact that the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights had reviewed Canada's compliance and issued the strongest criticism that any western nation had received for its human rights record, especially in relation to the country's failure to prevent homelessness. In the same vein, activists at the international level have recognized that homelessness constitutes an international disaster.

Hallmark Events and Their Legacies

There is an extensive body of literature documenting the detrimental effects of hallmark events like the Olympics and World Fairs on homeless and under-housed populations.² In light of this evidence, it could be argued that the burden of proof falls on Olympic bid and organizing committees to demonstrate two outcomes: firstly, that hosting the Olympics will not exacerbate existing housing problems, and secondly, that a meaningful legacy of affordable housing will result.

A legacy, according to dictionary definitions, is something "material or immaterial" that is "bequeathed or handed down by predecessors." In Olympic industry rhetoric, *legacy* refers to infrastructure, housing and sporting facilities that are represented as some kind of windfall profit for the host city, with the significant contribution of public money to Olympic projects—usually totaling at least 50% of the budget—often overlooked in this kind of calculation.

A related and somewhat more realistic representation of Olympic legacy uses the language of urban renewal, with the Olympics positioned as a "catalyst" for city-building and redevelopment. Similarly, the "catalyst" effect is said to bring about improvements in infrastructure, most notably public transportation. Admittedly, as I've told numerous audiences recently, Sydney's bus and train systems have seen significant improvements since Sydney 2000, but I argue that it reflects badly on city and state politicians to have waited until the last few years of the 20th century to make much-needed changes to these systems. For decades, Sydney's working class and poor people who didn't own cars received a clear message: your public transportation needs are only worthy of politicians'

attention when Sydney is expecting an influx of big-spending Olympic tourists who will rely on trains and buses to travel to Olympic sites. I would make the same case in relation to the recent improvements in public transit in Athens that were part of Olympic preparations.

Housing in Olympic Host Cities

In the last two decades, the vast majority of bid and host cities have shared a common problem: a housing and homelessness crisis. Examples include Seoul, Barcelona, Atlanta, Amsterdam, Sydney, Beijing, Toronto, Athens, Turin, New York and Vancouver. In most cases, bid and/or organizing committees from these cities included housing in their list of Olympic legacy promises. However, the actual post-Olympic situation in recent host cities suggests that an affordable housing legacy is unlikely to materialize, and that, in fact, conditions for homeless and inadequately housed people are exacerbated by the hosting of the Olympics.³

The last few years have seen significant research evidence to support my earlier critiques of promised housing legacies in Olympic host cities. These include Antonia Cassellas's doctoral research on Barcelona⁴ and a special issue of *Progressive Planning* edited by Richard Milgrom.⁵ A report is forthcoming from the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), an international non-governmental organization located in Geneva, which has commissioned local researchers to conduct studies of the housing impacts of the Olympics in Athens, Sydney, Atlanta, Barcelona and Seoul, as well as projected impacts on Beijing. In brief, these researchers' findings, like my own, document the following interrelated housing trends in Olympic host cities:

- evictions of tenants from low-rent housing, particularly in Olympic precincts and downtown areas, to make way for Olympic tourists
- evictions resulting from gentrification and beautification of low-income areas
- significant decrease in boarding house stock
- artificially inflated real estate prices
- unchanged or weakened tenant protection legislation, resulting in rent increases and evictions without cause, a problem for low-income tenants in particular
- the criminalization of poverty and homelessness through legislation increasing police powers over homeless and under-housed people in public spaces
- temporary or permanent privatization of public space
- temporary or permanent suppression of human rights, particularly freedom of assembly

Evidence from Past Olympics

The following summary of historical patterns in recent host cities supports these conclusions:

Mexico City: In October 1968, in the lead-up to the 1968 Summer Games, thousands of Mexican students mounted a mass protest against the government's lavish Olympic spending, with millions of dollars moved from the social services budget to urban and national "re-imaging" projects. The student protest was violently suppressed by Mexican army and paramilitary, with hundreds of students massacred and thousands more arrested and beaten.⁶

Seoul: For purposes of Olympic "beautification", huge numbers of the city's poorest residents had their homes destroyed. Traditional working-class communities were demolished to make way for mid-

dle-class high-rise residential buildings. The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights documented millions of forced evictions—the most extensive any city had experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. Displaced people, as “urban squatters” in central Seoul, had their shelters torn down because they were near the Olympic torch route and therefore visible to the international media. Using the same rationale, the government demolished “slum” housing that was in sight of main roads, Olympic facilities and hotels.⁷

Barcelona: Police targeted prostitutes and homeless people, as well as arresting large numbers of dissidents before and during the 1992 Games. One social impact study estimated that about 400 homeless people had been subjected to “control and supervision.”⁸ Community groups organized the Commission Against the Barcelona Games, composed of over 20 tenants’ rights, ecology and social justice organizations. Its concerns included diversion of public funds into elite projects at a time when housing and recreational facilities in working-class neighborhoods demanded higher priority.

Although in 1986 the Barcelona city council had promised to include subsidized housing in the post-Games Olympic village, it gave in to pressure from real estate developers, and by 1991 all except 76 of the 6,000 units had been sold at market value to young, middle-income professionals. Land prices in surrounding neighborhoods increased, resulting in redevelopment projects and displacement of residents.⁹ Overall, it was reported that in the period 1986-1992, new house prices in Barcelona had risen by 250%, with related increases in rents and in the number of people renting.¹⁰ Casellas’s in-depth study of Olympic impacts in Barcelona documented the following outcomes:

- [The Olympic project] “blocked out urban and social issues that did not fit into the hegemonic agenda designed by [Barcelona] council.”
- A further negative impact was “the lack of attention the public sector dedicated to the housing crisis in a period of high investment in all types of urban infrastructure and services.”
- Finally, “The council’s urban agenda shifted from an initial redistribution approach present in the urban concepts of neighborhood re-equilibrium... of the early 1980s to a boosterism approach dominated by property development in the late 1990s.”¹¹

Years later, there were reports on the Olympic aftermath in Barcelona, which in 2003 was facing a second “clean-up” in preparation for another hallmark event: the six-month-long European Union Forum. As some Olympics critics had predicted in the early 1990s, the gentrification trend had dire consequences for Barcelona’s poor:

The cityscape itself is transformed into a consumer playground that is much too expensive for “normal” people to continue to live there... Barcelona can scarcely afford to tolerate poverty and immigration, much less squats and squatted centres... there have been harsh attacks against the 100+ squatted buildings in and around the city, including evictions, demolitions, prosecution, and threats of evictions...¹²

Calgary: Problems of displacement and forced evictions of tenants in Calgary prior to the Games have been extensively documented.¹³ Over 2,000 people were temporarily or permanently evicted to make way for Olympic visitors. When residents’ groups objected to the siting of the Olympic Stadium in a low-income inner-city community, the development application was fast-tracked by a provincial government order-in-council.¹⁴ At the same time, some houses in this neighborhood received superficial improvements to enhance the city’s image for tourists.

Salt Lake City: A coalition of minority, anti-poverty, women's and disability rights groups, Salt Lake Impact 2002 and Beyond, was formed in 1995 to address issues such as post-Games affordable housing and protection of civil liberties of street people during the Games. However, despite the efforts of watchdog groups, the usual trend of forced evictions, large rent increases and gentrification ensued.

Community activist Stephen Goldsmith recently documented a six-year struggle that took place in the 1990s between environmentalists and community activists, on one hand, and city politicians and Olympic boosters, on the other, with the community groups' eventual victory. Again, this was a story of broken promises on the part of city officials and elected representatives. The mayor's "Olympic vision" threatened years of work on the part of grassroots organizers who had been developing affordable housing and health care for homeless families, artists and craftspeople in a blighted downtown neighborhood that Olympic boosters had earmarked for a speed skating oval.¹⁵

Athens: Housing and homelessness issues were exacerbated by Olympic preparations in Athens, and housing and anti-poverty advocates publicized abuses by landlords and state authorities. Urban squatters and other "undesirable" Athens residents were frequent targets of state intervention in the years prior to the Olympics. COHRE's Global Survey on Forced Evictions reported that Roma communities in and around Athens had been evicted by municipal authorities in 2001 and 2002. Several incidents were documented, with more than ten Roma homes and their contents bulldozed or burned to the ground. In some cases, the land was needed for Olympic construction and agreements involving resettlement were negotiated between the government and the Roma, but in some municipalities in the Greater Athens area, the Olympics were simply used as an excuse for forcible evictions.¹⁶

Following the pattern of many European cities, there were numerous squatted buildings in and around Athens when Olympic preparations began. In 2002, residents in a squat established in 1988, Lelas Karayanni 37, were threatened with violent eviction, and water and electricity were cut off. Squatters in a university student's house were also ordered to vacate it so journalists could be accommodated there during the Olympics.¹⁷ In the lead-up to the 2004 Olympics, local Olympic watchdog and anti-Olympic groups made use of athens.indymedia.org, anti2004.net, and other web sites to publish critiques and to organize and document protest actions, many of which were forcibly shut down by police.

An Exception: Melbourne's Bid for the 1990 Olympics

Melbourne's bid committee took the unusual step of commissioning a social impact study in 1989, a year before the bid was submitted. (In contrast, when Sydney was organizing its bid, a government spokesman was quoted as saying that it would be a "waste of taxpayers' money" to conduct a social impact assessment before the 2000 Olympics host city was announced.¹⁸)

On the question of potential negative impacts, the Melbourne study identified diversion of public funds from essential services, increases in housing costs and homelessness, a post-Games decline in employment, and environmental degradation. A 1990 Community Services Department report also predicted an increase in homelessness as a result of loss of single-room accommodation in the inner city. It recommended prioritizing public housing construction and funding for community support services.

Community organizations also identified housing problems associated with Melbourne's plans. With 71,000 people on the public housing waiting list, the athletes' village—4,000 new units costing over \$350,000 each—would not alleviate the housing crisis.¹⁹ The Melbourne Olympic watchdog group, Bread

Not Circuses, produced an *Alternative Bid Book* that revealed that both the athletes' and the media village sites, presented in the bid as Olympic housing "legacies", had been earmarked for housing development well before the bid. Similarly, in 2001 when the Toronto Bread Not Circuses Coalition produced *The People's Anti-Bid Book*, it identified the inadequacies of the Toronto Olympic Bid's housing promises: Only 1,000 affordable units at a time when 10,000 were needed.²⁰

Why?

Previously cited research studies, as well as my own, have shown that there are several interconnected variables contributing to negative social impacts on housing and homelessness issues in Olympic host cities. To understand how these forces work, I've developed a list of the most popular rationales used by Olympic supporters to justify the "inconveniences" that disadvantaged residents of Olympic host cities have to tolerate "for the greater good:"

1. "The ticking clock" argument: Olympic construction must be completed on schedule, if not on budget. As a result, development applications and time-consuming environmental and social impact studies must be fast-tracked. In relation to housing, tenants' and squatters' rights, such as they are, are suspended in order to meet the fixed Olympic timetable.
2. "The eyes of the world" argument: Tens of thousands of international visitors, including journalists, visit host cities before, during and after the Games, and millions more watch the television spectacle. A key part of the host city's image-building process involves the "disappearing" of homeless people and slum housing, lest potential tourists and investors be deterred by sights and sounds that are incompatible with the "world-class city" image.
3. The "Olympic leverage" argument: Politicians can be pressured to approve generous public funding of sporting facilities, housing and infrastructure if the city is going to host the Olympics. Citizens should value this window of opportunity and refrain from criticizing these spending priorities.
4. The "Olympic catalyst" argument: Construction of new market-value housing (e.g. athletes' and media villages) will have a "trickle-down" effect in terms of affordable housing. In the wake of Olympic-related construction and real estate booms, middle-class buyers and renters will move up the housing ladder, thereby making more room "at the bottom" for low-income renters.

In short, these kinds of arguments do not promise positive legacies for the disadvantaged residents. Rather, they convey a message of indirect benefits for which they should be grateful, even if their basic housing needs remain unmet and their basic human rights are threatened.

Social Responsibility as a Pillar of the "Olympic Movement"

I propose that social responsibility be introduced as a fourth pillar of the "Olympic movement." Even if one argues, as I do, that the Olympic industry is fundamentally a multinational corporation, it would be possible for the IOC to follow the lead of other multinationals by adhering to a mutually developed code of ethics—not to be confused with an internal "code of conduct" developed by Nike largely as a public relations gesture.²¹

Of particular relevance to ethical questions is the IOC Sport and Environment Commission's 1999 document, *Agenda 21: Sport for Sustainable Development*, a set of recommendations that embody key aspects of social responsibility, as I will explain below.²²

First of all, some background: As I documented in my 2000 book, *Inside the Olympic Industry*, in 1998, two Toronto Bread Not Circuses members (Michael Shapcott and I) asked Richard Pound about the IOC's responsibility to set social impact guidelines for host cities, just as it now establishes environmental guidelines. We noted the potential for negative social impacts in the specific areas of housing and homelessness. According to Pound, bid cities would view this requirement as undue IOC interference into their domestic politics and policies. Interestingly, he seemed to assume that host countries do not view the IOC's environmental guidelines as intrusive. Then again, organizing committees undoubtedly realize that failure to fulfil environmental promises may evoke criticism from Greenpeace, but will raise few eyebrows within the Olympic industry. Pragmatically, of course, it would not serve Olympic industry purposes, most notably the interests of its global corporate sponsors, to exclude any country on negative social impacts or human rights grounds, Beijing being a classic example.

In the years since the IOC bribery scandal, some non-governmental organizations have acted on the belief that there exists a window of opportunity to engage with the IOC in joint ventures to promote transparency, accountability and positive social and environmental impacts of the Olympics. These groups range from the conservative Olympics Athletes Together Honorably (OATH) to the radical Anti-Olympic People's Network, a Japanese group, and Toronto's Bread Not Circuses.²³ The more conservative groups typically take a mild and conciliatory tone; they avoid inflammatory language, appeal to the IOC's self-interest and urge them to take the moral high ground. While I understand the political strategy at work, I find this approach naive and I question if it will actually produce any concrete changes. The track record of the IOC on moral or ethical issues is less than stellar, and I believe it is misguided, to say the least, to accept every written statement of IOC principles and ethics at face value. For example, the IOC did not voluntarily create an ethics commission; they had little alternative in the face of the bribery scandals, and most investigations were conducted by their own people.²⁴

Agenda 21: Sport for Sustainable Development was adopted by the IOC and endorsed by the entire "Olympic Movement" in 1999. Then-president Samaranch proceeded to "invite all members of the Olympic Movement ... to comply with the recommendations ... to the best of their ability and with due respect for their cultures, traditions and belief" (emphasis added).²⁵ In short, they could take it or leave it.

(It should be noted, too, that the document was published "with the support of Shell International," an oil company that gained a seriously tarnished reputation in the 1990s. Environmentalists and human rights activists identified Shell's exploitation of oil reserves, the environment, and local people in Nigeria, environmental violations in the North Sea, and anti-trade union activities in the UK. More recently, critics have noted Shell's failure to address adequately the global problem of climate change.²⁶)

The fact that *Agenda 21* was not a binding instrument was unfortunate, since it had the potential to address a significant number of negative social and economic as well as environmental impacts. Indeed, the language and perspective of the document is surprisingly progressive, integrative and inclusive. Following relevant UN principles, its definition of sustainable development identified the need for simultaneous "economic, social and political development particularly geared to the benefit of the poorest members of society."²⁷ Combating exclusion and poverty, protecting health, particularly that of vulnerable populations, and boosting local housing strategies were among the many commendable goals identified in the document.

More fundamentally, *Agenda 21* called for strengthening of the democratic process by facilitating community groups' access to information, especially regarding "environmental and development aspects."²⁸ How this would work in an "undemocratic" regime is left unexplained; the escape clause cited above regarding "respect" for local cultures effectively permits complete secrecy on all these issues. Indeed, Sydney Organizing Committee's lack of transparency and accountability, together with its exemption as a non-government body from Freedom of Information requirements, cast doubt on the democratic process even in a democracy.

Conclusion

Agenda 21 provides a more than adequate template for the IOC to embark on a serious campaign to promote sustainable development. Significantly, the document defines the term in its broadest possible sense to encompass economic, social, political and environmental concerns. Thus, the IOC has in its hands an effective instrument for bringing about compliance on a number of key issues related to social responsibility in general, and housing and homelessness in particular. Given the documented damage suffered by vulnerable populations in recent Olympic host cities, and in light of the IOC's stated interest in promoting sustainable development, broadly defined, it would be a relatively simple step to make *Agenda 21* a binding instrument and thus a key criterion in the evaluation of Olympic bids. Realistically, however, the profit-making motives of multinational corporate sponsors of the Olympics would not be well-served by any requirement that, to their eyes, smacked of socialism, or even one that took social responsibility seriously. I conclude, then, that *Agenda 21* is unlikely to be fully implemented and hence is not a useful starting point for non-governmental organizations struggling for social justice within the "Olympic movement." Recent history has shown that there are more effective routes that community groups have used to challenge global corporations in general, and the Olympic industry specifically:

- lobbying elected politicians at every level
- putting forward city council candidates on an "Olympic watchdog" or "anti-Olympic bid" platform
- enlisting the help of supportive mainstream media to expose Olympic legacy myths
- using independent media web sites to circulate alternative views and visions
- engaging in protest rallies and direct action
- encouraging and supporting whistle-blowers found within every sector of the Olympic industry
- boycotting Olympic sponsors—and telling them why

A consolidated international campaign starting at the grassroots level could potentially pressure the IOC to take real action on *Agenda 21*, an important first step towards requiring bid committees to make social responsibility a key component of their plans. An authentic legacy of affordable housing, rent control legislation, protection of tenants' and boarders' rights, guaranteed freedom of assembly, unrestricted public use of public space... all these and more should flow from a bid that takes social responsibility seriously. Without such safeguards, talk of an affordable housing legacy for Olympic host cities is empty rhetoric.

Endnotes

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