

# **From local trading fair to global convention - urban transformations through the Olympic spectacle in London, 1908-2012**

---

**Jon Coaffee**

School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, University of Newcastle, UK

On May 15th 2003 the UK government announced that it was prepared to support a bid for London to host the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. The rhetoric of this decision was based on a predicted legacy of urban transformation akin to the Barcelona model of regenerating thorough sporting spectacle - linked to economic and tourist growth through place marketing, the regeneration of vast tracts of underused and disused land, and, significant infrastructural improvements. This paper seeks to critically question the appropriateness of the London bid by drawing on London's two previous experiences of hosting Olympic Games in 1908 and 1948 as well as other summer Olympiads, to highlight some of the historical lessons that the current bidding team might take into account when refining their bid. Both previous London Olympics which were both heralded as technological triumphs of their age, albeit in very different social, technological and political-economy contexts, but with dubious legacy benefits. In particular, this paper unpacks the planning and urban regeneration implications of being an Olympic city, and argues that there is a danger that there is a mythology of positive benefits associated Olympic hosting which blinds urban policy makers to the potential risks associated.

London 2012...would form part of the most extensive transformation of the city for generations... and its legacy would transform one of the most underdeveloped areas of the country ...All development would form part of an enormous and tangible legacy, ranging from sport and venues through to infrastructure and environment. London 2012 would change the face of the capital for ever.  
London 2012 (2004b)

Britain's Olympic bid is something else, or ought to be; and good luck to it. The problem here, and it is a big one, is that British politicians, lobbyists, developers, planners and architects have the unerring habit of confusing big events such as the long-forgotten millennium, or the future Olympic Games, with an opportunity for instant redevelopment. Mix bricks, mortar, a dash of the passion contemporary politicians always have for such headline-grabbing ploys, a sprinkle of public relations razzmatazz; then, stir in a spoon of hubris and, hey presto, our cities are lumbered with yet another...scheme that, a year after the big event, is nothing more than a damp squib.  
Jonathan Glancey 2004

## **INTRODUCTION**

Peter Hall (2001) in his seminal book *Cities of Tomorrow*, draws attention to the way in which planning ideas 're-echo, recyle and reconnect' over time despite changing social and economic contexts. The attempts by selected cities and nations to promote themselves, and to undertake urban regeneration, through the hosting of major sporting festivals throughout the twentieth century undoubtedly fits with this argument. However, many contrasting views have been expressed amongst planning professionals, marketing agencies and media commentators with regards to the tangible legacy benefits of such sporting events. Within this sports-led regeneration context, this paper seeks to critically question the appropriateness of the London 2012 bid by drawing on London's two previous experiences of hosting Olympic Games in 1908 and 1948. In addition this paper will also selectively use other summer Olympiads to highlight some of the historical lessons that the current bidding team might take into account when refining and promoting their bid.

Both previous London Olympics were heralded as triumphs of their age, albeit in very different social, technological and political-economy contexts, but with dubious 'legacy' benefits. In particular, this paper unpacks the planning and urban regeneration implications of being an Olympic city, and argues that there is a danger of a mythology of positive benefits associated Olympic hosting which blinds urban policy makers to the potential risks associated.

With the positive legacy benefits of being an Olympic city in mind, on 15 May 2003 the UK government announced that it was prepared to support a bid for London to host the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. The rhetoric of this decision was based on a predicted legacy of urban transformation akin to the 'Barcelona model' of regenerating thorough sporting spectacle - linked to economic and tourist growth through place marketing, the rejuvenation of vast tracts of underused and disused land, and, significant infrastructure improvements. This commitment by the UK Government was reaffirmed in the official launch of the 2012 bid in January 2004 where great significance was placed on the positive 'urban' impacts of post-war Olympiads,

including, not surprisingly London 1948 which could once again accrue if London was successful in its bid.

## **OLYMPIC CITY REGENERATION**

Much has been written about the positive potential of hosting Olympic Games to improve and develop urban infrastructure and to stimulate widespread urban revitalisation (see for example Essex and Chalkley, 1998, Chalkley and Essex, 1999). A great deal has also been written about the impact of Olympic hosting on the marketability of place, which Cashman refers to a 'cult of global society' (p.8) and an arena where the local politics of globalisation are brought centre stage. In short, the Olympics are seen as offering an almost unparalleled 'shop window' for inward investment and private sector land development as well as raising recreational participation and tourism profiles.

The planning and regeneration rhetoric, particularly of recent Olympic cities, draws much attention to these positive 'legacy' elements at the expense of more critical 'voices' that have questioned the very logic and justification for such sports-led regeneration. For example, a number of commentators have drawn attention to the social and economic dangers associated with being an the Olympic city especially with regard to the risk of municipal bankruptcy, and the dubious legacy impact in terms of the post-event under-use of venues and infrastructure. Some have argued that such venues have all too often become costly 'white elephants', creating 'islands of gentrification' (Garrido, 2003, p.9) and 'rich ghettos' funded by the private sector (Woodman, 2004). Others have also drawn attention to the short-termism of employment prospects, and the destruction of urban green spaces (Marrs, 2003). Overall, and on balance, the successes of sports-based events as catalysts of urban regeneration have, and will continue to divide planners and regenerators.

## **MORE THAN JUST A TRADE FAIR – LONDON 1908**

In 1905 Great Britain and France began organising a joint trade fair – the Franco-British Exhibition - to be held in London in 1908 with the intention of building and strengthening trading partnerships where Britain, France and their respective colonies were to be exhibitors (Mallon and Buchanan, 1998). Subsequent events dictated that this large-scale trade fair was to play a major role in hosting the 1908 Olympics.

At the 1904 International Olympic Committee (IOC) meeting, ironically held in London, the fourth modern Games were awarded to Rome. However, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius near Naples in 1906 led the Italian Government to argue that they could not organise the Games. London was then offered and entrusted with the Games, in large part because of the British experience at hosting sporting events such as the Henley Regatta and the Wimbledon Tennis championships.

Meanwhile, the infrastructure planning for the Franco-British Exhibition was continuing apace on a 140 acre site at Shepard's Bush in the Western Part of London. Architecturally the site was unique for its time with gardens, lakes and fountains being used to complement a vast array of innovative buildings with white plaster finishing leading to the nickname of 'White City' being adopted (Carden, 1908). When the decision to award London the 1908 Olympics was made, it was planned that the Exhibition should be 'more than just a trade fair' (Mallon and Buchanan, 1998, p.4), with the addition of the Olympics as a key element (ibid, p.16). This is in

contrast to both 1900 (St Louis) and 1904 (Paris) where the Olympic Games were a mere side-shows to prestigious Expositions (Matthews, 1980).

Those responsible for organising the Olympics managed to persuade the Exhibition organisers to build the required Olympic stadium (the White City stadium) in return for three-quarters of the gate receipts. This was seen as a remarkably successful contract for the organisers as the cost of building the stadium rose five-fold between planning and final construction. The stadium itself was considered to be the finest in the world at that point and provided a partial blueprint for future Olympic venues. Transport infrastructure was also enhanced to coincide with the Exhibition and Olympics with a new underground 'tube' stop being added to the network at Wood Street.

For many commentators the exhibition was a great success and had legacy effects both for the host city and the Olympic movement. As Levin (2001) noted 'the fair grounds, and Olympic stadium, remained and served as the site for future exhibitions and events. White City became a pleasure/amusement park, and the stadium's functions ranged from training Olympic athletes to the site for greyhound dog races until the stadium was demolished' (see also Grose, 2001).

In relation to the overall Olympic movement the first three Games (1896-2004) had been run on a small scale, had suffered from poor organisation, and had made little impact on revitalising the urban scene (Chalkey and Essex, 1999). London 1908 was different from a planning perspective and had been the first to construct purpose built venues and facilities as well as greatly improving the organisation and planning of the Games (IOC, 1908, Essex and Chalkey, 1998).

## **THE AUSTERITY GAMES – LONDON 1948**

The 1948 London Olympics were held after the planned Games of 1940 (Tokyo) and 1944 (London) were cancelled due to war. The 1948 Games became known as the 'Austerity Games' as a result of the 'blitz conditions' still faced by Londoners and to a large extent became a political project linked to 'returning to normality' as quickly as possible (Baker, 1994b, p.58).

As noted in recent records of The House of Lords, debate on the 2012 bid, 'it was a time of appalling austerity...yet London wanted to continue the Olympic tradition when much of the rest of Europe...were devastated' (Higgins, cited by Jeffery, 2003, also BOA 2002). Indeed, bread rationing in London only finished the day the Games began (History Today, 1998). Such austerity, coupled with a downturn in the world economy, put a number of restraints on preparations for the Games which would leave their future in doubt right up until the final weeks, with fears expressed that the Games would become a 'big bewildering jamboree' (Baker, 1994a, p.108 – see also Evening Standard, 3 January 1946).

Unlike the last pre-war Games in Berlin in 1936, no new venues, athletes villages or infrastructure were built for the 1948 Games with only temporary alterations to existing facilities being carried out. For example, a temporary track was fitted at Wembley Stadium (originally built for the Empire Exhibition in 1924) and local schools, government buildings and military barracks were used to house the athletes. A new road was also built from the stadium to the main station to ease spectator congestion. The International Olympic Association also requested that athletes bring their own food.

The Games however did have its detractors in the run-up to competition. In particular, critical questions were being asked about the appropriateness of London hosting the Games given the destitute conditions many of its citizens were living in. As Baker (1994b, p.60) noted, this pointed to a contradiction between Olympic preparations and the stringent economic circumstances facing the British people' which were 'exaggerated and a case for abandoning

the Games established' (Evening Standard, 2 September 1947). This was especially evident in the early stages of preparation when a judgement needed to be made over whether or not to construct a new Olympic village. A decision was quickly made in favour of using existing facilities. (Baker, 1994a, p.110).

The 1948 Games had very little effect on the urban structure of London, being referred to as the 'low impact Games' (Essex and Chalkley, 1998, p.192), given the relatively modest budget compared to subsequent Games. However, the wider significance of these Games was important from a geopolitical point of view. As IOC president Edstrom (1948) noted in the Official report of the Games – 'the staging of the Olympic Games in London this summer was recognised as the most crucial occasion in the history of sport. If it succeeded, sport would be well and truly launched in the post-war world'. The 1948 Games were also the first to be televised with the BBC paying 100 guineas for the rights, and the first to hold Paralympics. Similar rights are expected to cost over £1billion in 2012. As such the Chairman of the 1948 organising committee noted that 'British prestige will be enhanced by the running of the Games. Foreign visitors will say how wonderful that Britain can face crisis and still put on a great show like this' (Evening Standard, September 6 1947, cited in Baker, 1994, p.61-2). Some commentators went further highlighting that the 'summer carnival of sport' (the Olympic coincided with the Ashes Cricket contest in England) would be 'decisive not only in the morale re-building of work weary Britain, but in selling the British idea to the world' (Macadam, cited in Baker, 1996, p.84). These elements of global politics, media interest and marketing were to form increasingly important parts of the Olympic Games in the post war era.

## **MYTHOLOGY AS REALITY – THE GLOBAL CONVENTION 2012**

In the late 1990s the UK Government launched a programme of activities and interventions aimed at stimulating re-urbanisation, given the post-war counter urbanisation trend, and appointed world famous architect Richard Rogers to chair its Urban Task Force. In 1999 this Task Force published its preliminary findings (DETR, 1999) which were eventually, in a slimmed down form, to become the new 'Urban White Paper' – the guidebook for urban policy in the early twenty-first century Britain. The published document entitled – Towards an Urban Renaissance, is important with regard to the Olympic Games as it uses the experiences of Barcelona and its 1992 Olympics as a celebrated exemplar of urban rejuvenation linked to major sporting events. As the former Mayor of Barcelona noted in the introduction to this report, the Olympics helped 'multiply the good works' in planning, architecture and urban design already underway and enhance the 'urban quality and international prestige' of the city (Maragall, 1999, p.3, see also Glancey, 2004). Others argued about whether there is actually a 'Barcelona Model' for regenerating through sport that could or should be used. For example, Garcia-Ramon and Albert (2000) have pointed to 'shadows in the process' surrounding the 1992 Games which led to the privileging of physical and design led intervention at the expense of social needs of the most disadvantaged areas of Barcelona.

In the UK the positive benefits of such sports led regeneration were further catalysed by the apparently successful 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester despite critics arguing that legacy benefits would be far smaller than predicted. As such, the Barcelona and Manchester experiences were echoed in many ways by the organisers and critics of London's 2012 bid. The organisers highlight the social, political and economic opportunity such a global convention could bring to both London and the UK as a whole. Within the British Government's overarching project of Urban Renaissance, a London Olympic (and Paralympic) bid for 2012 became a central pillar. Launching the 2012 bid in January 2004, the British Prime Minister

highlighted the urban change mantra of the bid in that 'as well as being a wonderful sporting and cultural festival, the Games would drive the environmentally friendly regeneration and rejuvenation of East London' (Blair, 2004, p.1). More specifically, the bid organisers London 2012 (2004b) noted, "the key catalyst would be the development of the 500-acre Olympic Park ...containing the main sporting facilities, would be set in 1,500 landscaped acres - one of the biggest new city centre parks in Europe for 200 years. It would also feature a revitalised network of waterways serving new communities and businesses...The Olympic Village would also have a designated post-Games use as housing".

Whereas in 1908 and 1948 urban change was not a driving force behind becoming an Olympic city, the 2012 bid documents, and accompanying media rhetoric, place urban regeneration at the very heart of London 2012 bid, including the rebuilding of the main venue for the 1948 Games - Wembley stadium. As with the 1948 bid critical questions are being asked about the appropriateness of seeking to fund such an agenda of which sought such radical urban transformations at great expenses. Many commentators argued that the estimated cost of around £2.5 billion could be far better spent, for example on improving the existing housing stock, improving service delivery and renewing the transportation infrastructure. Indeed, the Government has pledged a massive £17-18 billion for transport infrastructure improvement prior to 2012 if the bid succeeds (London 2012). Despite an official 'no white elephants' policy, others, drawing on evidence from previous Olympics and large sporting festivals, have also argued that the proposed venues and specialised infrastructure could be in danger of becoming disused and obsolete once the Games are completed (Searle, 2002, Thornley 2002)

## **FROM WHITE CITY TO BROWNFIELD DEVELOPMENT - THE LEGACY OF LONDON AS AN OLYMPIC CITY**

Over the last century the changing planning and regeneration rhetoric of London as an Olympic city has reflected wider social, economic, technological and political changes. In 1908 the Olympics were seen very much as part of a local trade fair which was aiming to cement Britain's pre-eminence in international relations and economics. In contrast the 1948 experience reflected the austerity of the post war period but was none the less utilised as a promotional tool for Britain and its wartime allies. The London 2012 bid is seen very much as a global convention but with localised legacies especially associated with a wide array of planning and regeneration - linked to direct economic investment through job creation, property development, tourism and vast Brownfield redevelopment as well as social and cultural impacts linked to health, culture, education, raising national prestige, promoting cultural diversity and enhancing participation in sport and recreation (ARUP, 2002, DCMS, 2003, London 2012a, 2004).

The 1908 Olympic Games served as a 'vehicle for change' and 'provided a sense of dignity and credibility to the Olympic movement' after the 'farcical' Games of 1900 and 1904 where sporting spectacle was dwarfed by trading Expositions (Matthews, 1980, p.52). The 1908 Games also, for the first time, led to purpose built facilities and transport infrastructure being built that could be used post-Olympics. Importantly, the cost of constructing the Olympic venue increased five-fold between start and completion. Such underestimated costing has subsequently become a hallmark of hosting major sporting festivals, and it is one that the 2012 Olympic organisers need to be acutely aware of. Indeed one of the proposed Olympic venues – the newly built Wembley stadium – has almost doubled in cost between the drawing board and the first phase of construction.

Whereas the 1948 London Games did not involve the significant construction of venues or infrastructure, the organisers were under significant pressure to justify the short and long term

costs and benefits of being an Olympic city. Indeed, the balance between advantage and disadvantage was very much linked to Britain reaffirming its place in global economy and geopolitics. These are the same critical questions that many commentators, especially in the media, are beginning to reassert as the London 2012 bid gathers pace.

Planning history re-echoes the idea that legacy benefits associated with major sporting events such as the Olympics are at best a risky and uncertain strategy both in terms of financial liability and possible regenerative gains (see for example Cashman, 1999, Hardy, 2003). As such this poses a number of critical questions. Is such a risk worth taking? What are the economic and political implications of this risk? Could the vast expenditure on elite Olympic sporting facilities be more appropriately utilised – for example for grass roots sport? How can the vast array of social benefits expected from an Olympic bid be evidenced? Can these benefits be made sustainable? Do the communities likely to be affected by the planned urban regeneration actually think it's a good idea? Will finance be diverted away from other essential services to pay for the bid/hosting? (Garlick, 2003). Could the associated benefits and investment that are loudly trumpeted be distributed at a regional or even national level instead of being concentrated in London? (Coaffee and Shaw, 2003, Linford, 2003). And finally, can one city actually be expected to host the summer Olympics with their ever-expanding format and mass-media attention?

## REFERENCES

- Anon. (1998). "Opening of the London Olympics", *History Today*, Vol. 48, (7), July
- ARUP (2002). *London Olympics 2012 – Costs and Benefits*, May 21.
- Baker, N. (1994a). "The Games that Almost Weren't: London 1948, *Olympika – International Journal of Olympic Studies*" Vol. 3, 1994, pp.107-116
- Baker, N. (1994b). "Olympics or Test: The Disposition of the British Sporting Public, 1948" *Sporting Traditions*, Vol.11 (1) November, pp.57-74
- Baker, N. (1996). "Sports and National Prestige: The Case of Britain 1945-48" *Sporting Traditions*, Vol.12, (2) May, pp.81-97
- Blair, T. (2004). "A Message", in *A Vision for the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games*, London: London 2012, p.1
- British Olympic Association (2002) Press release – Extracts from the Lords Debate on Olympic bid, December 19
- Carden, R W. (1908). "The Franco-British Exhibition" *Architectural Review*, 1908 July, Vol. 24, pp. 32-37
- Cashman, R. (1999). "The greatest peacetime event", in Cashman, R. and Hughes, A. (eds.), *Staging the Olympics – The events and its impact*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press,, pp.3-17
- Chalkely, B. and Essex, S. (1999). "Urban Development through hosting international events: a history of the Olympic Games" *Planning Perspectives* 14, pp.369-394
- Coaffee, J. and Shaw, T. (2003). "Regional Experiences of Sports-Led Regeneration" *Northern Economic Review*, 33/34, pp.45-64
- Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2003). *Olympics – Government response to a London Olympic Bid for 2012*, June
- Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) (1999). *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, London: E & FN Spon, London
- Essex, S. and Chalkley, B. (1998). "Olympic Games: Catalyst of Urban Change, *Leisure Studies*" Vol.17, pp.187-206
- Garcia-Ramon, M.D., and Albet, A. (2000). "Pre-Olympic and post-Olympic Barcelona, a model for urban regeneration today?" *Environment and Planning A* Vol.32, pp.1331-1334
- Garlick, R. (2003). "We must be quick off the blocks for Olympic Renewal", *Regeneration and Renewal*, May 23, p.17
- Garrido, M. (2003). "The Olympic Ideal" *Property People*, June 19, pp.8-9
- Glancey, J. (2004). "The Games have already Started" *The Guardian Unlimited*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January at <http://society.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,7884,1129645,00.html> accessed 23/1/2004
- Grose, T. (2001). "White City Stadium." *UK Running Track Directory*, 2001. ([http://www.runtrackdir.com/uk/london\(wc\).htm](http://www.runtrackdir.com/uk/london(wc).htm))
- Hall, P. (2001) *Cities of Tomorrow* (Third Edition), Blackwell, Oxford
- Hardy, D. (2003). "Inner city blues, Olympic Gold" *Town and Country Planning*, October, pp.288-290
- International Olympic Committee (IOC) (1908). *The Fourth Olympiad – London 1908*, Official report, London: British Olympic Association, London
- Jeffery, S. (2003). "From Austerity to prosperity" *Guardian Unlimited*, May 15<sup>th</sup> - <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/gla/story/0,9061,956958,00.html> accessed May 15<sup>th</sup> 2003
- Levin, M (2001). - <http://www.lib.umd.edu/ARCH/honr219f/1908lond.html> accessed 10th February 2004
- Linford, P. (2003). "Olympics taking our cash" *The Journal*, June 12, p.2

- London 2012 (2004a) A Vision for the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, London: London 2012
- London 2012 (2004b) website - <http://www.london2012.org/en/bid/regeneration/> accessed 19/1/2004
- Maars, C. (2003). "Olympic bid divides regenerators" *Regeneration and Renewal*, May 23, p.5
- Macadam, J. (1948). "Comment" in *Daily Express* May 31
- Mallon, B. and Buchanan, I. (1998). *The 1908 Olympic Games*, North Carolina: McFarlands and Company
- Maragall, P. (1999). "Forward" in Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) (1999) *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, London: E & FN Spon, pp.5-6
- Matthews, G.R. (1980). "The controversial Olympic Games of 1908 as viewed by the New York Times and the Times of London" *Journal of Sports History*, 7 (20) pp.40-53
- Olympic Review (1948) *Bulletin du comite International Olympique*, Lausanne: IOC
- Searle, G. (2002). "Uncertain legacy: Sydney's Olympic Stadiums" *European Planning Studies*, Vol. 10 (7), pp.845-60
- Spring, C. (2003). "Taking a sporting chance, *Regeneration and Renewal*", June 6<sup>th</sup>, pp.1-2
- Thornley, A. (2002). "Urban Regeneration and Sport Stadia" *European Planning Studies*, Vol.10 (7) pp.813-818
- Woodman, E. (2004). "Stratford's glamour gameplan" *Building Design*, January 30, p.8

also fails to capture the major transformative processes happening alongside those events. Müller (2011, p. 2091) argues that the Russian federal state's involvement in the Sochi project "is underpinned by a nationalist narrative which frames the Olympic Games not primarily as a stimulus for economic development and global competitiveness but as a contribution to Russian greatness". Without doubt, hosting the Sochi Olympics was a moment of national pride, "la "make Russia great again", which was well celebrated in the Russian media circulations. Trubina (2014) focusing on the interplay of mega-events and their spatialities sees Sochi as an event through which Russian urban transformations become. Downloaded by [Cardiff University Libraries] at 15:08 10 October 2017. The 1908 Summer Olympics, officially the Games of the IV Olympiad, and commonly known as London 1908, was an international multi-sport event held in London, United Kingdom, from 27 April to 31 October 1908. The 1908 Games were originally scheduled to be held in Rome, but were relocated on financial grounds following the violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1906 which claimed more than 100 lives. Rome eventually hosted the 1960 Summer Olympics. These were the fourth chronological modern Summer... Through ranking immigrant urban destinations, a range of immigrant outcomes emerges from the hyper-diversity of London and New York, to the emerging gateways of Dubai and Johannesburg, and to the largely bypassed global cities of Tokyo and Mexico City. We use the data to position the world cities on a continuum that better illuminates the dynamics of migration to key urban areas, thus adding significantly to our understanding of global cities and the human networks that create them.