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Editorial Introduction

The Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games 2032 are fast approaching, and the region is in the grip of a housing and homelessness crisis. With all attention on stadium development, south-east Queensland is at risk of sleepwalking off a housing affordability and homelessness cliff. Prior Olympic host cities provide a sorry example of ineffective housing policies with detrimental impacts on the cities' most disadvantaged people. This research examines literature related to prior Olympic host city responses to homeless and other vulnerable communities as a bellwether for early action in the lead-up to the Brisbane Games in 2032.

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Homelessness and Olympic legacy: The good, the bad and the ugly

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Introduction

Olympic host city status, once fiercely vied for, brings promises of boosted tourism, stimulated economic growth and improved infrastructure, together with an enhanced global profile and reputation for the city. However, the consequently supercharged city growth and infrastructure investment can come at a cost, with rapid urban renewal having unintended outcomes for a host city's most vulnerable and marginalised residents.

Prior host cities provide valuable evidence of the impacts of Olympic hosting on housing and homelessness and the success or otherwise of various initiatives aimed at overcoming potential social and economic impacts. This briefing paper identifies lessons to be learned from previous Olympic host cities, identifying 'good, bad and ugly' policies and practices that had an impact on public housing and homelessness. These findings seek to inform Queensland policy-makers and Games organisers who, with a record lead-up window, have the opportunity to learn lessons from prior host cities in planning and implementing a positive public housing legacy for the Brisbane 2032 Games.

This paper presents findings from a review of over 200 academic papers on the impact of Olympic games on host city housing issues over a 40-year timeline from Los Angeles 1984 to Paris 2024, including both summer and winter Olympic Games.

Why become a host city?

Cities around the world vie for host city status for a multitude of economic and social reasons, including attracting investment, tourism and status. From a built environment perspective, hosting an Olympics is an opportunity for urban restructuring, bringing with it new people, infrastructure and investment within a compressed and motivated timeframe (Olds, 1998).

Host cities often use stadium and other venue construction as an opportunity to redevelop underutilised areas within the city (e.g., London 2012) or, in the case of Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004, to create a satellite suburb and associated infrastructure to accommodate future city growth. In either case, redevelopment and gentrification of these areas occurs with resultant displacement of existing residents. Given that these urban areas are generally underdeveloped pre-Games and house low-income residents, it is these vulnerable populations that are most impacted by way of displacement, be it forced or economic, by being priced out

of the market (Bernstock, 2013).

The literature consistently shows that for people with nowhere else to go, such displacements result in increased homelessness rates – which is not an aspiration for a host city with the eyes of world on it. Reactive homelessness responses on the eve of the event, such as evictions, punitive measures and heavy-handed policing, are the result of inadequate or ineffective pre-emptive policies to accommodate these pre-existing populations displaced by Games-fuelled urban renewal (Olds, 1998; Suzuki et al., 2018).

Prior host city learnings

The literature tells us that there are a multitude of housing impacts on host cities that have both immediate and long-term effects. The immediate impacts are those associated with the event lead-up period, the duration of the Games and the months following. Longer-term effects, or legacy, appear later and persist for many years. Host cities aspire to positive Games legacies; however, as shown below, this is not generally the outcome for the cities' most vulnerable residents.

The good

“Good” legacies are where successful housing initiatives and policies mitigate negative impacts to vulnerable populations and/or provide positive legacy outcomes for social and affordable housing. While many host cities cite aspirations for post-Games increases in affordable and social housing, unfortunately evidence is scant of this occurring, with Barcelona 1992 and Athens 2004 being rare examples (Blunden, 2012), and not without their issues.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to introduce socially progressive services for the city's homeless is missed by many. A lone counterexample in this category is Sydney 2000's Homelessness Protocol, which provided legal protections and support services for homeless individuals instead of displacing them in the lead-up to the

event (Minnaert, 2012). This initiative was a more humanitarian approach to the homeless than criminalisation or forced displacements, as described in examples given below.

The bad

“Bad” legacies are where well-intentioned yet ineffective policies have unintended consequences on vulnerable populations.

Athlete village conversion to social housing

Conversion of athlete's villages to social housing has been a social legacy goal for several host cities. However, privatisation and market-led gentrification instead priced out the marginalised populations intended to benefit from these facilities. In Barcelona 1992, the Olympic village was to be put on the housing market at low or moderate prices. However, the scheme excluded working-class housing and was priced out of reach for low-income families (Garcia-Ramon & Albet, 2000). Initial plans for the Vancouver 2010 winter Olympics village included 1000 social housing units post-Games; however, financial challenges associated with the Global Financial Crisis resulted in 90% being put out for market rental (Porter et al., 2009). London 2012's East Village provided 8,000 homes post-Games, but market-led gentrification and high property values ultimately priced out many of the lower-income residents it was meant to support, with affordable housing numbers falling far short of what was required (Bernstock, 2013; Corcillo & Watt, 2022; Gonzalez Basurto, 2017).

A different example is Athens 2004, where the athlete's village was built in a disconnected outer city location. Post-Games, this provided 2,292 units for low-income residents at half the market price. However, no services or infrastructure existed to support this vulnerable population, leaving it isolated and even more precarious than before (Bernstock, 2013).

Lack of long-term solutions

While short-term solutions ‘sanitise’ public areas, venues and re-development spaces, a lack of long-term solutions for displaced residents fail to compensate them for the unwelcome disruption. For example, in Los Angeles 1984, homeless people were relocated from the city centre to government-leased campgrounds; however, the lease on the property was only of three months' duration, with no long-term plan for housing the homeless (Goetz, 1992). In the year before Paris 2024, 12,545 people were evicted from informal living sites. Only one-third of these were offered accommodation, and then only for the short term (a few days to a few months). Temporary Regional Relocation Facilities set up in 2023 provided a maximum of three weeks' accommodation to the homeless bussed from Paris encampments. With 56% of Paris's homeless being asylum-seekers, the confluence of social work and control of foreign nationals through this process was controversial and ultimately ineffective (Le Reverse de la Médaille, 2024).

Exclusion by policy

With the eyes of the world on host cities, displacement of the homeless and other vulnerable populations by way of exclusion has been another policy approach. In Vancouver 2010, Project Civil City claimed to reduce homelessness but focused on punitive measures rather than creating sustainable housing solutions (Boyle & Haggerty, 2011) and was widely criticised for perversely increasing homelessness. This resulted in restricted access to homelessness services and public spaces and ‘no sit/no lie’ municipal bylaws. Policies such as ‘red zoning’ pushed homeless youth out of venue precincts, resulting in lack of access to essential services, such as shelters or health care (Kennelly & Watt, 2011). Similarly, in Tokyo 2020, public spaces were temporarily privatised for Olympic events, prioritising global

commercial interests over local needs. This pattern has been observed in several host cities, where public areas were restricted, repurposed or commercialised, often permanently altering access for lower-income residents (Brazao, 2020; Suzuki et al., 2018).

The ugly

The category of “ugly” legacies is where severe cases of displacement and homelessness are exacerbated by host city event-related policies and practices. It is disappointing that past lessons appear not to have been learnt, with evidence of ‘ugly’ practices stretching back the full 40 years of this study to Los Angeles 1984 and including the most recent host city, Paris 2024.

- Los Angeles 1984: In a city struggling to deal with its homeless population, police cleared city parks in the lead-up to the Olympics, dumping the belongings of the homeless. Such sweeps stopped after the Olympics (Goetz, 1992).
- Atlanta 1996: One of the most renowned displacements of vulnerable populations was linked to the restructuring of public housing in the city (Bernstock, 2013). Homelessness was criminalised, with approximately 9,000 arrests in 1995 and 1996 and 30,000 Atlantans evicted or displaced by other means between 1990 and 1996 (Gustafson, 2013).
- Athens 2004: 2,700 Roma minority members were the disproportionate subject of forced evictions, exacerbating systemic discrimination and historical marginalisation (Ross & McDougall, 2022).
- Beijing 2008: 1.5 million residents were forcibly displaced between 2000 and 2008, or 14% of Beijing citizens. The government justified evictions as part of the city’s modernisation and environmental improvement efforts. However, displaced residents reported that compensation was inadequate, with privileges, public service and social networks sacrificed (Shin & Li, 2013).
- Rio de Janeiro 2016: 77,000 marginalised residents were displaced when favelas were demolished. Residents who resisted were violently evicted by police, exacerbating poor living conditions. Increased surveillance led to aggressive policing of marginalised communities, worsening social exclusion and distrust rather than addressing urban inequalities (Bin, 2017; Sánchez & Broudehoux, 2013).
- Tokyo 2020: Elderly residents were forced from public housing built to accommodate persons displaced by the 1964 Games stadium. Many residents had lived there since the estate’s inception and were subjected to pressure ‘as if they were required to sacrifice themselves for the “national policy”’ (Suzuki et al., 2018, p. 92). At the same time, long-term homeless people living in parks that were also a legacy of the 1964 Olympics were evicted without notice and their belongings burnt (Suzuki et al., 2018).
- Paris 2024: Dispersal and removal of the precariously housed via 12,500 forcible evictions and/or closure of squats, including the relocation of around 4,000 people to temporary regional shelters, 56% of whom were asylum-seekers. This ‘social cleansing’ used a twofold approach: a) dispersal from public spaces to avoid informal settlements that would be visible; and b) removal from greater Paris of people living precariously in public spaces, hostels or squats (Le Reverse de la Médaille, 2024).

Lessons for future host cities

Evidence suggests that host cities prioritise the city’s image over the rights and welfare of their most vulnerable residents via mass displacement, heavy-handed policing and loss of public spaces, justified in the name of economic growth and global prestige. This may also be evidence of prioritising capitalism and private interests over those of the wider community. However, the consequences not only take welfare from vulnerable residents but also exacerbate housing crises through speculative and demand-driven price growth.

Hence, when planning for mega-events, host cities might consider the question, What cost for economic growth and global prestige? The evidence here suggests the costs are often borne by the most vulnerable in the community, via displacement, forcible evictions and event-led homelessness.

Unfortunately, the lessons from Los Angeles 1984 and Atlanta 1996 some 40 and 30 years ago, respectively, have not been heeded. In January 2025, Atlanta stopped clearing homeless encampments after a city truck ran over and killed a man sleeping in his tent (Keane, 2025). And in March 2025, the Brisbane mayor committed to evicting homeless people from city parks, amid a housing crisis (Sato, 2025). Both cities cited public health and safety concerns as the rationale for clearing homeless encampments, without offering long-term solutions for the provision of suitable housing.

This research is preliminary, limited by the sheer bulk of literature on Olympic host city housing and homelessness outcomes. Further research is required to uncover positive case studies to inform the Brisbane Olympic Games organisers. Further research should also include examining the effect of Airbnb's status as the official accommodation partner of the Olympic Games. It is well shown in the literature that short-term accommodation negatively impacts rental supply (Gurran & Redmond, 2021), and the impact of this on the rental community of Paris, the most recent host city, is yet to be studied.

Host city urban renewal shouldn't just bring benefits to the privileged. Event and legacy planning for long-term, sustainable public housing outcomes across society is required. Pre-emptive investment in combating homelessness via provision of additional public housing may circumvent the need for regressive and reactive policies in the immediate lead-up to mega-events. With respect to legacy planning, the evidence indicates that market-led urban renewal initiatives fail to accommodate low-income residents. Minimum public housing requirements, or public-private partnerships, could be used to ensure legacy housing projects provide long-term benefits across the community and minimise the social costs of hosting the Olympics. In any case, now is the time for Brisbane organisers to take heed from the lessons of past host cities and be proactive in ensuring positive housing legacies for all.

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