Building a better host city? Reforming and contesting the Olympics in Paris 2024

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Abstract

Many cities have abandoned plans for hosting the Olympics due to crises of high costs, unnecessary infrastructures, and a range of socio-spatial exclusions. These problems stem from conflicts between the short-term needs of the event and the long-term needs of the city. In response, Olympic organizers launched a series of reforms to improve alignment between the Games and the host city. This paper examines these reforms, identifies urban development agendas in preparation for Paris 2024, and explores their implications on selected spaces of urban intervention within Paris. Thinking through rhizomatic philosophy, the paper advocates for a more nuanced approach to exploring the problems and potential of mega-event-led urban development. In so doing, the paper maps organizer and activist assemblages, and posits that efforts at reform are stymied by a too-narrow interpretation of who counts as a stakeholder. Subsequently, the spatial articulations of the mega-event risk perpetuating the exclusions that reform intended to resolve. Ensuring a wider representation of resident voices could help minimize the distance between word and deed in the latest rounds of Olympic reform.

Keywords

mega-events, Olympics, political resistance, reform, urban development

Introduction: Problems beyond sport

Mega-events like the Olympics are famous for their sport and spectacle, but they have serious impacts on the cities and societies that host them. With preparatory periods lasting nearly a decade and routinely-busted budgets in the billions of dollars, mega-events come with significant social, political, and economic costs (Flyvbjerg et al., 2020; Horne and Whannel, 2020; Müller and Gaffney, 2018). The extant academic literature of these mobile, global celebrations has traced a variety of deleterious outcomes associated with hosting, from exorbitant costs to inappropriate infrastructures to the marginalization of vulnerable populations (Evans, 2020; Gold and Gold, 2017;

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Hayes and Karamichas, 2011; Lenskyj and Wagg, 2012). It is increasingly clear that hosting mega-events is unsustainable in social, economic, and ecological terms (Müller et al., 2021). This has developed into a hosting and credibility crisis, as the risks of negative outcomes mean that increasingly fewer cities are willing to bid for what is arguably the world's most prestigious mega-event: the Olympic Games (Lauermann, 2022; MacAloon, 2016).

The origin of this crisis stems from the fundamental risk in mega-event hosting: the conflict between planning for the short-term needs of the event as opposed to the long-term needs of the city. Insofar as the needs of the event and the city overlap, hosting may cause less damage; but if short term priorities overwhelm longer-term planning, then mega-events can result in any number of undesirable outcomes for cities (Müller and Gaffney, 2018). This is particularly visible in the wide-ranging urban development and revitalization schemes that are commonly associated with mega-events (Smith, 2012). These strategies are not evenly distributed within the host city, but rather targeted at selected spaces within the urban fabric that are deemed important by organizers and elites. Subsequently, mega-event urban interventions often lead to disjointed spatial development and socio-spatial exclusions (Gaffney, 2016; Kennelly, 2015; Watt, 2013). Particularly in the Global North, city authorities have grown reluctant to risk these outcomes, and where authorities are more supportive of hosting, then residents have organized to force referenda or cancel the bids outright (Lauermann and Vogelpohl, 2017). It has become increasingly clear that mega-events are losing their appeal as entrepreneurial strategies for driving urban development and economic growth (Lauermann, 2022).

In light of these challenges, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has undertaken a series of ambitious organizational reforms. Their goal is to better align the Olympic Games with the existing spatial politics and longer-term needs of the host city, restructuring the ways in which the Games are bid for, organized, and deployed. Ultimately, the reforms aspire to reorient event-led urban development towards less exclusionary outcomes (International Olympic Committee, 2018b). This, the IOC hopes, will alter the current trajectory of decline and reignite interest in hosting the Games.

Through an examination of the reforms, the urban development agendas related to hosting in Paris 2024, and a focus on Parisian activist coalitions, this paper determines that there is a weak connection between organizers and the actual lived city. Despite making significant improvements in regards to power sharing with local authorities, the series of Olympic reforms so far fails to give adequate voice to residents. There is a disjuncture between the goals of the reforms and the outcomes on the ground, which this paper unpacks through rhizomatic thinking, from the non-linear philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (2013). Interpreting the mega-event city through rhizomes illuminates the ways in which the IOC, local event organizers, and various residents do more than see the city differently. Rather, they *see different cities*. This has implications for the ways in which mega-events and urban development are traditionally understood.

Thinking the host city through rhizomes helps to reintroduce complexity into the narratives of mega-event-led urban development, which – particularly outside of academic work – often resemble fable. In one of these tales (usually told by organizers and supportive political figures), hosting leads to a wealth of benefits both material and symbolic, as a revitalized city with sparkling new infrastructures (re)introduces itself on the global stage, welcoming tourists and investment capital alike, and leaving a healthier and more prosperous city in its wake. In another tale (often told by critics and activist groups), mega-events are organized by a coterie of elites who marshal the forces of international capital to exclude vulnerable residents, extract maximum value, and leave behind a shattered city.

While each of these might be accurate in parts, their continued use among mega-event supporters and opponents remains problematic. Crucially, these fables misrepresent actor groups as homogenous and stable entities, overlooking their inherent heterogeneity and contingency. This

superficial simplicity elides the multiplicity of motivations and limitations that undergird and constrain mega-event-led urban development. Instead, the forces at play in the organization and articulation of the Olympics are diverse, multi-local, and transnational, comprising multiscalar urban growth machines that function across multiple regimes and domains (Surborg et al., 2008). Similarly, fables also render invisible the diversity of resident actions, and the variety of rationales behind those actions, as oppositional activity takes heterogenous forms, from athlete dissent to diverse assemblages of local and international protest (Boykoff, 2014, 2020; Lauermann and Vogelpohl, 2019). Finally, reductionist fables also misconstrue the city itself as a stable, singular object that is easily knowable, as opposed to the complexity of lived realities found in the vital interplay of the social and the material. Thus, as mega-event preparations force disparate groups into close contact, rhizomatic thinking helps make sense of the ontological divergences that grow visible in the contestations for control of selected spaces within the host cities. Ultimately, a rhizomatic approach encourages a more nuanced and less polemical exploration of the problems and potential inherent in mega-event-led urban development.

Within the context of the mega-event hosting and credibility crisis, this paper engages rhizomatic thinking to explore the spatial interventions of Paris 2024. It offers a nuanced exploration of the attempts at Olympic reform that is appreciative of both the aspirations of organizers and the protestations of residents in the face of deleterious outcomes. At its heart, the paper attempts to explain how and why these latest efforts at Olympic reform appear to repeat many of the problems they were intended to resolve. It concludes that those who are interested in mega-events that are less injurious and more universally beneficial should refocus their attention on the fundamental political question: *who gets to speak for the city*. This suggests that organizational reform – however wholesale and well-intentioned – may still have limited success at producing more egalitarian spatial outcomes, so long as certain resident voices are excluded.

Crisis and reform

Mega-events are "ambulatory occasions of a fixed duration that (a) attract a large number of visitors, (b) have large mediated reach, (c) come with large costs, and (d) have large impacts on the built environment and the population" (Müller, 2015: 3). The Olympics and the men's Football World Cup are the most famous and best researched of these, and the extant literature has established that hosting commonly results in a variety of injurious outcomes for cities. These range from broken budgets and private profit at the expense of the public purse (Baade and Matheson, 2016; Flyvbjerg et al., 2020; Raco, 2012; Zimbalist, 2016) to gentrifications, evictions, and white elephant infrastructures, occurring regardless of national or political economic cultures (Alm et al., 2016; Davis, 2011; Karbainov, 2013; Kennelly and Watt, 2011; Olds, 1998). Despite sometimes vociferous debate regarding the severity of or specific causes for these outcomes, mega-events overall tend to cause at least some kind of harm – whether economic, social, or environmental – to their hosts (Müller et al., 2021). This harm is often most visible in the host city spaces selected for intervention.

Dire pronouncements like these are, unsurprisingly, either ignored or vigorously contested by boosters: people in the International Olympic Committee, members of local organizing committees, political and business leaders, former and current athletes, supportive journalists, and sympathetic academics. In many cases these positions can be explained by vested interests, particularly regarding those actually involved in conducting or profiting from the events. Conversely, the general public has learned enough about the risks associated with hosting the Olympics that a number of potential host cities have refused to participate. Recently, Rome, Stockholm, Oslo, and Lviv withdrew bids due to economic pressures and fragile political support, while popular protest and public referenda destroyed bids in Krakow, Budapest, Graubünden, Munich, Hamburg, and Boston

(Lauermann and Vogelpohl, 2017; MacAloon, 2016; Maennig, 2019). This left only two candidate cities for the 2024 Summer Olympics: Paris and Los Angeles. To avoid negative press regarding the lack of bids, the IOC broke with precedent and awarded two Games at once, simultaneously granting the rights for 2024 to Paris and 2028 to Los Angeles (International Olympic Committee, 2020a).

The IOC launched its organizational reforms with Agenda 2020 (International Olympic Committee, 2014) and its updates, The New Norm (International Olympic Committee, 2018b), and most recently, Agenda 2020+5 (International Olympic Committee, 2021). The original Agenda 2020 was a proposal of 40 recommendations that MacAloon (2016: 771) categorized along three dimensions: cost overruns and white elephant infrastructures, general mistrust of the IOC, and skepticism of the Olympic Movement. Problems with the first two categories explain the existence of the third, since Olympism's mission is to place "sport at the service of humankind… and build a better world through sport" (International Olympic Committee, 2020b: 11, 15). Given the litany of cost overruns, oversized and underused infrastructures, and corruption scandals, it is small wonder that many people have come to doubt the sincerity of Olympism's mission. Still, this guiding vision figures heavily in the IOC's strategic reforms and shapes the ways in which the organization attempts to refashion its relationships with host cities in more socially responsible ways (Bayle, 2016; François et al., 2020). Rather than investigating the efforts at governance reform in order to restore organizational legitimacy (as in Verschuuren, 2021), this paper orients itself within the spatial politics of the host city. From this perspective, it explores the IOC's attempts to reduce the fundamental risk in hosting: the potential misalignment between the short-term needs of the event with the long-term needs of the city.

The paper is grounded in the three Olympic reform documents (Agenda 2020, The New Norm, and Agenda 2020+5), and traces organizational changes through the Olympic Games Framework (International Olympic Committee, 2015), a document created after Agenda 2020 in order to introduce potential candidate cities to the new dimensions of partnership with the IOC. It also builds on the report of the Evaluation Commission (International Olympic Committee, 2017) that examined the bids from Paris and Los Angeles – the first to be submitted and considered under the New Norm reforms – and on other IOC materials, including seminars, press releases, and IOC Executive Board meetings. Finally, the paper incorporates foundational documents from the Paris 2024 bidding and organizing committees, relevant municipal authorities within Greater Paris, and SOLIDEO, the delivery organization for Paris 2024. These include the original bid books, municipal planning frameworks, and public presentations on the current status of preparations.

These text materials are complemented by expert interviews and informal discussions with IOC employees involved in the rollout of these reforms; employees from SOLIDEO; and municipal administrators from Olympic-impacted areas in Greater Paris. In total, this paper makes use of contact with six individuals of professional responsibility, with roles generally ranging from manager to director level. This contact was augmented by numerous public statements, media interviews, and discussions at specialist workshops from these and other professionals. The paper also incorporates documents and public statements from a variety of anti-Olympics groups in Paris, and includes interviews and conversations with activists. Here, contact involved higher numbers, and consisted either of brief but significant interactions (for example, a conversation during a protest), or of longer-term conversations (including semi-structured interviews) conducted at intervals from 2020 – 2022. In total, contact with 51 individuals was logged in field notes, not counting repeated meetings. Finally, much in-person fieldwork in Paris was canceled or delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so many interactions were conducted via video chat, text, and email. These technological substitutions allowed some work to continue remotely, albeit imperfectly, but they also introduced new opportunities for connection with groups (among both organizers and opposition)

whose meetings previously had been held in-person, and as such would normally have been impossible to attend from a distance.

All materials were entered into qualitative data analysis software and coded inductively over time, in dynamic interplay between the (often virtual) field and traditional desk research (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). It is never simple to analyze a project *ex-ante*, so the paper avoids cost issues (which tend to rise over time) and instead uses the reforms, host city spatial politics, and resident response as the basis for discussion and analysis. The thematic coding revealed a disjuncture between the rhetoric of reform and the outcomes on the ground in Paris, oriented in the spaces selected for mega-event-led urban development. These spaces are important because this is where the divergent realities of various coalitions grow visible as they collide, and it is here that rhizomatic thinking can be useful for unpacking the multiplicities inherent in processes of mega-event-led spatial reorganization.

Thinking host cities through rhizomes

Outside of critical scholarship, mega-events are often presented simplistically: for or against, positive or negative, benefit or boondoggle. This representation overlooks the messiness found in urban life, event management, and spatial development projects – and especially the mega-event moments when these dynamics intersect. In this light, thinking through non-linear philosophy helps make sense of the complexities found in host cities during Olympic preparations. This paper begins with conceptual vocabulary from *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013) in order to build a more nuanced picture of the dynamic interactions between residents, local authorities, and event organizers. To do so, it begins from the notion of the rhizome, that subterranean stem whose diverse growths, ceaseless connections, and diverse interrelations inform Deleuze and Guattari's explorations of social organization and immanence. Rhizomes have no discernible beginning or end, nor identifiable points or stable structures; they are multi-dimensional and in constant flux, coalescing among heterogenous elements, territorializing and deterritorializing space, and cannot be understood by standard models (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 5–13).

In concert with the emergent philosophies of Spinoza, Bergson, and Whitehead, among others (Deleuze, 2001; Robinson, 2008), rhizomatic thinking informs many strands of critical urban scholarship. In exploring the attempts at Olympic reform in Paris, this paper echoes a body of literature on assemblage and the urban that, broadly, view the city as a spatially radiating relational machine, surging with liveliness and interaction between concentrations of humans, infrastructures, and technologies (Amin and Thrift, 2002, 2017). Knowledge and mobile policy also play a role in urban assemblages, as best practices are forged in particular contexts and mobilized for implementation in different locales (McCann and Ward, 2012a, 2012b). While this paper does not take a policy mobilities approach to the politics of Olympic reform, there are fertile interconnections here with that scholarship that should be noted. Further, seeing the city as an emergent coalescing of diverse and ontologically flat elements means that the urban can be assembled in any variety of configurations, which is ultimately an emancipatory call (McFarlane, 2011a). This is not to ignore or diminish the role of power or structure in unpacking the processes of contemporary urbanization worldwide (Brenner et al., 2011), but rather an opening for conceptualizing how agency, difference, and contingency can be (re)assembled in order to actualize alternative realities (McFarlane, 2011b).

At stake here are fundamental issues of urban spatial politics, brought to light and also exacerbated by the pressures of hosting the Olympics. The core of the matter – and a good entry point – is the long-standing question of the "right to the city," the radical slogan and wide-ranging concept that often undergirds Marxist urban geography (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 2015). These questions are especially resonant in Paris of all cities, and there is no small amount of literature applying Lefebvrian thought to contemporary spatial inequalities. Here, however, this paper

suggests Marcuse's (2014) multiple readings of the concept to explore how Olympic preparations in contemporary Paris are understood and employed by different groups implicated in these processes. In this way, Olympic reformers and Parisian authorities could be seen through Marcuse's *spatial* and *collaborationist* frames, while the heterogeneous opposition groups could be understood through *discontented* or *subversive* readings. The broader point is not to attempt to fix a specific reading to a particular group, but rather to understand the ways in which a multiplicity of realities can coexist. Thus, Marcuse's strategies for approaching the multiple rights to the city represent a practical application of rhizomatic thinking, and help make sense of the ways in which different assemblages are implicated in these fluid and emergent processes of urban change.

Here, assemblages are not seen as a discrete or unified approach to analysis, but rather as one of the many means by which rhizomatic thinking can help understand different dimensions of the urban. If assemblage is a process of organizing disparate components into a functional temporary order, then rhizomes are more total way of abstract seeing that eschews structure. Through rhizomatic thinking,

> "…one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad… Good and bad are only the products of an active and temporary selection, which must be renewed." (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 9)

Thinking through rhizomes helps dissolve rigidity and structure, and the interconnected richness of Deleuze and Guattari's non-linear thought offer some footholds for unpacking the processes of mega-event reform. There are four dimensions to consider: foregrounding the instability of all things from the perspective of time, decentering objects of analysis in order to destroy the illusion of separation, establishing radical connections between apparently disparate elements, and embracing multiplicities. These are not the only ways of approaching rhizomatic thinking, but they are well-suited to working with mega-event cities. None of this should be taken in the sense of applying a concept to an empirical case, however. As Massumi (2002: 17) warns, this kind of rough application of concept-to-case risks reaffirming existing systems, rather than inventing new and richer ways of understanding the world. Instead, these four dimensions are understood as a set of sensitivities, to be engaged for the purpose of destabilizing traditional interpretations of the host city. To that end, and with the understanding that all four dimensions are interrelated, what follows is a brief introduction of these aspects of rhizomatic thinking, teasing out connections to relevant spaces and moments in Paris.

The dimension of *time* begins from an understanding of impermanence, but grows richer through an appreciation of two modes of temporality: Chronos, that is, measurement and form, situation and definition; and Aeon, the "indefinite time of the event," the paradoxical "floating line" that defies traditional notions of past and future (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 305). Chronos time is the fundamental organizing force underlying the mega-event. There are fixed calendar dates agreed upon from the start: dates for bidding, for choosing and announcing the hosts, deadlines for clearing land and building necessary infrastructures, the opening and closing ceremonies, and the after-period that organizers call "legacy." The affair runs on a linear conception of calendar time: Chronos. But Aeon, the floating line of becoming, defies these calendar points: "…a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure or arrival, origin nor destination… A line of becoming has only a middle," (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 342). This perspective encourages a view beyond the seemingly discrete phases of mega-event bidding, preparation, event, and legacy, and towards an understanding of the messiness generated by the multifarious collisions between mega-event and city. Aeon time, the time of becoming, reminds that the mega-event city is immanent and ripe with the potential to develop in multiple directions. It is an exhortation to explore the selected spaces where collisions may take place.

Decentering refers to a means by which analysis takes place from a position of openness, heterogeneity, and connection. This entails a movement wherein the object of analysis is removed from a privileged place of attention – a place that, unwittingly, encases the object in a closed system, where models can be applied and rationality imposed (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 7). Instead, the decentering move operates through the so-called abstract machine, defined as "the aspect or moment at which nothing but functions and matters remain" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 164). This level of abstraction transcends definitions and divisions, encouraging a view of mega-event and city not as separate, but rather as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements linked by functions of intensity, speed, conjunction, and resistance. These assemblages and functions transcend the city, enrolling actors in locales worldwide.

Like time, the dimension of *connections* seems simple, but in actuality invites a profound rethinking of ontology. Rather than determining a relationship between two or more elements, "the rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles," (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 6). In concert with the decentering movement of the abstract machine, this means exploring the inter-linkages between seemingly disparate elements, forming a heterogeneous, multidimensional assemblage. Further – and with a view towards time – this assemblage is in flux, with connections constantly being made, unmade, and remade. In this way, exploring connections reveals that the rhizome is the sum of disparate elements and, simultaneously, it is also the lines and linkages between those elements. Within the host city, this means working with an understanding that individuals and organizations are not stable, but rather in perpetual motion, endlessly establishing new relationships across space and time.

This conceptualization bleeds into the fourth dimension, *multiplicities*, which refers to the ultimate destruction of dualism through the seeming paradox of the many and the one being one and the same (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 37). One of the most accessible metaphors for generic multiplicities found in *A Thousand Plateaus* is the wolf pack, which encompasses at the same time a single subject, a group, and the relationships and distances between individuals (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 32). Thinking further along these lines, multiplicities transcend the apparent differentiation between subjects and objects, and instead emphasize determinations and magnitudes. Multiplicities are rhizomatic, growing and shrinking through the establishment and dissolution of relations, all in ceaseless variation (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007: viii). This leads to the uncomfortable notion that organizing authorities and residents are not necessarily discrete groups in opposition, nor is the host city a neutral backdrop. Rather, these are individuals and groups who inhabit and create different cities of the same name. Within the context of preparing for the Olympics, they make, lose, and remake a multitude of connections of varying intensities, and the durability of these connections is reflected in the articulation and contestation of mega-event projects within selected spaces.

Ultimately, thinking through rhizomes destabilizes many conceptual limitations regarding mega-events and cities. A rhizomatic view encompasses the time of becoming, dissolves boundaries through abstraction, discovers and valorizes assemblages of disparate elements, and embraces multiplicities to understand entities beyond reductionist group dynamics. This means investigating how a variety of elements and influences are related over time, and how they change in intensity. It means appreciating the actual lived diversity of a city under the influence of profound material changes and socioeconomic pressures, without resorting to crude propaganda or reductionist thinking. It means acknowledging that just as separation is illusory, so too is stability – and thereby witnessing the processes of motion and change as multiple fluctuating groups with varying powers and capacities vie to make and remake selected spaces of mega-event Paris, all within the broader context of Olympic reform.

Optimization and flexibility

The Agenda 2020 document was the spark for rethinking the Olympic project, oriented around demands for transparency, social responsibility, and authenticity, and aimed at sustainability writ large (International Olympic Committee, 2014: 3). Many of the recommendations centered on reducing or preventing negative outcomes by lowering the costs of bidding and staging the Games, and better aligning the needs of the Olympics with the city's development trajectory. This took the shape of a power shift away from the IOC and towards local organizing committees, resulting in two prongs of reform around optimization and flexibility. Thus, from the outset, the efforts at Olympic reform involved a reordering of the rhizome to create new assemblages that, theoretically, would result in better outcomes.

Optimization means streamlining the extraordinarily complex processes of delivering the Games in order to reduce inefficiencies without sacrificing quality. These are technical interventions that rely on improved communication and coordination between the assemblage of heterogenous and interdependent elements that comprise the Olympic System: the IOC, the local organizing committee, governments, sponsors, media, international sporting federations, local delivery organizations, and relevant municipal authorities (Chappelet, 2016). In the words of one IOC director, "we want to deliver operationally in the most flawless way possible, with no overscoping… we want to deliver exactly what was needed to create a best-in-class experience, but without overdoing it in places where it was not necessary." This director underscored that the central challenge in relation to optimization is the need to balance efficiencies against the imperatives of the event itself. Under no circumstances can optimizations sacrifice the quality of the Olympics for athletes, sponsors, or spectators. In other words, there are limitations to how far the rhizomatic reordering will be permitted to go, and the establishment and policing of those borders is a restatement of the IOC's power.

Flexibility, the second prong of reform, means improving alignment between the Olympics and the city, altering the power dynamic in the mega-event assemblage. These reforms restructured procedures for bidding and hosting, modified foundational legal documents and contracts, and shifted power away from the IOC and towards the hosts. An IOC manager explained: "In the past, we used to come in and somehow impose our will onto the city… Today it is very much the Games that adapt to the city. That's very different in how we work, and that's probably the single biggest challenge we have." The idea is to create a different Olympic organizational culture, one in which the IOC and the host city behave more in partnership, tailoring the Olympics to better suit the city. The underlying assumption is that local organizers and authorities are better attuned to the host city's needs than the IOC, given their presumed familiarity with the selected spaces of urban intervention. Thus, increasing the authority of local organizers should result in a reduction or elimination of the destructive urban outcomes too often seen in mega-events.

The optimization and flexibility reforms can be organized thematically into three groups: governance, infrastructures, and transparency – all of which attempt in various fashions to re-assemble the multitude of connections implicated in the articulation of the Olympics. Governance refers to widening the circle of those who participate in decision-making, including a greater diversity of local stakeholders and experts. Infrastructures refer to the ways in which the event should take advantage of existing facilities, aligning with the city's long-term development agenda. And transparency means that development plans should be conducted and executed ethically and openly. An IOC director elaborated: "There are some really quite revolutionary changes in roles and responsibilities and governance… it is really about using the right expertise at the right time and working alongside, in order to move the project forward in the most efficient way." Engaged through governance, infrastructure, and transparency, the optimization and flexibility reforms aim to

restructure the Olympic assemblage away from a top-down imposition and towards a more customized partnership with local authorities.

This reordering can already be seen on the ground, as the IOC loosened stadium and city requirements to minimize or eliminate the construction of new venues, and no longer supports the construction of monofunctional venues at all. Further, existing stadiums in disparate sites can now be used for hosting, rather than mandating new construction within a fixed territory. Concretely, this has resulted in significant reductions of urban intervention: Paris 2024 organizers promised that 95% of the venues are either already existing or temporary structures (Paris 2024 Bid Committee, 2017: 16). Fieldwork investigations in 2022 revealed that this figure is actually 79%, but this still represents significant progress over the mega-event status quo. Overall, reducing urban interventions diminishes the risk of white elephant infrastructures, one of the great risks of hosting mega-events (Alm et al., 2016). Here, the Aeon time of becoming reveals how new assemblages emerge from the processes of reform, shifting decision-making power to local authorities and producing an Olympics that should fit the existing city better, without forcing new interventions. Yet if local authorities have greater autonomy to fit the Olympics to the city, the question still remains: who has the power to determine local development agendas? Rhizomatic thinking suggests an answer to this question by revealing new networks of resistance emerging to agitate for different assemblages and a different city.

Developing Paris

In Paris, Olympic venues are sited in two zones, one in the tourist center (highlighting the city's iconic backdrops), and one in the northern suburbs, oriented around the existing Stade de France stadium in the poorer communes in and around the department of Seine-Saint-Denis. This second zone is also part of a longstanding plan to develop what is known as Grand Paris, an urban, social, and economic development agenda to create and link a series of regional economic clusters through an enhanced public transport network (Le Grand Paris, 2021). The Grand Paris project also attempts to homogenize the fractured landscape of metropolitan governance in the entire Île-de-France region, and the Olympics are a key part of this effort (Geffroy et al., 2021). Mayor Hidalgo framed this as a climate-sensitive way to modernize and transform Paris, preserving its heritage while improving economic opportunities for millions of people (Olympic Review, 2017: 65). A manager at SOLIDEO, the delivery organization for Paris 2024, explained how preparing for the Olympics fulfills these two goals for French authorities: "We must deliver venues and other constructions by summer 2024, naturally, but we are considering the legacy phase as well… We must deliver entire districts and neighborhoods to improve the lives of residents for the next 30 or 40 years… This is an important element of building Grand Paris." From this perspective, local organizers – empowered by IOC reforms – deploy the Olympics in better alignment with the city's and region's overall development trajectory.

If the idea underlying IOC reforms is that host city authorities know better how to enact less injurious Games, then the alignment of Olympic preparations with Paris' long-term development agenda indeed represents a significant improvement. Rhizomatic thinking complicates this narrative, however, starting with an appreciation of Aeon time. Departing from organizers' linear planning methodology, Aeon time understands the immanence of the event and the potential to develop simultaneously in multiple directions. Practically, this translates into a search for the ways in which new assemblages are rendered visible in the built environment, either in accordance to reforms or in defiance of them. This does not mean a linear accounting of outcomes, but rather an exploration of the heterogeneous connections being made, unmade, and remade in the preparations for hosting, oriented around a sensitivity towards intensity, speed, conjunction, and resistance.

What this means in practice is that hosting the Olympics has sparked a dramatic increase in connections in a variety of domains at multiple scales. For instance, in Paris SOLIDEO hosted numerous webinars to introduce development plans and Olympic requirements to the business community, ultimately inviting bids for the necessary work. Over 5 years of preparations, they planned to fill 150,000 jobs across event organization, construction, and tourism sectors, with different sectors emphasized at different points in the linear Chronos-interpretation of the development cycle (International Olympic Committee, 2019). Simultaneously, local administrators in the Seine-Saint-Denis department – whose communes are thrust into the spotlight – also experience varied processes of connection to national and international networks of business, politics, and media. Indeed, as mega-events are in more-or-less continual phases of bidding, preparation, and execution, organizers from different host cities routinely participate in knowledge transfer activities (Müller and Stewart, 2016). The Olympic reforms have increased the intensity of these conjunctures, as organizers from Tokyo 2020, Beijing 2022, Paris 2024, Milano Cortina 2026, and Los Angeles 2028 exchange reform experiences at regular IOC sessions (International Olympic Committee, 2020c).

While Paris organizers tout the reductions in scope and cost of their socially-responsible Games (International Olympic Committee, 2019), few of their plans or reports mention the residents where developments take place. On the contrary, while administrators and organizers at international, national, regional, and municipals levels are enrolled with increasing intensity into new, far-reaching, and prestigious relations, many Parisians around the Seine-Saint-Denis department have been denied opportunities for increased connection and visibility, despite the fact that construction is happening in their neighborhoods. In the frenzy of double development for the Olympics and Grand Paris, many of these residents, by their own accounts, have been overlooked.

Resisting the recipient role

A number of oppositional and protest groups formed in and around Seine-Saint-Denis to resist the imposition of plans associated with Paris 2024. Mirroring the fragmented landscape of Parisian regional governance, these groups tended to split along topical and ideological lines. Some favored engagement with authorities in order to address problems with Olympic-led development, while others agitated for the cancellation of the Games outright. Still others focused on issues of local concern and ignored the broader context of the Olympics. Examining the landscape of local resistance over time introduces further complications, as new political developments and concerns resulted in shifting priorities, altered allegiances, the dissolution of some groups, and the constitution of novel configurations. These ceaseless connections, disconnections, and reconnections represent an assemblage that mirrors those of organizers and authorities. Excluded from the structures of power that articulate the Olympics, residents formed their own connections, taking shape in actions of social struggle, and agitating for the right to make their city.

To illustrate: one resident began meeting with a watchdog group ("Comité de Vigilance JO 2024 à Saint-Denis") that advocated for local representation and a reform-oriented engagement in order to adapt the Games to resident needs. From the outset, this reveals the weak linkages between local authorities and residents, which deflates somewhat the glowing pronouncements of reform's shifting power to the city. Among other projects, the Comité distributed information on Olympic-related urban developments in the commune, such as a controversial highway interchange that would disrupt existing vulnerable communities – part of the Grand Paris transport plans (Comité De Vigilance, 2020). Organizers and local authorities did not listen to resident complaints, however, and ignored calls for meetings and suggestions for alternative plans. Disillusioned with what she considered the Comité's conciliatory approach, the activist-resident began working with a heterogenous, non-unified collective ("NON aux JO2024") that was stridently anti-Olympics, not just in

Paris but globally as well, tying into an emergent international network that agitated for abolition of the Games. She learned of this group through a city-wide petition that called for a referendum on the 2024 Olympics (NON aux JO 2024 à Paris, 2020). The petition garnered over 30,000 signatures but was ignored by city authorities. As Olympic organizers steadfastly ignored resident concerns, the Comité grew more strident in its posture of resistance, while NON aux JO2024 began online meetings with anti-Olympics groups in Tokyo and Los Angeles to share resources and coordinate action – another parallel to the transnational learning networks emerging among Olympic organizers.

Soon, other groups coalesced to counter developments that threated specific areas in and around Seine-Saint-Denis. Membership and participation in these groups was often fluid and informal, with people floating between different meetings and actions, sometimes driven from one group by personal reasons only to return when the pressures of the Olympic development agenda necessitated group solidarity. Neighborhood and commune considerations also played a role, as people in various areas of Seine-Saint-Denis expressed different priorities. Later, there emerged a group called Saccage 2024, which can be translated variously as *rampage, devastation*, or *sacking* –which would seem to reveal their position towards the Games. Yet despite this group's stated radicality, they expressed a diversity of viewpoints regarding the upcoming Olympics. Some in the collective framed Olympic resistance as part of a wider struggle for a more just city, linking the mega-event to destructive processes of urban speculation, gentrification, and securitization in their communes (Saccage 2024, 2021). Politicized on global scales by her participation in these groups, the activist-resident explained her motivations: "The Olympics will bring nothing for me or any other residents of the 93 [Saint-Denis]. It doesn't matter where in the world they happen. It's always the same story: oppression of minorities, expulsions, and profit above all." This critical language underscores her newly-forged connections with transnational resistance groups, notably NOlympics LA, an abolition-oriented collective that organizes against the 2028 Olympics while positioning itself as a hub of Olympic opposition worldwide (Boykoff, 2020). NOlympics LA co-sponsored the referendum petition launched by NON aux JO2024, hosted transnational teach-ins about Olympic problems, and held online meetings with Parisian activists to trade best practices for resistance.

One of the most visible examples of spatial conflict in Paris occurred in early 2021, with the construction of an Olympic pool and training center in Aubervilliers, a commune in Seine-Saint-Denis (just south-east of the Stade de France) with a centuries-long history of being home to working class immigrants. This project was planned in the public gardens of Aubervilliers – a fixture of the commune since 1935, and a place that gardeners regard as more than a source of food or recreation: "It is remarkable that here, so close to the center of Paris, we still have so much green space. I think it is important as a refuge from the city," one gardener said. Yet this proximity to the urban core has made the gardens and nearby spaces a target for development, and Grand Paris planners have already held cultural events there to prepare the area for inclusion into wider circuits of tourism and investment (Grand Paris Aménagement, 2020). The construction of the training center was slated to destroy around 10,000 square meters of gardens, so various members of Parisian anti-Olympics groups coalesced in early 2021 to resist the project, joining in a department-wide action with gardening activists who had no explicit Olympic agenda.

Consisting of Olympic pool, sport center, and solarium, authorities framed the training center project as socially and ecologically responsible, one of nine new swimming facilities to benefit of the underserved northern communities after the Games, and all constructed to the highest environmental standards (International Olympic Committee, 2018a; Paris 2024, 2020). Organizers promised to compensate displaced gardeners by granting them other plots in an unused area nearby. Some gardeners accepted the offer but others refused, not wishing to abandon their cultivated plots. The idea of defending the gardens against Olympic and Grand Paris development was broad enough to apply to those involved in Olympic opposition groups as well as to those more concerned with

their immediate communities. Gathered under the banner of defending the gardens ("Jardins à Defendre"), this coalition published a manifesto against the destruction of their spaces, proposed alternative plans, garnered some press attention, and gathered over 70,000 signatures for a petition to the Aubervilliers mayor (Jardins Aubervilliers, 2021). Though the garden group refused to take a position on the Games, the department's anti-Olympics activists largely supported the garden defense community. This speaks to the intensity of the connections emerging in the resistance assemblages.

The activist-resident who participated in the gamut of anti-Olympic groups also became involved in the collective garden defense. When some of the gardeners abandoned their plots for the compensation scheme, she and others rushed in to protect the space, building a symbolic wall of straw bales to signify their resistance to the bulldozers gathered opposite (Paq, 2021). This culminated in an organized occupation of the gardens, maintaining a physical presence around the clock in order to deter demolition. Speaking from the occupied gardens via Zoom, another protester explained: "If we don't stop this, the entire area will be paved in concrete soon… We know that Grand Paris will put a train station here and then a new phase of gentrification will begin. Instead of nature we will have offices and fancy apartments." These protestors saw clear links between real estate speculation, paving the land, privatization of public space, and Olympic and Grand Paris developments. For them, talk of the project's social and environmental dimensions amounted to elite obfuscation and greenwashing. "Who cares if they build the solarium with recycled materials? They're still destroying natural habitats and not listening to us," another protestor said.

Rhizomatically, the garden site experienced flurries in intensity and speed, even as discourses on the Olympics diminished – reflecting the diversity of perspectives in this protestor assemblage, and in the Saccage 2024 collective overall. First, local courts sided with Grand Paris Aménagement and granted police the right to evict the occupiers, which was accomplished with force. 4000 square meters of gardens were destroyed and construction begun. Then protestors won an injunction on the grounds that destroying the gardens would violate Paris' Green Plan, which allocates a minimum amount of undeveloped space per resident. Yet despite the new court order to stop, construction on the site continued in spring 2022, so some protestors broke into the site, hung banners against the project and against Grand Paris, and chained themselves to the construction equipment. Police removed and arrested them the following morning. At the time of writing, the remaining gardeners are separated from the construction site by a tall aluminum barrier, shielded from the construction still underway.

Conclusion: A rhizomatic view of reform

Thinking through rhizomes reveals a more nuanced picture of the problems and potential inherent in mega-event-led urban development. At stake here are fundamental issues of urban governance, rendered visible by preparations and contestations in pre-Olympic Paris, and brought into focus by the upheaval of the Olympic reforms. The questions of the right to the city remain salient as ever, spotlighted in the spaces selected for Olympic development. Here in particular, rhizomatic philosophy helps dissolve dualistic, programmatic, and polemical thinking. A focus on time, de-centering, connections, and multiplicities allows for analysis that better unpacks the complexities of mega-event development, ultimately revealing significant ontological divergence between the variety of assemblages that constitute the city. In the context of Olympic preparations, the contestations in Paris underscore how diverse actor groups actually inhabit different cities of the same name, struggling to produce them and to make them durable.

Overall, the devolution of power from the IOC to local authorities represents significant progress in mitigating harm to host cities. For all its power in shaping the requirements for the Games, the IOC no longer dictates how the event unfolds. Now, it is local authorities who articulate their vision

of mega-event-led development. In Paris, authorities harnessed Olympic-related development impulses to their existing agendas, merging the Games with existing plans for Grand Paris. Crucially, however, this devolution matters less to people likely to lose from Olympic-related developments, because for all their progress, the reforms still do not grant sufficient voice to affected residents.

The Olympic reforms do reduce some of the immediate harm traditionally caused by hosting, notably by limiting the construction of new infrastructures. Any reduction in the construction of unnecessary infrastructures is a mark of progress, but the idea that local authorities are better positioned to host a less injurious Games assumes that every city has a representative democratic politics that includes all residents equally. This assumption is disproven by the ways in which local authorities ignore many residents, by the contestations in the Aubervilliers gardens, and by the paternalistic development agendas slated for other disadvantaged areas in and around Seine-Saint-Denis. Thus, when Olympic reformers tout their progress in moving power to local stakeholders, it is crucial to determine who exactly counts as a stakeholder in that equation.

Regardless, the Olympics remain popular in France, even among leftist parties who might be expected to oppose such endeavors in other national contexts. By associating controversial development projects with the Olympics, local authorities may be able to fracture opposition and minimize protest. Certainly, many Parisian activists complained that they struggle to muster popular support, and the emergence of intensified connections with national and international opposition groups is not a substitute for massive gatherings of physical solidarity in the streets of Paris. Yet a rhizomatic approach to thinking the urban reminds that stability is illusory, linkages continually transgress the illusion of separation, and all is in constant motion. New assemblages continually emerge, heterogeneous and dynamic, with various intensities and resistances, and establishing ever new multiplicities of connections. Fundamentally, exploring the dynamics of urban change and contestation through rhizomes is a reminder of the possibility of alternative outcomes, and of hope.

Though the New Norm reforms made progress in minimizing new construction, reducing costs, and increasing control by local authorities, there are still Olympic-related problems emerging in Paris, and many of the most vulnerable lack the fundamental right to their city. Ultimately, without a broader assemblage of stakeholders that better includes affected residents, Olympic reforms risk repeating the crises of social and spatial exclusion that they were ostensibly designed to solve.

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