

## Spectrum

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Fall 2012

Article 4

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9-1-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Silva, Krista (2012) "Olympic Landscapes: A Global Event on a Local Landscape," *Spectrum*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol2/iss1/4>

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## **Olympic Landscapes: A Global Event on a Local Landscape**

**By Krista Silva**

### **Introduction**

Recently, cities around the globe have become involved in a competition for obtaining the title of the most “powerful” city in the world. Hosting mega-events, like the Olympics allow for these cities to restructure the entire floor plan of their metropolis. The Olympic games are well-known global events that occur within a smaller scale local landscape; therefore, the landscape undergoes many changes due to the drastic measures the games entail, as well as the goals for the landscape, economy, and residents post-Olympics.

While looking at these landscapes, it is important to remember that the individual shapes the landscape, while the landscape itself influences and shapes the individuals who reside there (Tilley 1996:162). The landscape of the Olympics is structured around human desires and political interests, while in turn, the reconstructed landscape, reshapes the memories, meanings, and conceptions the residents associate with the area itself. The built landscape of the Olympic can be understood as a conceptual, ideational, and a constructed landscape through the instilled memories, political associations, aesthetic appeal, and the outcomes of the newly shaped area. In this paper I analyze the Olympics in terms of its effects on a city by using analytical categories of conceptual, ideational, and a constructed landscape. I consider the desirability of becoming host city, the transformation of the land not only to support the event itself, but also in relation to the functioning use of the land post-Olympic, as well as how monuments, places, and cohesive events instill a stronger sense of social solidarity and unity through emotional connections.

### **Hosting the Games**

The Olympic games occur in different areas of the world every two years. This means that multiple cities have the opportunity to become a host city every time the global tradition is repeated. The host city needs to be prepared to reconstruct the entire infrastructure of the urban area. Over the recent years, the Games have become more and more elaborate and technologically advanced, therefore more

expensive to accommodate. This makes it essentially impossible for small-scale cities and poor countries to make it past the early rounds of the biddings (Short 2008: 333). The more renowned cities are chosen because they are able to generate more income than other areas and are more recognized in all areas of the globe. These factors and many more often increase the desire and competitiveness of becoming host of the Olympic games.

Cities around the globe are often honored and excited to be able to accommodate such a large-scale event as the Olympics. Most of the time the cities view this as an opportunity to convey a positive international image. Being viewed as the arena for the Olympics enhances the areas image as a dynamic place involved in the globalized world (Broudehoux 2007: 384). Hosting the games is also used as an opportunity to recreate and restructure the entire urban environment (Short 2008). The area is able to undergo large-scale transformations without public scrutiny and with a strict deadline (Broudehoux 2007: 384). According to Short (2008), these “urban makeovers” are designed to improve international linkage and increase the circuits of international capital flow. Because the Olympics are worldwide events, the host city is going to experience a vast amount of tourism while the games are in session. However, these landscapes continue to exist after the Games have come to an end, therefore it is important to look at how the reconstructed urban landscapes are inhabited post-Olympics.

### **Urban Landscapes**

The new infrastructure that is enabled by becoming a host city of the Olympics is obviously a major part of the landscape. Because the Olympics are a world event, the landscape needs to be all encompassing. Host cities use this to their advantage to create a completely different skyline of their metropolis. The host cities also use the reconstruction as an advantage to become a “global city” (Short 2008: 337). Reaching “global city” status is a vision these elite cities have of a “self consciously ‘global’ city replete with images of busy international airports, foreign tourists [...] and an overwhelmingly positive image shared around the world” (Short 2008: 336). This image is used to promote and project certain images, such as multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism around the globe (Short 2008: 337). The Olympic games allow to speed up this process because they provide dramatic infrastructure renewal and improvement. This positive image is most often embedded in the dramatic and aesthetically pleasing architecture and design of the Olympic monuments and structures.

The visual appeal and aesthetic of these dramatic infrastructures also plays a huge part in the reputation of the urban area. According to Minnaert (2012), the globalization of the economy has brought about the concept of “the entrepreneurial city.” In these cities urban elites unite in order to promote the economic development of their city in order to enhance their position in the “global urban hierarchy,” with the goal of obtaining the highest position on the hierarchy and to “showcase the city as an attractive place for investment” (Minnaert 2012: 362).

The attractiveness of the city is a result of the “constructed landscape” (Minnaert 2012). The ideas, designs, and emotions are projected onto the world in attempts to achieve the outcome desired. In this case, the desired outcome is to become the most powerful city in the world through aesthetically pleasing design. The visual appeal of the city also contributes to how the place is remembered and recognized. A building or monument will be most noticed if it is conspicuous and if it emits a strong aesthetic presence (Broudehoux 2010: 57). Although these constructed landscapes may be aesthetically pleasing, and serve a purpose in the larger, global scale, they impact the meaning of the landscape to the local residents. Knapp and Ashmore (1991) argue that “modernization of landscapes often leads to truncation and impoverishment of their living embodiment of memory, to a rupture in their “cultural biography” –the long interaction between people and their environment” (1999:10). The aesthetic of the landscape may contribute to its status in the entrepreneurial world. However, the drastic change causes the memories that were once instilled among the landscape to completely change. These changes may not always be done to create a stronger sense of power among the world, but in some cases, the infrastructure is changed with a purpose to emanate stronger power relations and control domestically.

### **Power Landscapes**

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the city was completely reconstructed in order to project the element of power and global interest onto the landscape. Beijing in particular accomplished this with spectacular, one-of-a-kind monuments. Broudehoux (2007) reminds that “[i]n its attempt to modernize its image and to leave a mark in Olympic history, Beijing has followed other aspiring world cities in exploiting the emblematic power of architecture as cultural capital” (2007: 384). Beijing used the capacity of the Olympic games to restructure their city using spectacular architecture to draw in the attention of the outside world. The structures and monuments presented an image of power and authority throughout the

internal and external world. In the recent years, urban areas have been cast under the spell of the “Bilbao Effect,” an effect causes cities to embark on a competition for global preeminence by building the largest, most dramatic, daring, and technological advanced buildings (Broudehoux 2007: 385). This is clearly seen in the architecture created in Beijing for the 2008 Olympic games.

Beijing wanted to be seen as a powerful, dominating landscape not only to the other world renowned urban areas, but to tourists and potential investors in Chinese economy. Most importantly, Beijing wanted to be seen as a powerful, controlled urban area in the eyes of others, while maintaining authority internally in the country. The monuments and structures not only created a visualized aspect of power but also reinforced the power that was already in existence throughout the landscape. Broudehoux (2010) argues that

Their monumentalism reflects upon the government's dynamism, authority, and will power, and testifies to its desire to be taken seriously on the world stage. It also boldly marks the continuous presence of the state on the urban landscape, and reinforces, on an everyday basis, the awareness and experience of state power (Broudehoux 2010: 57).

Daily these new structures project and instill the sense of power and authority on the Beijing's citizens. This image of power and visibility reasserts Beijing's legitimacy as the leader of China (Broudehoux 2010: 57). This concept and initiative relates to what Tilley (1996) refers to as “empowering landscapes,”

[l]andscapes *empower*, they form personal biographical understanding of an agent's place. While people create their landscapes these landscapes recursively act back so as to create the people who belong to them (Tilley 1996: 162).

The dominating landscape Beijing elites have created, directly impacts the people governed by the existing regime. The disenfranchisement of the powerless serves as a means to reinforce social control while hindering the progress of resistance movements by breaking community networks (Broudehoux 2007: 389).

This disengaging of the lower class is a result of the worldly oriented goals of the Olympic landscape. The purpose of these landscape transformations is to be seen as a modern, influential area of the world with a focus toward the future rather than the present. Therefore, the individuals who live in the core of the area are subjected to the social inequalities and unjust governance. This can be understood

as what Dillehay (2008) calls “utopic space.” When looking at the Olympic landscapes through the power relations within Beijing, the changed landscape can be viewed as a “utopic space” defined by Dillehay (2008) as a space in which “society’s concept of utopia is expressed spatially, materially, and [...] aesthetically” (2008: 46). Because the main focus of these newly enforced landscape is toward the future, the development and urban planning is more oriented to instill a newfound sense of order and control.

Dillehay (2008) suggests that such spaces are considered “utopic” because of the important role they play in relation to the places and spaces that they are compared to. Beijing, in comparison to the other core areas of the world, is full of with dramatic infrastructure and complex technology. The landscape created for the Olympic games only allowed for Beijing to progress closer to a “utopic space.” Such “utopic spaces” become imperative points in a complex chain of social spaces relying on their aesthetic appeal, as “they express varying degrees of connectivity, centrality, and influence within the setting of relations” (Dillehay 2008: 46-47). These elements are used together in order to look more towards the future than remain in the present. The main focus of these spaces is to instill a *new* sense of order and status while comparing themselves to other “non-utopic” spaces. This allows such spaces to remain powerful and dominant in global relations.

However, prioritizing the cities image amongst the global world over its daily use by its inhabitants reproduces inequality among those who live within this utopia’s borders. The image these built landscapes project onto the outside world plays a huge factor in the reasons behind building them. By constructing massive, dramatic structures, the city of Beijing is hiding certain features of their culture through the landscape. Through these Olympic structures the city is projecting a constructed reality of an economically successful and well-functioning society (Broudehoux 2010: 61). Inasmuch as these landscapes project power, they also conceal the rising contradictions and social inequalities that are associated with Chinese society. The monuments idealize the elite and continue to ignore the lower class. For instance, in order to build these massive structures people need to be relocated in order to create room for the building. More often than not these people are of lower class and therefore, the social inequalities are being perpetuated within the city.

### **Negative Social Impacts from the Landscape**

Although Beijing may believe that by building these landscapes the area is benefiting dramatically, there are quite a few downfalls to being the host of the Olympics and having to construct these massive facilities. After the Olympics have concluded the host city needs to figure out how they are going to continue to use the monuments built for the Olympics. They need to be able to continue to support their economy while supporting these elaborate, land consuming structures built for the Games. What is going to happen to the community, as well as the remaining landscape after the Olympics have ended? What type of legacy are these Olympics going to leave behind? How is the economy going to support these major structures built upon their landscape?

Throughout the past twenty Olympic games more than twenty million individuals have been displaced and relocated in order to allow the constructions of Olympic monuments and buildings (Borger 2007). Minnaert (2012) observes that “[f]or socially excluded groups, the impacts may be negative, via diluted community structures or an inflation in the housing market, which may force people who do not own their homes to move (2012: 362). These negative impacts for the lower class can range from rent increase for social housing to the complete tearing down of the place they once called home (Digby 2008: 46). Figure one shows an image from the Beijing 2008 Olympics in which a central-city area was completely demolished in order to make room for the renovation of the new infrastructure. This exemplifies just how much stress urban areas place on their reputation around the world. The socially elite are able to thrive in these entrepreneurial global cities, however, the lower class end up struggling to maintain a home, health care, and education.



Figure 1. A lone house in what remains of a section of a central-city neighborhood in Beijing. This area was “revitalized” for the 2008 Olympics (Broudehoux 2010: 59).

The disenfranchising of the lower class can also be seen in the upcoming London Olympics (at the time this paper is written these Olympics have not happened yet). These Games are going to take place in five boroughs of east London; one out of the five being one of the poorest and most deprived areas of the UK according to the 2001 UK Census (Digby 2008: 46). These five boroughs are also the areas of London with the youngest, most diverse population. Of course, this played a huge factor in the bidding process because cultural diversity and the young energetic population will make the “global city” look promising to the rest of the world. However, within London, the forty-one percent of the population that is under the age of twenty-four make up the majority of the one-parent families, with the worst health and living conditions (Digby 2008: 47). This makes them the ideal target for displacement and relocation for the means to build the elaborate structures the Olympics entail. The structures that are built in order to enhance and sanitize the location for the Olympics will hide these factors and project a constructed reality of a well functioning society, similar to the case in Beijing.

According to Beriatos and Gospondini (2004), ninety-five percent of the projects planned for the Olympics are not temporary but permanent, and therefore need to be re-designed or re-structured in order to have a function after the games have ended. In most cases, the former Olympic landscapes are



constructed in tourist venues or sporting arenas. When considering the type of individuals who will be able to go to these facilities it becomes apparent that the structures are contributing to the social and cultural inequalities of the area. Many of the Olympic venues in Beijing that were constructed over older, lower class neighborhoods will not be accessible to the general public. Instead, they will be turned into luxury resorts for China's new elite. This creates a space of exclusion, in which particular types of people are advantaged (Broudehoux 2007: 386-387). This, in turn, increases social disparities and is causing a greater income divide than ever before (Broudehoux 2007: 389).

As an outcome of hosting the Olympic games and gaining a completely new urban infrastructure, the area is destroying the landscape-history it once had. In Beijing, the historical infrastructure and cultural landscape was completely undone in order to reach the standards of "global city status" through spectacular architecture. Broudehoux (2007) observes that "by destroying Beijing's historical fabric and obliterating its unique cultural landscape they effectively annihilate part of the city's competitive advantage and erase the particularities that had given Beijing its distinctive flavor" (2007, 384).

The history of a landscape is something that many people identify with. In order to call a place home, the history and memory of the individuals residing in the area need to be recollected. Ruth M. Van Dyke (2004) discusses the importance of the memory and history of certain landscapes. She believes that the memory of a particular location or space is crucial to invoking the history of social engagement throughout the area (Van Dyke 2004: 414). The way an individual remembers a certain area or monument is not only a reflection of the landscape itself, but it is also used as a way for people to situate, organize, and use the landscape (Knapp and Ashmore 1999:14). The memory associated with a place is part of the way individuals engage and experience the landscape in which they live. Knapp and Ashmore (1999) argue that "[p]laces create and express sociocultural identity. Landscape provides a focus by which people engage with the world, and create and sustain a sense of their social identity" (1999, 15). By completely changing the infrastructure of the land, the meaning and social identity that is embedded within the landscape is altered. The recreation of the landscape for the Olympic games disengages this factor of memory. Because the landscape is completely renovated, the memory instilled in the land becomes vulnerable, and so do the lower class individuals.

### **Collective Effervescence and Public Open Spaces**

The Olympic games, no matter where they are held, are known to generate a feeling of national pride and identity. Since individuals are traveling from all over the world to either participate in the games, or watch the games, there is a need for landscapes in which these people feel comfortable and feel a sense of social solidarity. In order to create a space where social and cultural, diversity can be fostered and enhanced “public open spaces” were created. The spaces synchronize the different social, cultural, and economic groups. Because these individuals are all embedded within a common space, new social solidarities are created (Beriatos and Gospondini 2004: 198). These spaces also allow for the fostering of stronger feelings of pride and place attachment due to the lack of restrictions and the openness of the area (Minnaert 2012: 362). This type of Olympic landscape falls under what Knapp and Ashmore (1999) term “conceptual landscape.” In these spaces, the land itself plays a major role in the relations that occur within them. These spaces are normally areas in which the architectural landscapes have not dominated and are simple parks in the midst of the urbanity, allowing for people to be more aware of their physical emotions rather than the physical dominance of the architecture. Figure two shows a computer-generated image of the supposed 2012 London Olympics’ public open space surrounded by the larger, more urban structures developed for the Olympics.



Figure 2. A computer generated view of the Olympic park in London 2012 (Digby 2008: 41).

These public open spaces often emanate stronger feelings of nationality and collectiveness among the individuals. Unlike many of the other Olympic spaces, these open spaces are completely free to the public. This allows locals and tourists to participate in the celebration of the Olympics regardless of whether or not they have purchased event tickets. Knapp and Ashmore (1999) discuss landscape in terms of social order and cultural relations; “as a community merges with its *habitus* through the actions and activities of its members, the landscape may become a key reference point for expressions of individual as well as group identity” (1999: 16). In this particular case, the landscape does act as a key reference point in which people’s emotions are expressed to create a sort of group identity and social cohesion. This merging of community can be seen throughout the entirety of the Olympics. However, the natural setting and physical openness of the “public open spaces”, allow for a stronger sense of collectiveness through similar emotions.

Durkheim (1895) discusses the collective emotions shared between individuals when brought together at a shared event or location. His ideas can be reflected within these public open spaces seen at the Olympic games due to their intended purpose of cultural integration and cohesion. The fact that these open spaces are created for the strict intention of allowing people to gather together during a momentous event shows that individuals need to feel a part of a larger, collective group and therefore, supports Durkheim’s (1895) theory of “collective effervescence” or “collective consciousness.” Durkheim (1915) argues that when social and cultural events in which people congregate becomes a powerful stimulant that draws people together and in turn, fosters an experience of common passion,

There are occasions when this strengthening and vivifying action of society is especially apparent. In the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces [...] (1915: 209-210).

In this particular case, the Olympic games are the occasions in which the society feels a stronger sense of assembly and common passion. This sense of passion and pride become stronger in public open spaces because they are areas that are completely surrounded by Olympic sentiment, allowing everyone to be aware that the Games are present. Public open spaces are a particularly interesting case because no events occur there other than cultural cohesion and solidarity.

## Conclusion

The landscape of the Olympic games creates various feelings of cultural cohesion and social solidarity, while enhancing the host cities status as a “global city.” However, while reinforcing a sense of global identity, the landscape is completely transformed, and in turn results in displacement of some local individuals. In many cases, among the displaced and those who attend the new places, the memories associated with the previous landscape are lost and the importance of power and utopia are prioritized. The host cities of the Olympic games are often honored when designated to this task, however, the infrastructure and economy of the city is subject to complete renovation. Whether transformation of the landscape has a positive or negative impact on the population, I think depends on the city. This transformation, however, shows how landscapes can affect the residents of the area not only through the building process, but also by the visualization, the urban infrastructure, collectiveness, and the globalization of the landscapes involved.

***The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Anthropology and University of New Hampshire.***

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