

Neighborhood impacts of Atlanta's Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT Mega-events such as the Olympic Games offer cities the opportunity to attract economic development and to market themselves on a global scale. Decisions made by business and public leaders as they prepared to host the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games resulted in the relocation of many *public housing residents* and in frustration among *low-income neighborhoods* as revitalization efforts failed to meet expectations. Some progress was made in housing development in downtown Atlanta as well as in neighborhoods closest to Olympic venues. However, as other cities compete to host similar events, they can learn from Atlanta's experience and provide *better planning* as well as more resources to redevelop their *low-income neighborhoods*.

Introduction

Cities throughout the world have increasingly recognized that tourism is an important economic development strategy. Cities compete with one another to attract premier tourism events. Perhaps the largest prize in this highly competitive municipal derby is the opportunity to stage the Olympic games. The experience of preparing for and hosting the Olympics has the potential to compress an entire generation of economic development into a five-year period (Tews, 1992, p. 34A). Many cities seem willing to assume the risks of such rapid growth in order to stage tourism-related events such as the Olympics. In doing so, cities often forget the community-related consequences of tourism (Lovel and Feuerstein, 1992, p. 335). The failure of Atlanta to use the opportunity provided by the Olympics to revitalize its central city neighborhoods may be helpful to other cities as they plan this type of event.

Theoretical background

One of the ways in which cities have chosen to market themselves to visitors from throughout the world is by hosting what are often called 'hall-mark' or mega-events. These are defined as major one-time or recurring events of limited duration, developed primarily to enhance the awareness, appeal and profitability of a tourism destination. These events rely for their success of uniqueness, status, or timely significance to create interest and

attract attention (Ritchie, 1984, p. 2). For an event to be a hallmark it must be on a scale so that there are huge amounts of money involved in preparing for the event and the expectation that there will be national and international recognition for the host location. Such mega-events include world-class exhibitions and fairs, but the largest of them all is the Olympics, since few other activities have its ability to focus the attention of the world. It is estimated that 3.5 billion people around the globe watched the opening ceremonies of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games. This gives the Olympic games the opportunity to provide the host city with publicity, urban renewal, the construction of physical infrastructure, and economic development on an unprecedented scale (Hall, 1992, p. 36). Preparations for this type of mega-event are certain to have significant impacts on neighborhoods within the host cities.

The process of decision making to prepare for Atlanta's mega-event followed a pattern which was remarkably similar to Stone's description of the city's urban renewal program (Stone, 1976). Planning for urban renewal was initiated and guided largely by the private sector for the benefit of business interests. The role of government was to assist in implementing corporate decisions in the city. Little opportunity for public debate was given on the urban renewal program once fundamental agreement to move forward was reached by business leaders and elected public officials. This process appears to replicate the pattern of decision making described by Hartman in transforming a part of San Francisco for its convention industry (1984, pp. 319–326).

One writer has suggested that mega-events such as the Olympics are 'Just an excuse to transform the city' (Tews, 1993, p. 3). If so, there would be significant impact on the neighborhoods as well as the entire host city. This has caused numerous observers to question the distribution of benefits from such events. If increased business activity and an enhanced image are the goals of the host city, then low-income areas near venue sites are likely to suffer. Many of these neighborhoods will experience the loss of 'use values' in the process of growth which accompanies the preparation for the event. The losses may take the form of increased noise, congestion, and traffic as well as the potential to lose the use of space as residents are moved out to make way for growth (Logan and Molotch, 1987, pp. 17–20).

This raises the costs of preparing for a mega-event as city residents may not share in the benefits of the activity. The disparity between the costs and benefits of mega-event preparation on neighborhood residents raises a fundamental question about the nature and function of the city itself. Is the city a product to be sold based on a favorable image to visitors or to potential investors? Or, is the city a place to live and be enjoyed by its residents and not treated as a commodity (Bramham *et al.*, 1989, p. 4)? The commodification of urban space to attract capital and upper income people at the expense of lower-income residents has been critiqued by urban geographers such as Harvey. The redeveloped environment of the city becomes a

mechanism for conspicuous consumption rather than the civic values of residents. Newly reshaped neighborhoods and downtown areas become the centerpiece of 'urban spectacle and display' crowding out the routine aspect of daily life for urban residents (Harvey, 1990, pp. 421–422; Harvey, 1987, pp. 275–276). This 'spectacularization' (Rutheiser, 1996a, p. 286) of public space is certain to have long lasting effects on the city and its residents.

Low-income neighborhoods

The local organization charged with the responsibility of preparing the city for the games was known as the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG). ACOG was a powerful coalition of business leaders and elected public officials who faced a legacy of distrust within the city's low-income African-American neighborhoods. This was the result of years of policies such as expressway construction and urban renewal which relocated thousands of low-income African-American families.

When he returned in triumph from Tokyo after Atlanta was awarded the games, former Mayor Andrew Young, who was instrumental in the city's successful bid, remarked that the task ahead for ACOG was to put on the games and not try to revitalize the city's older neighborhoods. ACOG's business was limited to the task of preparing the city for the athletic competitions and not economic development (*Constitution* 12-1-90, C-1). His successor as Mayor was Maynard Jackson, who had a different vision of the opportunity provided by the Olympics. He described the challenge of preparing for the Olympics as climbing the 'twin peaks of Mount Olympus.' The first peak symbolized the effort to put on the games themselves, while the second represented the effort to improve Atlanta in significant ways (Robinson-Barnes, 1995, pp. 1–2). For Mayor Jackson, this improvement meant using the Olympics as an opportunity to revitalize some of the city's low-income neighborhoods.

The responsibility for this redevelopment task fell upon a public-private partnership organization created by the city which was called the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta (CODA). Major Jackson would be co-chair of CODA along with a business leader selected by the major. In addition to the co-chairs, there were seventeen members of the CODA Board of Directors including only two representatives from the neighborhoods affected by the Olympics. CODA's mission was to plan for the Olympic development program, develop a financial plan, raise the funds for the program, and to manage its implementation (City of Atlanta, 1992).

CODA outlined an ambitious plan to revitalize fifteen city Olympic Ring Neighborhoods which were near venue sites close to the downtown. A preliminary step was a careful survey of the neighborhoods to determine conditions and the eligibility of the areas for urban redevelopment. The surveys were conducted on thirteen of the neighborhoods by students from the Georgia Institute of Technology. Both the composition of the CODA Board

and its survey program displeased the neighborhoods. Many area residents felt they should have greater representation on the Board. Residents also feared that the survey results would be used to repeat the old urban renewal process in which the neighborhoods would be declared slums, property acquired by the use of eminent domain, and more people forced from their homes. Neighborhood protests prevented CODA from receiving City Council approval of the proposed Olympic Redevelopment Program.

CODA also had difficulty funding the proposed neighborhood revitalization program. Money from a foundation grant and the city enabled CODA to conduct the neighborhood survey, but other funding proposals were not approved. One suggestion was a special tax on tickets for sporting events to generate an Olympic Legacy Trust Fund. The mayor suggested an additional one cent sales tax increase, but neither proposal was seriously considered by the Georgia legislature. Without public sector support and with limited contributions from businesses and foundations, CODA largely abandoned its neighborhood redevelopment program. Instead, it focused on preparing the street environments for pedestrians attending the games. The organization raised \$76 million from a variety of sources to improve sidewalks, lighting, and plantings of twelve streets near the Olympic venues. CODA also worked to place public art in several plazas and parks which were highly visible during the games. In several locations the street improvements provided a stark contrast to the poor commercial and residential areas nearby. CODA's efforts to redevelop the housing in these low income areas was described as part of the 'big dreams that fizzled' (*Constitution* 6-9-96, A-1).

Other neighborhood impacts of the Olympics were immediate soon after the announcement of Atlanta's successful bid. In the initial plan the venue for the tennis matches was to be located in Blackburn Park in an affluent predominately white area of north Dekalb County known as Dunwoody. When the neighborhood association received the news of the proposed site for the venue, the group responded by asking ACOG to move the tennis matches elsewhere. Area residents worried about the potential crowding the tennis center would generate in their community. ACOG responded by agreeing to move the tennis venue to the state-owned Stone Mountain Park.

Next, ACOG announced its intention to build the Olympic Stadium in the low-income black neighborhood known as Summerhill. The new stadium would be located on a site just south of the existing Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, which had been built twenty-five years earlier on land cleared under the urban renewal program. When the neighborhood protested the location of a second stadium in their community, ACOG refused to budge. This provoked an initial confrontation, but finally resulted in a compromise. The new stadium would be built in the Summerhill neighborhood, but after the games, ACOG would pay off the outstanding debt on the old stadium, tear it down, and reconfigure the Olympic Stadium for the use of the Atlanta Braves

baseball team. The neighborhood also received promises of financial support from the business community to assist in the revitalization of Summerhill and the training and employment of area residents for construction jobs on the new stadium. In the process of selecting its venues, ACOG had set a tone that would continue to create problems in its relations with the city's low-income black neighborhoods. The perception was created that well-to-do white neighborhoods could influence decisions in preparation for the Olympics while poorer black neighborhoods would gain little and possibly lose much as the city prepared for the games.

Over the years most of the public housing projects in the Atlanta area were located in the central city. The preparations for the Olympic Games presented the opportunity to make changes in some of the city's older public housing projects. Early in the planning process for the games, the decision was made to relocate the residents of the oldest project, Techwood Homes, tear it down, construct the Olympic Village on part of the land, and rebuild a portion of the complex as a mixed income neighborhood. Despite opposition from many residents, the plan moved forward with most tenants relocated to an apartment complex in the northwest portion of the city. The renovated 'mixed-income complex' was completed after the games, but with only a small percentage of the former public housing residents returning.

This process of relocating residents and renovating the projects into mixed income neighborhoods was repeated on four other housing projects as part of the Atlanta Housing Authority's 'Olympic Legacy Program.' Applications for funding have been filed with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to add nine more housing projects to the list of those which will be closed, torn down, and rebuilt as lower density, mixed income complexes (Atlanta Housing Authority, 1996). Another project in the Summerhill neighborhood near the Atlanta-Fulton County and Olympic Stadiums was to be privatized with the units renovated and the tenants returning as the owners of their individual units. The privatization of the Martin Street Plaza project was one of the center pieces in the revitalization plans of the Summerhill neighborhood. The residents were moved prior to the games, leaving the units boarded up and empty during the Olympics. While the project was empty, plans changed and the complex reopened in December 1997 as renovated public housing.

Before the Olympics, the Housing Authority relocated 114 families from Techwood Homes, 558 from Clark Howell Homes, 340 from Eagan Homes, 470 from East Lake Meadows, 64 from John Hope Homes, and 30 from Martin Street Plaza (Atlanta Housing Authority, 1996). A total of fifteen housing projects will be rebuilt resulting in the relocation of thousands of low income families at a time when little replacement housing is being constructed. For most of these individuals the impact of the Olympic Games was the sacrifice of the use value of their homes and neighborhoods as part of the costs of growth (Logan and Molotch, 1987, p. 98).

Some of Atlanta's older neighborhoods were able to take advantage of

their proximity to Olympic venues to make substantial changes. For instance, the community development corporation in the Summerhill neighborhood where the Olympic Stadium was located formed a partnership with several major corporations to redevelop the area. This partnership did not accomplish nearly all of the ambitious plans made by the neighborhood for revitalizing the area before the games. The area received some new housing, much of the existing housing was improved, and the neighborhood's one public housing project closed for remodeling. In the process, many additional households were displaced from private housing located near the Olympic Stadium construction (CODA, 1996).

Another residential area near the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made substantial progress in restoring older houses in the neighborhood and building new in-fill houses. This was done with assistance from a variety of sources including major financial institutions and federal agencies such as the National Park Service. The neighborhood organization which coordinated the process is known as the Historic District Development Corporation (HDDC). The HDDC sold the new houses in the area to middle class families, while rehabilitating older houses that were occupied by lower income residents. HDDC deserves considerable credit for its sensitivity to the needs of the area's existing low-income residents as well as the requirements to preserve the historic character of this part of the city.

It was more than coincidence that the Olympic Marathon course was routed past the birthplace of Dr. King and through the neighborhood being revitalized by the Historic District Development Corporation. Investment in other neighborhoods seemed to be in inverse relation to their distance from Olympic venues. The farther from the games a neighborhood was located, the less money the area received. According to one estimate, The Summerhill neighborhood received more than 80 percent of the dollars invested in Atlanta's low-income neighborhoods during the period from 1990 through 1996 (Keating, Creighton and Abercrombie, 1996, pp. 4-5). This means that other areas of the city which were equally in need of rehabilitation were required to wait until after the games to compete for resources.

Downtown housing

One of the most potentially important impacts of the Olympics was the creation of a new 'neighborhood' consisting of residences in the central business district. Downtown housing had been a goal of both the city's business and political leadership for many years. The games provided a catalyst for the conversion of many loft spaces in older buildings in the area of Five Points, the historic center of the city. There were also new apartments constructed downtown such as the City Plaza development adjacent to City Hall. Costs for this project were underwritten by the lease agreement to house security forces during the Olympics. Whether or not these downtown

residential projects are successful will depend upon the continued demand for downtown housing. The Olympic games did provide the impetus for this residential development in the downtown area; however, it will take several years to evaluate whether the former central business district has become a new neighborhood.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from this assessment of Olympic preparations on Atlanta's neighborhoods. First, a mega-event such as the Summer Olympics has a lasting impact on the host city. The low-income predominately African-American areas of Atlanta were affected most by the preparations for the games. Residents were relocated from at least six public housing projects and many other households in the path of Olympic construction were also moved. For these individuals the preparations for the Olympics cost them the use value of their homes and neighborhoods.

The record to date suggests that many of the mistakes of earlier revitalization programs were repeated. The Olympics were perceived by many low-income residents as another excuse to reshape the city. The decision making process used by ACOG was remarkably consistent with the 'regime' described by Stone with business leadership able to exert strong influence on public decisions affecting low-income neighborhoods (1989). CODA's neighborhood revitalization plans failed, and only those areas closest to Olympic venues received substantial support for revitalization. This attention to the neighborhoods located near Olympic venues gives some credence to Harvey's suggestion that events such as the Olympics are part of a process of reshaping land use in the city to make room for 'urban spectacle and display' at the expense of the routine aspects of daily life for urban residents. In public housing projects and in low-income neighborhoods, many families were moved to make way for the spectacle. The legacy of newly constructed sports venues and the enhanced image of Atlanta as a 'world city' must be tempered by the continuation of a pattern of moving low-income residents to make way for growth. Only the most dedicated efforts by business leaders and city government to work *with* low-income citizens after the games will change the legacy of distrust the Olympics have helped to perpetuate.

As cities in other parts of the world compete to host mega-events such as the Olympics, it is hoped that some of Atlanta's mistakes can be avoided. Planning for the event was left largely in the hands of the private sector with the role of government to assist in implementing corporate decisions. Low-income residents of neighborhoods affected by these events should be involved as fully as possible in planning decisions which will impact their communities. As Rutheiser observed, Atlanta 'lost the Olympics', by failing to use the games to regenerate its poverty-stricken heart (1996b, pp. 28-29). More careful planning and a recognition that mega-events such as the

Olympics will have significant impacts in low-income neighborhoods can help other cities take better advantage of economic development opportunities.

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