The Olympic Games have emerged as a significant catalyst of urban change and can act as a key instrument of urban policy for their host cities. This paper reviews the effect of the Games on the built environment of the various cities which have acted as hosts in the modern Olympic period (1896–1996) and assesses the preparations now being made for the Games in Sydney in the year 2000. The review indicates that the Games have been increasingly used as a trigger for a wide range of urban improvements, although there have been considerable variations in the scale of infrastructural investment and in the public-private sector mix.

Introduction

The Olympic Games are regarded as the world’s most prestigious sporting occasion. They are typical of major hallmark events in that they are transitory, bring short-term international participation and attention and can have long-term consequences for the host city (Syme et al., 1989; Ritchie and Smith, 1991; Hall, 1992; Roche, 1994). Considerable investment in both sporting facilities and supporting infrastructure is required to stage the Games, but these then become legacies to the host city when the Games are over. Indeed, the costs involved in staging the Games are now so high that host cities can often only justify the expenditure when it is seen as leading to a major programme of regeneration and improvement. From relatively small scale origins, the Olympics have, therefore, emerged as a significant catalyst of urban change and for host cities can act as a key instrument of urban policy.

The main aim of this paper is to review the effect of the Games on the built environment of the various cities which have acted as hosts in the modern Olympic period (1896–1996). As the modern Olympic movement proceeds into its second century, this is a particularly appropriate time to look back over the last hundred years and to reflect upon the rationale for cities wanting to host the Games and upon the changing role of the Olympics in urban development. The information for this review is drawn principally from the official reports produced by the host organizing committees. Although these documents are obviously written from the organizer’s perspective, they nevertheless contain an accurate factual record of the main physical developments associated with the Games. Many of these developments have survived into today’s urban landscape as reminders of the cities’ Olympic past. A near complete set of the official Olympic reports is held in the library of the British Olympic Association in London. The research for this paper is
the first time that these sources have been used to provide an audit of the
urban impacts of the Olympics. In using these Olympic reports, the aim of
this paper is not to provide a complete cost-benefit analysis for each of the
Games, but to focus principally on the role of the Olympics in changing and
modernizing the built environment.

Urban spectacles and post-Fordism

In order to appreciate why the Olympics have increasingly been used as an
opportunity for urban renewal, it is important to place these developments
within the context of wider changes in the urban economy. Indeed, the
contribution of hallmark events, such as the Olympics, to strategies for urban
regeneration is strongly associated with post-Fordism and with the related
transitions from industrial to post-industrial society and from modernism to
post-modernism (Esser and Hirsch, 1989; Graham, 1992; Tickell and Peck,
1995).

Harvey (1989) has highlighted that urban policies to compensate for de-
industrialization and reduced public expenditure have been required to
become more proactive and entrepreneurial often involving some form of
interurban competition for jobs and investment. He particularly refers to the
use of ‘urban spectacles’, such as major sporting events, as a strategy for
urban renewal arguing that spectacles are being seen as one of the main
products of post-modern society and a key means by which cities express
their personality, enhance their status and advertise their position on the
global stage. In this way the concept of the spectacle is closely aligned with
the concept of city marketing which now plays an increasingly important role
in redefining the city’s image and in attracting inward investment to underpin
regeneration and renewal (Kearns and Philo, 1993; Paddison, 1993);
Rubalcaba-Bermejo and Cuadrado-Roura, 1995). The transformation of
urban politics to become less bureaucratic, more entrepreneurial and
sometimes comparatively autonomous has particularly manifested itself in the
competition to host and manage events like the Olympics. Cochrane et al.,
(1996) illustrate some of the key features of this new urban politics through
the example of Manchester’s Olympic bids of the 1980s and 1990s, in which
local government-based decision-making and bureaucratic politics were
essentially replaced by a dynamic business leadership.

The role of the Olympics in renewing the built environment can, therefore,
be placed within a broader conceptual framework of post-Fordism, global-
ization and the role of the spectacle in post-modern societies. It should not be
overlooked, however, that there were major festivals, exhibitions and fairs
long before post-modernism and that many of them also left a mark on their
host cities. Examples would include the Eiffel Tower built for the Paris
Exhibition of 1889 and the substantial redevelopment of central Barcelona
initiated by the International Exposition of 1929. The significance and
context of hallmark events may have changed but they are not a new
phenomenon. Indeed, one of the interesting features of the Olympic Games is
that it is neither a new nor a one-off event. Except during the First and
Second World Wars, the Olympics have been held every four years for over a hundred years. This history opens up the possibility of tracing and exploring the changing nature of the Olympics urban imprint across the past century (see Figure 1). Following an extensive literature search, it seems that this paper is the first time that this task has been undertaken.

Hosting the Games

The modern Olympics were revived by Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937) in 1896, after a lapse of some 1500 years. Coubertin’s motives were derived from his belief that organized sport can be an agent of both physical and cultural renewal (Gordon, 1983; Young, 1991; Guttmann, 1992). Sport should promote physical health and bring different nations and social classes together in a new age of democracy and social equality. Although the Greek government in the 1890s lobbied strongly to provide a permanent venue for the Games in Greece, Coubertin established the principle that the Olympics should be hosted in different locations every four years as a means of promoting and diffusing the Olympic spirit of freedom, progress and equality throughout the world (Grupe, 1991).

For the host cities themselves, however, a much more important justification for wishing to stage the Games has often been, particularly in recent years, the stimulus to economic development and urban regeneration (Kitchen, 1996). The event can promote economic activity as a result of the jobs created by the vast numbers of tourists visiting the city before, during and after the event. The construction of sports facilities can also play a role in programmes of urban renewal by, for example, introducing new sporting and recreational facilities into previously under-provided areas. On a broader scale, preparations for the event can also provide a means of justifying new investment in transport infrastructure and in projects to enhance the city’s landscape and physical appearance. Even unsuccessful bids for the Olympic Games can bring benefits through, for example, the urban projects and regeneration initiated in order to strengthen the city’s Olympic bid (Law, 1994; Lawson, 1996).

Other reasons for hosting the Olympic Games are less tangible but equally persuasive. The Olympics represent an international showcase which can enhance a city’s global recognition, image and reputation. The event places its host on the global stage and the international media attention for the duration of the event can help the host country and city to transmit a new image to the world (Hall, 1987). The planning and architecture of the new facilities, which often break new ground in the use of design forms and innovative materials (Kelly, 1989), can also assist in creating this new image.

The strength of these various anticipated benefits means that the Olympics have become widely viewed by city leaders as a highly desirable event to secure (Hiller, 1989). A decision to bid for the Olympics is therefore made by the city’s political authorities, backed by the national government and by business corporations (Cochrane et al., 1996). A persuasive submission and
Fig. 1. Host cities of the Olympic Games, 1896–2000.
campaign generally demands public–private sector co-operation, a high level of entrepreneurialism, an appreciation of the value of urban spectacles and an ability to use the media. The decision to bid, however, is not necessarily democratic or based on a clear expression of public opinion (Paddison, 1993; Roche, 1994). Indeed, in many instances the bid preparation is ‘fast-tracked’ with only limited public consultation and an incomplete evaluation of the social and economic implications (Hall, 1992).

Some of these implications can, of course, be negative. No matter how powerful the city authority’s desire to host the Games, not all the anticipated consequences are necessarily beneficial. Indeed, critics have argued that the reality of staging an Olympic Games is that the average urban citizen may receive relatively little tangible or direct benefit and may even experience extra costs (Hiller, 1990). Harvey (1989) argues that heightened inter-urban competition, such as the bidding for an Olympic Games, can produce socially wasteful investments which exacerbate rather than ameliorate urban problems. Extra costs can emerge through increased taxes raised to finance the sporting infrastructure, the destruction or disturbance of existing communities through building projects, and from increased housing costs resulting from gentriﬁcation.

In effect, the Olympic Games as an urban spectacle can represent a somewhat fragile and uncertain tool for unification, not only because the illusion is often difficult to sustain, but also because it may generate its own problems and alienations (Harvey, 1989). It may heighten the tensions deriving from social inequality or raise concerns about the level of taxation and government expenditure. As a result, the Games have been described as a self-serving commercial circus of property developers, construction companies, equipment suppliers and commercial sponsors whose beneﬁts do not necessarily extend to the local communities (Keating, 1991). Although the scale of the ﬁrst modern Games were too small to provoke major arguments about their anticipated costs and beneﬁts, more recently, as the Games have grown, so too have the public debates as to their likely consequences.

The urban impact of the Olympic Games 1896–1996

A review of the historical record across the period of the modern Olympics reveals that the Games have had highly variable levels of impact on the host city’s built environment. Some Games were held without even the provision of new sports facilities and, in these cases, their physical impact was minimal. By contrast, on other occasions, there have been signiﬁcant changes to landuse patterns and the city’s infrastructure, particularly in terms of transport networks. In broad terms, the level of change has tended to increase over time as the Games have grown in size and stature. The Games of 1896, 1900 and 1904 were small scale, poorly organized and with a level of urban impact which did not generally extend even to the construction of new sports facilities. During the next half century, the Games grew in size, became better organized and regularly involved the provision of new sports stadia. Since 1960, it has become increasingly common for the Olympics to be used as a
trigger for large-scale urban improvement and consequently they have had a much wider and more substantial impact on the host city’s built environment. Perhaps the best example of the Games being used in this way was the Barcelona Olympics of 1992 where there was major investment in new transport systems and the rejuvenation of a run-down coastal area which now has a new marina, leisure facilities and attractive sandy beaches.

Although there has been a clear movement towards increased levels of urban impact, the trend has not been entirely continuous or consistent. The discussion which follows is therefore organized around the scale of the changes which the various games initiated rather than on a strictly chronological basis.

Low impact Games

Olympics falling within this category are those where the organizers deliberately sought to keep expenditure to a minimum and where most, if not all, of the events were staged in existing sports facilities. This group, of course, includes the first three Games. The Athens Olympics of 1896 did produce some new and refurbished venues, for example the Parthenon Stadium, but the following two Games were very low impact events. In Paris in 1900, no new facilities were provided and the swimming events were staged in the River Seine. In St. Louis in 1904, the Games were held over several months as an adjunct to the World Fair and the swimming events took place in an artificial pond in the fairgrounds (Gordon, 1983).

Although more recent Olympics, largely on account of their increased size, have generally made a more substantial imprint on their host cities, there have been Games, even in the last half century, where financial or political considerations have led to a tightly constrained approach. For example, the London Games of 1948 were forced to rely on existing facilities because of post-war austerity measures. More recently, the Mexico Games of 1968 produced only modest levels of investment. The general condition of Mexico’s economy compelled the organizers to use a variety of existing facilities scattered in various parts of the city, a pattern which created a tremendous strain on the public transport system (Olympic Committee, 1969). Even so, the costs of the Games were such that many ordinary Mexicans questioned whether the money might not have been better spent on dealing with poverty and alleviating the city’s severe social problems. This opposition resulted in violent protests which police and army units quelled with force.

The Los Angeles Games of 1984 were also characterized by comparatively modest investment in new facilities and an almost total reliance on private-sector funding (Miller, 1992). In order to avoid major capital expenditure, the organizers used existing sports facilities and accommodation over a wide geographical area, including the Olympic Stadium used in 1932 and student residencies at the Universities of California and Southern California. The Olympics may have brought little change to the city’s infrastructure, but they were a substantial commercial success benefiting from increased television income and business sponsorship. A surplus of US $215m was produced,
which was greater than all the prior Games combined (Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, 1985). As a result, many potential host cities began to show a renewed interest in staging the Olympics.

### Games focusing mainly on additional sports facilities

This section deals with those Olympics where major new sports facilities were provided but where there were nonetheless only modest changes to the city’s wider environment and infrastructure. The first Games to provide major new venues built expressly for the Olympics were those held in London in 1908 (British Olympic Association, 1908). Unfortunately, the White City Stadium in practice proved to be a somewhat unsatisfactory venue as the organizers attempted to accommodate too many sports within its limited facilities. The 1912 Games held in Stockholm took the Olympic movement one step forward by providing specialist new facilities for separate sports and highlighted for the first time the role of the athletics stadium as their centrepiece and ceremonial focus. The staging of the Games of 1932 in Los Angeles similarly stimulated the refurbishment and development of a range of substantial sports venues, including the main athletics stadium (re-used in 1984). Interestingly, the 1932 Games were the first to provide a communal residence for athletes in the form of an Olympic Village (although wooden barracks had been provided at the Paris games in 1924) (Olympiade Committee, 1933).

The facilities provided for the Berlin Games of 1936 were also substantial, involving a new stadium for 100 000 spectators, a swimming pool, an open-air theatre, a sports forum and a large administrative building for the House of German Sport, all on one site at Grunewald. A special Olympic Village for the competitors was erected beyond the western suburbs of Berlin. Although these facilities had only modest impacts on the rest of the city, they were physically impressive and deliberately designed to symbolize the aspirations of Hitler’s Third Reich. The intentions were clear: ‘If Germany is to stand host to the entire world, her preparations must be complete and magnificent’ (Organization Committee, 1936). All the buildings were constructed using native German materials and the architecture and physical setting for the Games contributed inestimably to their character, which was captured by Leni Riefenstahl’s film of the Games (Olympia, 1938). As a result, these facilities acted as favourable political propaganda for the Third Reich government. Many visitors had their judgement skewed by what they had experienced in Berlin, which had shown the Reich government to be apparently successful and even respectable (Mandell, 1971). To a certain extent, these perceptions were also reflected in the sporting events of the Games themselves, where athletes from totalitarian nations generally performed well, despite Jesse Owen’s remarkable four gold medals.

The Helsinki Games of 1952 and the Melbourne Games of 1956 both produced new sporting venues as well as Olympic Villages which were afterwards used as permanent residential quarters. The Melbourne Games of 1956, however, left a physical legacy which was subsequently to cause
While the Olympic Park complex still provides facilities for soccer, hockey and athletics, the Olympic Velodrome and swimming stadium were much less successful as community facilities after the Games. The cycling track in the velodrome did not conform to the specified requirements and was later demolished. The swimming stadium was, in aesthetic terms, the most admired structure at the Games, but it quickly deteriorated and became too costly for the Victoria Swimming Association to maintain. The Olympic Village, known as ‘Heidelberg’, also ran into difficulties. It became a public-sector housing project occupied by new immigrants from Greece, Italy and Malta and experienced a variety of physical and social problems (Bailey, 1993). Critics might suggest, therefore, that in the case of Melbourne, the Olympics proved, in certain respects, a force for urban degeneration rather than regeneration.

Despite the special significance of the Centennial Games of 1996, Atlanta’s preparations were mainly focused on new sporting facilities and produced only relatively minor changes in the city’s wider infrastructure and environment. Atlanta, like Los Angeles in 1984, was determined that the Games should be a commercial success and that public-sector involvement should be tightly constrained. The centerpiece of the Games was the Olympic Stadium (capacity of 85 000) constructed especially for the event with private finance. After the Games, it was converted to a 45 000–48 000 seat baseball park for use by the Atlanta Braves baseball team. Other new facilities, such as the Aquatic Center, basketball gym, hockey stadium and equestrian venue, were given to educational establishments or local authorities. The main Olympic Village (133 ha) was located on the campus of Georgia Technical College.

The lack of wider investment in Atlanta’s infrastructure was related to the fact that the local organizing committee, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), had been formed as a private, non-profit making organization with responsibilities for the development of sporting facilities only. Other agencies established for the preparation of the Games appear to have been ineffective in producing broader changes to the urban structure. The preparations for the Atlanta Games have been cited as a failure of American public–private sector partnerships, with the ACOG operating as a ‘privatized government’, entirely unaccountable to the local population (Rutheiser, 1996). In many respects, these organizational problems were reflected in the operation of the Games themselves. In particular, the severity of the traffic congestion called into question the decision not to invest in new urban freeways or major public transport systems. The security arrangements also received some criticism, particularly after the bombing in Centennial Square in which two people were killed and 110 people were injured. The President of the IOC was only prepared to pronounce the Games in Atlanta as a qualified success in his speech at the closing ceremony rather than as the customary ‘best Games ever’. He is reported to have told a German
newspaper that he would not again support a privately-funded Olympics, with such prominent business sponsorship. As a result of the traffic congestion, administrative problems, security breaches and over-commercialization, Atlanta did not receive the kind of media attention it would ideally have liked. Its experience highlights the dangers as well as the benefits of being under the international Olympic spotlight.

Games stimulating transformations of the built environment

The Rome Games of 1960 provided the first indication of the Olympics potential role as a trigger for major urban development and improvement well beyond the construction of sports facilities. The main sporting infrastructure of the Games was focused in two separate areas, which were linked by a new road called the Olympic Way. In addition, the city developed a modern municipal water supply system and airport facilities and it also made numerous decorative improvements to the city's landscape and environment (Olympic Committee, 1960).

The Olympics in Tokyo in 1964 took the theme of the Games as an agent of urban renewal one step further. Tokyo used the event to give impetus to its already proposed ten year development plan, involving road improvements, harbour development, housing and tourist accommodation projects, water supply, sewage disposal plants and public health improvements (Olympic Committee, 1964). The actual sporting facilities and the Olympic Village relied mainly on existing buildings, but the organizers and government spent US$2.7 billion on a variety of wider urban developments. The largest project involved the construction of a new road and highway network to enable the city to cope, in the short-term, with the transportation demands of the Olympics and, in the long-term, with the city's continued population and traffic increase. A total of 22 main highways were constructed and two new underground railway lines were also completed in time for the Games.

The Munich Games of 1972 involved the 'fast-tracking' of a redevelopment scheme for a 280 ha derelict site which had been originally proposed in 1963 (see Figure 2). The Olympic Village, close to the main sports facilities, was constructed to accommodate 10 000 athletes during the Games, and middle and lower income families and single persons afterwards (Pro-Sport München, 1972, Vol. 1). Indeed, since 1972 the village has become a successful self-sustaining community (Gordon, 1983). A number of improvements were made within the city of Munich especially for the Olympics, such as the restoration and pedestrianization of the historic quarter, the improvement of public transport, the provision of underground car parking, the development of a new shopping centre with hotels and the construction of three new expressways (145 km) (Gordon, 1983). The Games were overshadowed, however, by the killing of 11 Israeli athletes in a terrorist attack, which heightened issues of security at future events.

The pattern of large-scale redevelopment for the Olympics continued with Montreal in 1976. Montreal had been awarded the Games in 1970, despite competition from much bigger cities such as Los Angeles and Moscow. The
IOC wanted to show that a smaller city could stage the Games on a completely self-financed basis (an ambition which in practice failed very badly). The Olympics provided the stimulus for Montreal to construct an ‘Olympic Park’ which had been to extend the subway system by 20 km and to build a new airport as well as several new roads and hotels (COJO-76, 1978, Vol. 2).

Fig. 2. Facilities of the Olympic Games in Munich, 1972.
The development of facilities for the 1976 Montreal Games was, however, plagued with problems (Kidd, 1992). The period following the award of the Games to Montreal coincided with a worsening economic situation in Canada, an international recession and global inflation, which accentuated the financial burden of staging the Games. These economic difficulties were compounded by a number of other factors. First, there was local opposition to staging the Games in the city. Second, technical and construction problems were experienced with the facilities at Olympic Park, relating to an unstable site and the use of new construction materials and techniques; this resulted in major cost over-runs. Third, labour relation disputes lost over 150 working days in the period immediately prior to the Games. A 24 hour working day was required to complete the facilities on time, which involved crippling costs in overtime, heating and equipment rentals. The consequence of all these factors was a debt of CAN$600m (c. US$ 460m). In addition, the Games were nearly cancelled 16 days before the opening ceremony due to an international political dispute over recognition of Peking and Taiwan and the participation of New Zealand which had sporting associations with South Africa. The Montreal Games underlined that staging an Olympic Games can be high risk strategy for the host city and one which can result in long-term indebtedness (Kidd, 1992).

The experience at Montreal had profound implications for the next few Olympics. The 1980 Moscow Games were much more cost-conscious. The organizers did not attempt to outdo their predecessors by building ever more huge and spectacular structures, but sought only essential installations with ‘no monuments to vanity’ (OCOG-80, 1981). Nonetheless, the award of the Games to Moscow accelerated the construction of 12 new sports facilities identified in the tenth five-year plan (1971) and led to the renovation of 13 existing facilities. In addition, new hotels, a new air terminal, an Olympic Television and Radio Centre, an Olympic Communications Centre and buildings for the Novosti Press Agency were all constructed for the Games.

The role of the Olympics as a vehicle for really substantial urban change was resumed, however, with the Seoul Games of 1988. The sports facilities and Olympic Village (of 3692 units) were provided as usual but, in addition, new programmes were introduced to ensure higher health and hygiene standards throughout the city and to deal with air pollution, garbage control and water quality, including a major scheme to depollute the Han River. Three new subway lines were opened to ease congestion, 47 bus routes were extended and the international airport was enlarged. Projects were also established to emphasize the cultural aspects of the Olympics, including the construction of the Seoul Arts Centre, the National Classical Music Institute, the National Museum of Contemporary Arts and the Chongju Museum. A programme of refurbishment and extensive repair of historic monuments, such as palaces and shrines, was also undertaken (SOOC, 1989). However, not all sections of the local community benefited from these changes to the urban environment. The programme of urban refurbishment involved moving many of the street stalls into the back alleys out of public sight during the Games (Official Report, 1989). Hill (1992) reports that walls were built to
hide the slums and poor quality houses on the torch and marathon run. These examples illustrate very graphically the way in which urban spectacles can heighten tensions and disguise social problems in an effort to project a positive global image (Harvey, 1989).

The Barcelona Games of 1992 is probably the best example of the role of the Olympics as a catalyst for urban change and renewal. The city’s traditional economic base in engineering and other forms of manufacturing had been seriously damaged during the 1970s and 1980s by periods of world economic recession, restructuring and the effects of global competition. Barcelona exemplified the need facing many Western cities to re-invent themselves and to define new roles and new images appropriate to a post-Fordist world. Major urban improvement programmes were therefore undertaken in order to underline the city’s claim for a place on the ‘global cities’ network’ (Sánchez, 1992). As the capital of Catalonia, Barcelona was also keen to promote Catalan identity and to assert its importance relative to Madrid, the Spanish national capital.

The sporting facilities for the Barcelona Games were provided at two main locations in the city (Montjuïc and Vall d’Hebron), and involved the construction of 15 new venues, the refurbishment of ten existing venues and the use of 43 existing facilities that required little alteration (see Figure 3). The Olympic Village was developed on a 130 ha site at Parc de Mar, which

Fig. 3. Facilities of the Olympic Games in Barcelona, 1992.
experienced the most innovative of all the transformations in the preparations for the Barcelona Olympics (COOB, 1992, Vol. 1, p.89). Before the Games, the land was occupied by declining industries, which were separated from the rest of the city and from the coast by two railway lines. The Olympics provided a justification for the redevelopment of the site involving the restructuring of the rail network, the building of a coastal ring road, the development of the Olympic Village and a new marina (Olympic Harbour), the restructuring of the sewage system and the regeneration of the coastline. The development opened up the city to the sea by improving access to 5.2 km of coastline for the inhabitants of the metropolitan area. Here the new beaches and waterfront facilities have transformed the landscape and will potentially alter the shape of the future growth of the city (COOB, 1992, Vol.1, p.77). A less visible, but nonetheless significant effect of the Games was the upgrading of the urban technology and telecommunications systems necessary to host the world’s media. These improvements will have major implications for the further development of the city as an administrative centre (Sánchez, 1992).

The Sydney Games of 2000 seem set to continue the theme of major urban change, but for the first time to raise the profile of environmental sustainability within the proposed Olympic developments. The IOC particularly commended the Sydney proposal for the emphasis placed on environmental protection and enhancement in all aspects of the bidding process and the attention paid to working closely with groups such as Greenpeace (IOC, 1993). All the new facilities for the Sydney Games are intended to incorporate ‘green’ design principles, such as energy conservation and recycling (albeit how far these green ambitions will be realized remains a matter of some controversy).

The Olympic Stadium and Village will be in an area known as Homebush Bay which lies 14 km to the west of the city centre (Young, 1992; NSW Government, 1994; Brogan, 1996). The 760 hectare site has for many decades been scarred by noxious land uses and areas of contaminated wasteland used for dumping household and industrial refuse, including the State Brickworks, the State Abattoir and the Royal Australian Armaments Depot (Sanders, 1995). The decision to pursue the Olympic bid in 1991 reinforced and accelerated the area’s renewal, the policies for which were set out in the Homebush Bay Structure Plan of 1994 which aimed to ensure that development is consistent with the green guidelines (see Figure 4).

In the case of the Olympic Village, located only a kilometre away from the main stadium, the adoption of ‘green’ principles will mean using solar power and water recycling and designing buildings which are totally passive in terms of their requirements for space heating and cooling. When the Olympics are over, parts of the Village will be adapted to accommodate competitors in the Paralympic Games. Then the properties will be sold or rented to help meet Sydney’s ever-increasing demand for housing. The Village is intended to act as a model for eco-sensitive urban design which can be reproduced elsewhere in Australia or abroad (Greenpeace, 1995). It claims to be the largest ‘green’ housing project in the world and it could represent a chance for Australian
architects, developers and manufacturers to develop a lead in green technologies which could then be big export-earners.

Discussion

Whereas the early games of the modern Olympiad involved, at most, the building or refurbishment of relatively small-scale sports facilities, by contrast, the Games since 1960 have increasingly been used as a trigger for

Fig. 4. Site of Olympic Games at Homebush Bay, Sydney, 2000.
a wide range of urban improvements. In addition to the provision of large new sports stadia and facilities, the Olympics have acted as a stimulus for major developments such as new road systems, public transport initiatives, air terminals, urban renewal programmes, tourist and cultural facilities, and parks and beautification projects designed to enhance the city’s landscape and environment. Particularly in the case of the two Asian hosts, the Games were also used to reduce pollution problems and to improve standards of water quality, hygiene and sewage disposal. In Sydney the Games will take on a new role as a pioneer of sustainable urban development. In many cases, the Olympic Games have provided the justification for related developments to be ‘fast-tracked’ through accelerated planning, design and construction.

The increased scale of the investment triggered by the Olympics has arisen in part from the increased scale of the Games, with more events, more competitors and more visitors. Over two million people attended the Games in Atlanta in 1996. The funding to pay for the new facilities has been derived from the Games’ increased revenues. The Atlanta Olympics generated US$2.5 billion through television coverage, sponsorships and ticket sales in roughly equal proportions. The hugely increased income from television rights has been especially important: for example, whereas NBC paid US$225 million for the Los Angeles Games of 1984, the figure for the Atlanta Games in 1996 was nearly double at US$456 million and for Sydney NBC are due to pay US$705 million. The role of television in the staging of the Olympics is an aspect of globalization now of major importance to the Games and to the host city’s aspirations to ‘global city’ status.

The host city’s exposure to enormous numbers of visitors has intensified the need to improve and extend transport systems and to up-grade at least parts of the city’s landscape and environment. The exposure to the world’s media has re-inforced the desire to ‘show off’ the city to best effect. The more extensive the publicity, the more compelling the opportunity to enhance the city’s image and reputation. In the modern global economy, in which major world cities compete for investment, the Olympics represent a unique publicity platform and opportunity for place marketing. In the context of post-Fordism, as cities strive to present themselves as consumer, leisure and cultural centres, the growth of the Games as an international spectacle has offered its hosts increasing opportunities to capture what Bourdieu (1984) has called ‘symbolic capital’, namely a collection of physical attributes and images which attest to its distinction, taste and eminence.

Despite these opportunities, however, the recent hosts have shown some variation in their commitment to major change and infrastructural investment. Barcelona, for example, used a mix of Olympic, government and private funds to support major transport and renewal projects. By contrast, the two recent USA Olympics have both tended to set their face against really large public spending and, apart from the actual sports venues, have sought to constrain general infrastructural programmes. Such contrasts in approach have their roots in political ideologies and in differing views of the role of the state and town planning. The emergence of the private sector model of Olympic organization could be said to reflect the shift from ‘government’ to
‘governance’, which forms part of post-Fordist modes of regulation. It also owes something to the emergence of the ‘New Right’ and the growth of scepticism about high levels of public expenditure and personal taxation. However, it is interesting that in the light of the criticisms of the Atlanta Games (and in particular the lack of investment in transport), the Sydney organizers have moved further away from the commercially-orientated, private-sector model. There has been a return instead to something closer to the Barcelona approach, although debates are continuing in Australia about the precise level of infrastructural investment which the public sector can afford.

The increased scale of the modern Olympics and their infrastructural requirements raises a number of other issues. Coubertin’s original philosophy for the Games has been overtaken by the increasing gigantism of the event itself. Many of the athletes are now professionals rather than amateurs, and the Games have become dependent on commercial sponsorship and television rights. While such changes might have been necessary for the Olympics to survive in the modern world, the scale of investment required for the Games has become so great that it might be argued that the concept of sport as a means of spiritual renewal has given way to sport as a means of urban renewal.

In terms of social equity, the distributional effects of the Games and other sporting festivals also continue to provoke debate. The question contested is whether urban public investment for such events represents a subsidy to affluent consumers and visitors at the expense of local collective consumption for the underprivileged (Harvey, 1989; Critcher, 1992). These concerns about the distributional effects of the Olympics to some extent mirror wider debates about the kinds of property-led renewal strategies which were so prominent in city regeneration strategies in the UK and elsewhere during the 1980s (Imrie and Thomas, 1993). Investment in new buildings and infrastructure, whether sports stadia, new roads or shopping malls, may lead to the neglect of other community needs such as education and training, affordable housing or the quality of social services. In this respect, too, sports-led regeneration could be said to have parallels with the culture and arts-led regeneration strategies adopted by cities such as Glasgow.

There are equity issues also at the international level. The Olympics have almost always been held in the already prosperous cities of Europe, North America and Asia Pacific. After over one hundred years of the modern Olympiad, there has still been no Games in the cities of Africa, South America or South West Asia. The Games of 2004 have been awarded to Athens despite bids from Cape Town and Buenos Aires. On the one hand, Olympic gigantism might increase doubts as to whether these regions would be able to stage an event on this scale. On the other hand, equity and the Olympic international philosophy demand a wider geographical spread. The sale of television rights and sponsorship now represents an enormous accumulation of capital from around the world which is currently being concentrated on further improving already prosperous ‘western’ cities. Arguably, the benefits
of Olympic resourcing would be better focused on poorer cities more in need of large-scale investment and environmental improvement.

Another very serious concern about the Olympic Games, resulting from the gigantism and globalization of the event, is that they can provide a platform for terrorism. The Games in Munich (1972) and Atlanta (1996) have been overshadowed by tragedy and all future Games will have to plan and develop facilities with the security of athletes and spectators as a priority. This and other logistical objectives would, of course, be more readily achieved if there were one purpose-built permanent Olympic venue, but this is an idea which the IOC shows no sign of accepting. As a result, the Olympics seem set to continue as a major arena for inter-city competition, with the increased intensity of the bidding process mirroring the combined effects of trends in globalization, the mass media audience, post-Fordist economics and the perceived costs and benefits of hosting the world’s most prestigious sporting spectacle.

Conclusions

Such implications indicate the extent to which the Olympics now bridge the worlds of sport and urban change. What began simply as a festival of sport has grown into an unusually conspicuous element in urban global competition and, for its host cities, a unique opportunity to attract publicity, bring in investment and modernize their infrastructures and images. As the Games have grown in size and stature, so increasingly they have left a discernible physical imprint on their host cities. The precise nature and extent of the changes that they have inspired has, of course, been variable and it is most certainly not legitimate to conceptualize ‘the Olympic City’ as a distinct urban genre. Nonetheless, in different ways and at different times, the Olympic signature has made a mark enduring well beyond the seventeen days of sporting competition.

It may, of course, be suggested that the apparent size of this signature can be over-stated in that some of the urban changes might perhaps in time have happened anyway and should not therefore necessarily be ascribed simply to the Olympics. Certainly, city planners may see in the Games an opportunity to fund and bring forward long-term plans which would otherwise remain in the pending file for many years. In this way, the Olympics may be said to accelerate change rather than to initiate it. It is obviously difficult to judge the force of this argument; one can only speculate as to what might have happened without the Olympics. This is the classic ‘counter-factual’ problem which besets most forms of policy evaluation and impact research. In the case of the Olympics, however, it is reasonably safe to assume that few of the sporting and other facilities would have been provided in anything like their present form simply to meet local needs. In relation to wider investments in transport and environmental improvements, urban planners are well known for their capacity to produce blueprints and proposals which are subsequently not implemented. Moreover, the scale of the modern Olympics and the sums of money they now generate are such that it is difficult to envisage many of
the related urban developments taking place without Olympic resources and the political pressures deriving from a clear deadline and intense interest from the international media. The very enthusiasm and determination with which cities now compete for the right to host the Games is further evidence of the difference they can make. Most of the main urban changes referred to in this paper can therefore be safely and fairly described as Olympic legacies. To resolve this issue at the level of individual projects and developments however would obviously require a substantial effort in terms of further, more detailed, investigation.

In considering the broader question of further research, there are, of course, many other aspects of the Olympics which would repay additional enquiry. This paper has focused on the history of the physical impact of the Games, but there is potentially an equally interesting and much broader history to unravel and review concerning the socio-economic impact of the Games and how this has changed across the century. Similarly, it would be interesting to explore the locational decision-making behaviours and strategies which have led to the selection of the various host cities. This research avenue could encompass both the actions and processes involved in deciding that a city should bid and the IOC’s actions and procedures in making the final selection. Another interesting dimension would be to examine the losers in this selection process: an intriguing issue here would be to assess the legacy and effects of bidding and failing.

All of these research questions no doubt would raise methodological problems and certainly one must recognize that the further back in time the researcher wishes to stretch, the more fragmentary the evidence is likely to be. There may therefore be a case for concentrating enquiries on the more recent Games. Nonetheless, with the turn of the century just ahead and a hundred years of Olympic endeavour now behind, there has never been a better moment at which to adopt a longitudinal approach and to explore aspects of the full Olympic sequence, a history which began with a sharp focus on sport but which has recently grown to embrace so many wider considerations.

References


