

Athens 2004. Ten Years Later the Olympic Infrastructure, the Cultural Olympiad and the ‘White Elephant’ Syndrome

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Abstract

It is now ten years since the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 and questions remain as to how the Greek government has dealt with the Olympic legacy. It is true that the everyday life of the inhabitants of Athens has improved to an unprecedented degree as a result of the mandatory infrastructure projects that were carried out, for example with regard to means of transportation, the rehabilitation of urban areas, and the environment. Furthermore, it was generally acknowledged that the Games were a great success. However, the construction projects carried out to meet the sporting needs of the Games, as well as the cultural projects built as part of the Cultural Olympiad, are still the subject of intense public concern because of the apparent lack of a timetable for properly valuing and managing these projects for the benefit of the wider public. Ten years after the Olympics, it seems that some of these projects, although necessary to the organisation of the Games, were disproportionately large for a country the size of Greece. Some of the venues were particularly expensive and are now very difficult to maintain, while others remain unused and are becoming derelict. This problem is exacerbated by the present unprecedented economic crisis and has resulted in severe criticism, with people openly talking about a post Olympic Greece suffering from the ‘White Elephant’ syndrome.

Keywords: Olympic infrastructures, Cultural Olympiad, White Elephants, Olympic legacy and management.

Introduction

Two Olympic Games have taken place since 2004, in Beijing (2008) and London (2012). The London Olympic Games, in particular, organised eight years after those in Athens, have provided an opportunity for international public opinion to address the Olympic legacy of the Greek capital and the manner it has been managed. There are many reasons behind this sudden interest on the part of foreigners – and in particular, the British – but the most prominent is the economic crisis that has hit Greece, which has revived memories of the costs of the Olympics as well as the subsequent use of both the athletic and cultural Olympic infrastructure.

The costs of the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 remain unknown, because the figures are either increased or decreased depending on the viewpoint adopted, i.e. depending on whether all infrastructure projects are included and not just those necessary for organising the Games based on the contractual obligations undertaken by the Greek government towards the International Olympic Committee.

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In any event, there are conflicting views, and many voices have been raised – especially from the Greek political opposition and the media – demanding a thorough audit of the finances of the Organising Committee for the Athens 2004 Olympic Games (ATHOC) to arrive at objective and reliable answers.

It should be noted, from the outset, that Greece is the smallest country ever to have undertaken organising the Olympic Games, (actually, twice, in 1896 and in 2004), with the exception of Finland (Helsinki) in 1952) when the political, social and economic situation was entirely different. The Greek Olympic authorities and the Greek State were fully aware of the difficulty of this exercise, having bid for the organisation of the Games both in 1996 (the centennial anniversary of the first modern-era Olympic Games held in Athens in 1896) and in 2004.

Thus, the motivation for the Greek bid had its roots in history and in the strong national feeling that led the overwhelming majority of Greeks to fervently support such a bid. The concepts of national identity and national pride were very strong factors, on which even the two major parties aspiring to power, PASOK and New Democracy, were fully agreed. It should be noted that at the time these parties represented more than 85% of Greek voters, while the Left disagreed, mostly on ideological as well as financial grounds. The likely longer term benefits from organising the Olympic Games were considered to be less significant, although the documentation submitted to bid for the organisation of the Games included references to future tangible and intangible gains that Greece would profit from.

In the first modern Games in 1896 the historical continuity of the Olympic Games, and its association with the Greek national identity had been an issue. In the 20th century, the same issue had focused on the prevailing assumption that Greece, being the cradle of Western civilisation and the melting pot of Eastern and Western civilisations, had a clear Western-European perspective (Stavrides, 2008). In 2004 Athens had shaped a multi-faceted cultural identity, and the Greeks were in a position to organise a modern Olympic Games worthy of their great civilisation of the past (Stavrides, 2008: 580).

On this issue, Margaret Gold (2011: 315) was right to point out that “[t]he relationship between Greece and the Olympic Games is like no other. The slogan ‘There’s no Place like Home’, used in all the advertising for the 2004 Games, resonated with Greek identity, collective memory and historical experience. As home to the classical Olympics, the Games go to the very heart of Greek culture.”

With respect to the costs of the Olympic Games, in 2004 the Greek government announced that they had reached 9 billion Euros, while the political conflict on the issue culminated when the two major parties exchanged positions between government and opposition after elections (Kissoudi, 2008: 1976).

According to one economic study (Tziralis et al., 2006: 25), the total costs of the Olympic Games amounted to 11.274 billion Euros.

However, this was not the highest estimate since, based on a study carried out by the Ministry of Finance in 2005, they actually reached 13.5 billion Euros, or, to put this in the Greek context, 7% of the GDP (*Real News* newspaper, 30.4.2011).

Nevertheless, a recent estimate by the Ministry of Finance considered that the final costs of the Olympic Games only amounted to 8.486 billion Euros (*Sky TV*, 19.11.2012).

The current political opposition, supported by comments on the social networking media, have linked the costs of the Olympic Games with the subsequent economic crisis that has plagued the country from 2010 on.

The costs of the Cultural Olympiad amounted to 146,320,000 Euros. Other scholars (Lenskyi, 2010: 378-380) have also pointed out the negative impact on the Greek economy, noting that, since Greece's financial deficit was the highest in Europe (3.2% in the year 2004), those who foresaw that the costs of the Olympic Games would burden the country for years have been proven right.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the exact nature of the economic costs, it is a fact that, in the 2004 Athens Games, athleticism and culture took divergent paths, since the cultural aspect did not succeed in convincing public opinion of the worth of the Olympic ideal. Something re-enforced by the lack of any great project or cultural institution remaining from the Games, apart from promises that the Olympic legacy would be passed on to the next generations.

It is true that the face of Athens, with its population of 4 million, has been changed and that it has been transformed from a provincial Mediterranean capital to a modern megalopolis with safe and fast transportation networks resulting in a positive impact on the environment, while Olympic projects have expanded throughout the basin of Attica. A new understanding of the organisation of space now prevails, large-scale urban renewal projects are being carried out, traditional buildings are being renovated, and efforts to unify archaeological sites are being intensified (Potsiou & Apostolatos, 2006).

In general, an image of a creative Greece is being promoted, by consolidating historical tradition on the one hand, and by promoting modern achievements on the other. These constitute efforts to integrate modern aesthetics with pan-Hellenic intertemporal principles, invoking at the same time the concept of Olympism.

In the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, Greeks were called on to implement the ideals and values of Olympism by organising a Cultural Olympiad, one of the greatest and most significant institutions of the Olympic movement. The most interesting feature of such institution, which falls within the remit of the International Olympic Committee, is its extended duration (approximately four years).

The Cultural Olympiad of Athens included a diversified programme with promises of initiatives in favour of the environment, which already represented the third pillar of Olympism. The Cultural Olympiad is by nature a complex institution and it has had to deal with institutional, social, cultural and development issues.

The Cultural Olympiad runs in parallel with the Olympic Games (athleticism, culture and education was the initial triptych of the Olympic Charter), it has a long history, it is supported by a global network of organisations having an educational and intercultural mandate, and it promotes Olympism as a "philosophy of life" (Garcia, 2012: 1-5).

The Olympic Infrastructure and its Management

In 2004 Athens had the opportunity to undergo radical renewal; and it achieved that goal to a limited extent through the new development model. According to Jon Coaffee (2011: 191), Athens had indeed a great opportunity to replace its underdeveloped infrastructure, to promote its more remote and environmentally degraded areas, and to exploit its new athletic and cultural facilities, but it does not appear to have taken any action to that end after the Olympic Games.

Furthermore, according to Kissoudi (2008: 1981), the Olympic legacy should have a "long-term perspective"; an Olympic city should maintain, after the Games as well, its "international profile", make use of the Olympic facilities and integrate them into the life of the city (Hiller, 2010: 331).

However, the Olympic Games are not only an extremely important athletic event; they are also a cultural and social event. Therefore, it should be possible to interlink the cultural infrastructure with the economy and the development of the city, so as to enhance the city (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004: 331).

According to Margaret Gold (2011: 315), the legacy left by the Olympic Games to Athens was very significant, since, in 2004, the city acted having at its forefront a thorough reconstruction revolving around the axis of classical antiquity with the motto of approximating the intertemporal values of Greek civilisation.

The Olympic infrastructure in Athens was developed around the following main centres: the Olympic Village (at the feet of Mount Parnes), the Olympic Complex (in Marousi), the urban regeneration projects in the centre of Athens and along the coastal zone of Attica (Faliro, Markopoulo, Marathonas, Agios Kosmas) and in other parts of Athens (Nikaia, Nea Ionia, Tatoï, etc.).

With regard to cultural infrastructure, the legacy concerned interventions to, and renovations of, important museums in ancient Olympia, the National Archaeological Museum and the Byzantine Museum. Furthermore, “[t]he Olympics were a vehicle for developing contemporary art. This led to the foundation of two complexes, both housed in former industrial premises: Technopolis, an arts and performance space that also houses a small Maria Callas Museum; and the Athinais, a restored silk factory that contains a theatre, cinema, music space, museum space, restaurants, bars and cafes, and conference facilities” (Gold, 2011: 326).

However, it was not long before criticism of the post-Olympic legacy in Athens made itself heard. Although the majority of experts and journalists acknowledged the great efforts made in bringing about the considerable changes that took place in the Greek capital, some criticized the lack of long-term design. Criticism became even more strident with the abandonment of some of the Olympic infrastructure because of the lack of maintenance and use.

In his article, Jon Coaffee (2011: 191) reminds his readers of a special BBC program, in June 2005, where the then current state of the Olympic infrastructure was subjected to negative comments, concluding with the observation of a Greek viewer who stated: “we had fantastic Games but no plan for the day after.”

Another reason for the problematic nature of the Olympic facilities lies in the fact that 95% of them were of a permanent nature, making the burden of maintaining them considerably more difficult. The subsequent abandonment of these projects, in spite of their positive impact on the Greek economy, shows that Athens had no “strategic plan” (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004: 192 and Boukas et al., 2012).

Ten years after the Athens Olympic Games, concern about the state and fate of the Olympic Properties is only natural. Even the flagship of the Olympic infrastructure, the Olympic Stadium in Marousi, has sent out a distress call. On July 27, 2013, Giannis Andrianos, the Deputy Minister of Culture of the Greek government, sent a letter to the Speaker of the Greek Parliament requesting financial assistance to help maintain the famous roof of the Olympic Stadium, designed by architect Santiago Calatrava, which otherwise would be at risk of collapsing. This example illustrates the tragic state of the Olympic Properties.

In the meantime, the media are exerting pressure demanding solutions and are highly critical of the Greek State. “The dowry of the Olympic Properties which has become a noose around our necks” was the title of a popular program broadcast on September 25, 2013 (*Dion TV*).

Which showed shameful images of some of these properties, such as, among many others, the Indoor Volleyball Stadium in Paiania, left, without security and protection, at the mercy of robbers, while the exquisite building for Weight-Lifting in Nea Ionia has been left empty and unused.

Certainly, there has also been some instances of adequate use of Olympic Properties, such as the Badminton Theatre in Goudi, the lease of the International Broadcasting Centre - Golden Hall (I.B.C.) in Marousi, as well as the involvement of large private groups in exploiting the Olympic land in Faliro (Stavros Niarchos Foundation) and the rehabilitating the historical centre of Athens (Onassis Foundation).

The exploitation of the Olympic Properties had initially been delegated to Hellenic Tourist Properties S.A. and is now the task of Public Properties Company S.A., which often finds its plans obstructed by bureaucracy and judicial interventions.

A major mistake, apparently dating from the outset, has been the inability to evaluate the Olympic Properties, both before and after they were used for the Olympic Games, as required since 2002 by the International Olympic Committee (Lausanne Congress). The relevant rules had been included by the IOC in the Olympic Charter in 2003 (Leopkey & Parent, 2012). Thus, a tool for analysing and measuring the impact of the Olympic Games was created (OGGI - Olympic Games Global Impact). It appears that, in the case of Athens, these evaluation indices have not been used by the International Olympic Committee, either because it was too late or because there was some tolerance, as contrasted with what happened, for example, with the Olympic Games held in London in 2012.

In the case of Athens, it can be validly argued that there has been no strategic planning, as confirmed by Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, President of Athens 2004, in her book entitled *My Greek Drama* (2013), the result being that it is now extremely difficult to manage this considerable Olympic wealth.

The Legacy of the Cultural Olympiad

The Cultural Olympiad was envisioned by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who made it an Olympic institution at the Olympic Games held in London in 1908, in an effort to restore the original beauty of the Olympic Games (Cashman, 1998: 108). This was also the spirit that guided Athens in 2004, promoting the philosophical concepts and the humanistic values of Antiquity, as may be seen from the main themes explored during the Cultural Olympiad: “Man and Space”, “Man and the Earth”, “Man and the Spirit”, “Man and Man” (Garcia, 2008: 372).

According to the promise made by the Olympic Games Organisation (Cultural Olympiad. Official Report, 2005: 27), Athens was supposed to implement a programme promoting the ecumenical character of culture, to be associated with social projects and cultural spaces (Papanikolaou, 2013).

Athens mounted a multitude of cultural events, both inside and outside the country, but once again the resulting cultural wealth lacked proper management. First of all, there was a failure to achieve large scale public participation and there was no provision for capitalising on achievements by creating the necessary cultural infrastructure. None of the museums that were scheduled to be established within the new Olympic facilities saw the light of the day, including, for example, the “Olympic Museum” and the “International Classical Athleticism Museum” (at the International Broadcasting Centre), the “Maria Callas Museum” (in Technopolis, Gazi), as well as the “Arts and Culture Academy” (in the Ano Liosia Olympic Centre); these remain paper projects that have never materialised.

Some other aspects of the Cultural Olympiad, such as “Olympic Education”, “Olympic Truce” and the institutions for the “Cultural Olympiad” and the “Olympic Truce” to be established in Athens, have been proven to be a dead letter and to have been just communication gimmicks.

The progress of the “Unification of Archaeological Sites” has been satisfactory, whereas safeguarding the historical centre of Athens has required the intervention of a private body (the Onassis Foundation), as indicated above, in order to improve its image.

State intervention has also been positive with respect to renovating important archaeological museums (in Athens, Olympia, Thessaloniki and elsewhere), creating museums of contemporary art, such as the National Glyptothek in Goudi and the New Benaki Museum on Peiraeus Street. However, these are the only tangible evidence of the Olympic legacy in cultural terms.

It should further be noted that the design of the Olympic athletic facilities also included cultural spaces, i.e. spaces for congresses, exhibitions, concerts and multipurpose spaces for events, but none of these aspects have been implemented. Evidently, the underlying intention was to associate athleticism with culture, this being a fundamental principle of the Olympic movement, but this has remained an unfulfilled promise.

Olympism, as a concept and part of the intangible legacy, was perhaps the only thing promoted through the operation of the Cultural Olympiad. Its ideas were promoted during high points of the Olympic Games, from the Olympic Flame Lighting in ancient Olympia until the Closing Ceremony in the Olympic Stadium, which have been rightfully linked to Greek national pride.

Therefore, the question is whether the tangible and intangible legacies, the two aspects of the Cultural Olympiad, have been kept in trust for future generations, in a manner that has nurtured the cultural life of the city and enhanced knowledge. The management of this enormous material and intellectual wealth is still beset by issues of sustainability, and the good impression left by the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004 is currently being undermined.

According to Garcia (2005: 33), what is finally left from the Olympic Games experience is whether the Games have been able to touch people in a way that they will be remembered and engender long-term benefits.

The Athens of ‘White Elephants’

“White Elephant” is a common term in the parlance of cultural and technological critique. It is frequently used in cases where cities compete so frantically against each other to for the title of Olympic city, that they often include unrealistic project ambitions in their bids. Indeed, if these bids are successful and the projects are implemented by constructing gigantic facilities at an exorbitant cost, these facilities which cannot subsequently be exploited then become liabilities. Many scholars use the term in a derogatory and ironical manner, referring to the metaphor of the well-known Asian legend (Girginov, 2010: 16).

To be more specific, these are cases where there is a clear discrepancy between the unrealistic and overly ambitious intentions involving the building of large projects, on the one hand, and an inability to subsequently manage and exploit them in a sustainable way on the other hand. These are acts of vanity, megalomania and ostentation totally inconsistent with reality in a small and relatively poor country like Greece. This kind of behaviour could be described by the neologism *micromegalismus*.

This is particularly true for Olympic Games, which have become a global super-show with gigantic facilities, where there is a risk of letting such facilities become fossilized relics of the past, in spite of the enormous amounts of money spent on their construction. It is also very likely that such facilities, by remaining unused due to the inability to maintain and exploit them, will end up having a negative impact on the country’s economic life.

Those risks had been identified in due time by the International Olympic Committee, in its aforementioned Congress held in Lausanne in 2002, where certain rules were established in order to prevent the cities hosting Olympic Games from unnecessary expenditure and unrealistic proposals, prioritising instead the need for sustainable development and a positive Olympic legacy (Cashman, 2007: 1). Olympic facilities and Olympic stadiums, which excessively burden the public debt, contribute to the deficit and are finally left empty, undoubtedly represent the negative aspect of the Olympic legacy, the so-called “White Elephants” (Leopkey & Parent, 2012).

Other scholars (Erten & Ozfiliz, 2006: 528) pinpoint the “White Elephants” issue in the unexploited facilities, the excessive public expenditure and the inability to integrate the enormous Olympic stadiums into the fabric of a city’s activities. They also suggest that the projects should be part of sustainable development and built using renewable sources of energy. This was the approach adopted by London in 2012, where temporary constructions were built, sensibly limiting the permanent spaces of Olympic hospitality, in order to minimise the number of “White Elephants”.

The contribution made by the Athens Olympic Games to the transformation of the city has already been mentioned, comprising the large infrastructure projects carried out as well as the showcasing of the city’s enormous and globally unique cultural heritage. However, ten years after the magnificent closing ceremony of the Olympic Games, in August 2004, many Olympic structures already appear to be abandoned due to the obvious inability to exploit or utilise them in a sustainable way. This highlights the lack of strategic planning and vision regarding their post-Olympic use.

There is now considerable critical reaction, particularly from the Greek and foreign media, which, as the ten year anniversary approaches, often make references to “Rotting Olympic properties” (*Star TV*, 16.04.2013), accompanied by shameful images from the old Hellenikon airport. Most criticism is directed at the enormous expenditure for permanent facilities which were not necessary. For example, there are stadiums intended for sports where Greece does not even have a national team (for example, icehockey). As newspaper *Ta Nea* put it, “[i]t was all a sacrifice at the altar of an ephemeral image” (30.07.2012).

Limiting ourselves to the scientific aspect, studies such as the one carried out by Mangan & Dyreson (2010) point out the scale of the budget overrun and the significant financial surcharges, beyond the originally planned costs, as the cause of the White Elephant image created.

In his provocative book entitled *Ghost Milk* (2011: 384), Lain Sinklair wrote in a particularly mordant tone referring to post-Olympic Athens: “White-elephant stadiums that cost a fortune to keep empty. New roads choked with tractor protests. Airports closed. Angry, stone throwing mobs demonstrating the consequences of fiscal mismanagement, chicanery by international bankers, a culture of tax avoidance and brown bagism. National pride suborned by a word the Greeks patented: Hubris”.

The crux of the matter is that, less than ten years later, Athens has tarnished its international reputation and image, which represent the fundamental values of the intangible legacy of the Olympic Games.

Conclusion

Research shows that Athens did not design the Olympic Games with a long-term perspective in mind, nor did it implement any feasibility study, in line with the repeated statements on that matter by Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, President of the Athens 2004 Organisation. The lack of management can be identified not only in large athletic projects but also with regard to cultural wealth, as confirmed also by the Minister of Culture.

His reference to the tragic condition of the roof of the Olympic Stadium, designed by Santiago Calatrava, shows that the Olympic memory itself is now in jeopardy, as represented in this masterpiece of the Spanish architect.

It is true that Athens considered the Olympiad primarily as an opportunity to change the face of the Greek capital, and then as an opportunity to promote the city's cultural treasures. These are the two aspects of the Olympic Games, and the link connecting them was the effort to boost national pride and to enhance the national identity of Greeks. Hence, the (almost) universal initial acceptance of this grand exercise by public opinion.

The great problem facing the Greek State today is how to maintain, manage and exploit the considerable Olympic legacy, enabling it to recover its credibility and obtaining some financial and moral returns. However, the obstacles to gainfully exploiting this enormous potential resource lie in bureaucracy, litigation, suspicion and the lack of understanding among political parties (Kissoudi, 2008: 1978-1979).

In Attica, there exist 23 permanent and extremely costly Olympic Properties which represent an Olympic first, in terms of number and size, in the history of Olympic Games. When this is added to all the problems, described in this paper, involved in exploiting such properties, it seems that Athens will have a hard time shedding its characterisation as the White Elephants Olympic City.

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