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**Title:** Urban Revitalization in the shadow of the Atlanta Olympics

### Introduction

This paper traces the events surrounding the staging of the Atlanta Olympics. It focuses primarily on the interplay of the diverse priorities and interests of (a) residents, (b) businesses, and (c) the City government. The relationships among these players and the consequence of their conflicting agendas are examined to show the strategies employed by each player in pursuing their goals.

French and Disher (JAPA, summer 1997) identified four types of benefits from mega events: (a) the legacy of facilities built for the event; (b) short term economic benefits; (c) marketing opportunities; and (d) urban revitalization. Atlanta reaped all these benefits but with much less success with urban revitalization. When the Olympic games came to Atlanta in 1996, the mayor remarked that the games would “Uplift the people of Atlanta and fight poverty in the process.”(Mayor Maynard Jackson) He hoped the games would leverage its resources to revitalize its distressed neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the City of Atlanta was neither in a position to fund anti poverty program, nor could it persuade the private Olympic organizing committee to do so.

One of the questions that this paper tries to answer is: given the current conditions on how the games is organized and the nature of local politics in the United States (often characterize as regime politics) (Burbank et.al.), can residents of host cities realistically use the Olympics as a leverage to revitalize their neighborhoods. Based on the Atlanta experience, hosting the Olympics does not provide sufficient opportunities to accomplish the goal of easing poverty.

### The Atlanta Case

It is well agreed upon that the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics were a major turning point in the staging of Olympic Games. (Burbank et. al., French, Swann) This is because it was the first profitable staging of the Games and the first Olympics to be funded primarily from private sources. The Los Angeles experience has since been the model adopted by host cities in the United States. With this change came the diminishment of the role of the public sector, such as limited public access, participation, and accountability.

Unlike Los Angeles, which detached itself from the staging of the Games, Atlanta, had the ambitious goal of what its mayor called “scaling the twin peaks of Mt Olympus,” that is to “stage the best games ever and uplift the people of Atlanta and fight poverty in the process.” (Burbank et.al.) Despite the tremendous amount of money that flowed through Atlanta as a result of its hosting of the Games, (See Figure 1.) the fact that the Olympic Games is primarily controlled by private entities or quasi private

<b>Economic Outcomes of the Atlanta Olympics</b>
\$650 million in new construction
\$609 million in Federal funds
18 Companies relocated to Atlanta area
\$ 5 billion in tourism
Expansion of tourism businesses
Expands international sports presence

Source: Andranovich et. Al.

**Figure 1: Economic Outcomes of the Atlanta**

corporations, proved that the public sector's task of fighting poverty within the context of the Olympics, is practically impossible to achieve. To understand the difficulty of such task this paper looks at divergent interests of key organizations in the 1996 Olympics including the residents who were deeply affected by it but not necessarily key players in the staging of the Games.

### Business Development Agenda

Although only cities are allowed to bid in hosting the Olympic games, private entities have been in control of it in the last couple of decades. The Atlanta Olympics was staged primary because of the efforts of one man William Porter Payne. It was through his efforts of raising funds and organizing that made Atlanta's bid for the Olympics a success. As the president and CEO of the Atlanta Committee for Olympic Games (ACOG), a private corporation charged of organizing the Games, he was responsible for overseeing contracts, policies, and investments. Although there was an agreement between the City of Atlanta, the state of Georgia, and ACOG that the City and the State would have supervision over the Committee's activities, funding for both local and state agencies overseeing ACOG was from Committee itself. Real decision-making authority resided primarily on ACOG and not on government agencies. (Burbank et. al.)

Key Organizations in the 1996 Olympics	
Organization	Role in the Atlanta Olympics
Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG)	Private, non profit corporation charged with the staging the Games. Responsibilities included building the sports venues and the Olympic village, as well as selling sponsorships and tickets and negotiating media contracts.
City of Atlanta	Local municipal government with major responsibility for necessary infrastructure improvements around venue and visitor sites.
Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta (CODA)	Nonprofit corporation created by the City of Atlanta and the business community to plan and implement redevelopment projects.
Georgia World Congress Center Authority	Owner of the major convention and entertainment complex of facilities, including the Georgia Dome, World Congress Center, and the Omni Coliseum where a number of Olympic events took place.
International Olympic Committee (IOC)	The international committee responsible for selecting the host cities and approving the venues for individual sporting events.
Metropolitan Atlanta Olympic Games Authority (MAOGA)	State authority created to oversee ACOG's finances and approve all ACOG contracts to ensure legality and long-term financial viability.
Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)	State authority created to provide rapid rail and bus service in Fulton and DeKalb counties.

Source: French and Disher

**Figure 2: Key Organizations in the 1996 Olympics**

This group pursued a business development agenda that focused on “staging the best games ever,” and increase the destination appeal of the city through redevelopment of downtown that appeals to tourists and businesses. With these goals in mind, the projects they pursued consisted of: tourist corridors; airport improvements; venue/facilities development; and urban design projects, such as parks and artworks within downtown Atlanta.

**Resident Involvement**

The takeover of private and quasi-private entities of the Games has resulted in the Olympics being a profitable endeavor for host cities. Unfortunately, it also resulted in less public participation, and public accountability. Local communities take the brunt of the destructive effects of staging mega events, such as displacement due to venues being built in their neighborhood, yet their concerns are often disregarded. The setup of the key organizations in the 1996 Olympics was designed to minimize public oversight. (Roche) The public was not consulted nor involved in the bidding or organizing of the Game. Public agencies that were setup to guard public interest were rendered mute by their financial dependence to the same entities that they were supposed to be regulating.

Public involvement consisted of small group oppositions to specific projects in their neighborhoods. This piecemeal resistance was the only path pursued by residents to take control of the events affecting their communities. This kind of approach has failed in most cases and in cases where it “succeeded;” it only succeeded in blocking certain developments from occurring in specific areas. (Burbank et.al.) Neighborhood opposition had minimal influence in reshaping development to its benefit. Its overall impact or influence on how the Game was organized, or planned is very negligible or none at all.

Opposition to Olympic related Growth in Atlanta			
Target	Organization	Techniques	Outcome
Expansion of suburban tennis complex	Neighborhood	Private communications with Olympic officials	Venue relocation
Construction of Olympic stadium	Neighborhood, taxpayer	Publicity, protest, negotiation with city and Olympic officials	Venue built with minor concessions to opponents
Development of Centennial Park	Neighborhood	Negotiation with city and Olympic officials, lawsuit	Development Completed as planned
Renovation of downtown park	Homeless	Public protest	Renovation completed as planned

**Figure 3: Opposition to Olympic related Growth in Atlanta** Source: Burbank et. al.

Out of the four examples of community resistance in Figure 3, only one was successful in achieving its desired outcome. The success of this neighborhood resistance primarily depended on the ready community organization and high socio-economic standing of its residents. Resistance from poor minority neighborhoods either gained minimal concession or failed to have any effect

**The City Government Dilemma**

The weakness of the City of Atlanta as an Olympic partner prevented it from pursuing its grand vision of revitalizing its poorest downtown neighborhoods. It had neither the necessary funding nor the ability to persuade ACOG and other private partners to buy in into its vision. Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta (CODA), a non-profit corporation setup by the city to lead its

Olympic Spending	
Expenditures	Amount
	(in millions of dollars)
CODA expenditures for neighborhood	\$ 8.17
CODA urban design projects	\$ 74.96
Sports Facilities	\$ 791.87
Infrastructure	\$ 708.00
Safety and security	\$ 123.00
Atlanta Housing Authority housing projects	\$ 495.00
Federal Empowerment Zone	\$ 250.00
Hartfield Airport	\$ 455.00
Total Expenditures	\$ 2,906.00

Sources: Burbank et. Al. and French & Dishier

**Figure 4: Olympic Spending**

redevelopment efforts was poorly funded. Its plan to respond to neighborhood needs such as housing and job creation were co-opted by ACOG's business development agenda of "making Atlanta more presentable". In the end, nearly 75 million of CODA's over 80 million budget was spent mostly on urban design projects rather than on the neighborhoods it was supposed to help uplift. (French and Disher)

### **Conclusion:**

When different development goals collide, image building and business development often displaces the dreams of poor city residents of neighborhood revitalization. Billions of dollars poured into Atlanta as a result of its hosting the 1996 Olympic Games, but as illustrated above the benefits flowed primarily to projects that benefited private interests which were in control of staging the event. Mega events, such as the Olympics, could potentially generate the momentum for a city to revitalize its underserved neighborhoods; but two conditions must be present for such an event to leverage revitalization efforts. First a strong political leadership that uses its influence to achieve its stated goals. Second, well-organized and vigilant community organizations have to be in place in each neighborhood. (Ritchie) Only a concerted effort from a supportive leadership and a proactive community can ensure that community interest of the larger community and not just business interest is represented. (Lewis) Although, Public-Private Partnership would continue to be the means of organizing mega events, such as the Olympics; greater effort has to be made in guarding the public interest, such as opening up the bidding and organizing process to public scrutiny. So in the end, we are not left wondering: when most of the public and private expenditures go to projects that re-images the city into the fantasies of tourist and business interests, what happens to the people who live there.

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