

# Scrutinizing global mega-events

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## The importance of global mega-events research

Over the past 20 years, mega-events – such as the Olympic Games or the Football World Cup – have become a global urban force. For many cities, hosting a mega-event propels historically large interventions in urban development, remodelling both urban politics and the built environment in the course of a few years. The Olympic Games and the Football World Cup have, in this sense, become urban events more than sporting events.

The capital cost of material interventions into the city – upgrading or building new sports venues, roads, railway lines, airports, communication centres, security systems, and hotels – is now several times the operational cost of putting on the event itself. The Russian city of Sochi spent more than USD 50 billion on infrastructure in preparation for the 2014 Winter Games, compared to less than USD 5 billion of operational expenses (Müller 2014). Some scholars see the degree of urban transformation as one of the key distinction between events and mega-events. Hiller (2000, 183), for example, suggests that a mega-event significantly alters the urban fabric and reprioritises the urban agenda.

It is no exaggeration to claim that, over the past two decades, the urban impacts of mega-events have become global. Whereas cities in North America, Western Europe, and Japan

were the traditional hosts of mega-events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russia, China, Brazil, and South Africa have not just joined their ranks but become dominant players: in the years from 2013 to 2022, Japan is the only host of the Olympics or the World Cup that is not an emerging economy. The period between 1992 and 2022 has seen or will see the first Olympic Games or Football World Cup ever in Africa (Football World Cup 2010) and the Middle East (Football World Cup 2022), and the first Olympic Games in South America (Rio de Janeiro 2016).

That mega-events can serve as showcases of and catalysts for larger dynamics in urban development makes them relevant as a research topic. Mega-events introduce idiosyncratic urban development dynamics and rationales into specific cities, creating stark differences between event-driven and quotidian political economies. The same event may serve very different purposes in urban development in different areas of a given city or for different governmental agendas. While London may have harnessed the Olympics for urban redevelopment, the Olympic Games in Sochi served to lubricate a neopatrimonial political system (Müller 2014) and Rio opened up spaces for development through Private Public Partnerships and accumulation by dispossession (Freeman 2014).

Constituted through global networks and institutional relations, mega-events also epitomise the multiple mobilities at the heart of global urban research. Olympics, World Cups, Worlds Fairs and other, smaller events both create and are captured by a vortex of global flows of capital, knowledge, policies, symbols, images, and people (Cook and Ward 2011; Salazar et al. 2017). As such, they lend themselves to comparative research designs that explore the effects of the same intervention in different locations and trace the flows that bind, at first glance rather different, cities – Sochi and Pyeongchang, Rio and Tokyo – into common global circuits.

## Challenges of researching global mega-events

Mega-events are a global phenomenon in multiple aspects: these large-scale, temporary spectacles travel to new locations around the world and feature international participants, but they are also broadcast to a global audience and each event is produced by a globalized network of actors – sponsors, construction companies, consultants, media companies, public relations firms, architects, banks, and so on. This fluid network is multi-local and temporary, dissolving once the mega-event is concluded and then reconstituting itself in new environments. A global urban researcher focusing on mega-events faces the challenge of making sense of the varying temporalities, spatialities, and articulations of this dynamic network.

Take, for example, the Football World Cup: this mega-event is owned by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), a multinational association with 211 member nations, headquartered in Zürich, Switzerland. Nations that are interested in hosting a World Cup will create bidding committees to prepare and submit proposals for hosting. These committees typically involve members of the nation's governmental, sporting, and business elites, but also hire the expertise of international consultants and marketing firms who specialize in attracting mega-events (Hall 2006).

Once FIFA grants the right to host a World Cup, the new host nation forms a national organizing committee, often composed of members from the bidding committee but also involving other actors, from both public and private entities (Andranovich, Burbank, and Heying 2001). Since World Cup games are played in numerous venues around the host nation, the national organizing committee creates local organizing committees for each host city. Aside from governmental connections at the federal level, each host city is tied into a network of regional, national, and international construction companies, architects

and planners, equipment suppliers, energy concerns, technology specialists, security firms, corporate sponsors, and consultants. This network begins the process of preparing the nation to host, launching infrastructure construction and rehabilitation projects and spearheading public relations initiatives.

These developments generate interest both locally and internationally, and are covered by an extensive media network that both reflects and shapes public attitudes. As the opening date approaches, media coverage increases in intensity until the games begin in earnest, at which point billions of people around the world tune in (Solberg and Gratton 2014). Media is always present in global sport, but during mega-events the media concentration directs the world's attention to make the host city into a stage and the sporting event into global spectacle. Alongside traditional media coverage, social media and the internet represent another point of insertion into a global network, as individuals, organizers, and advertisers make use of new technologies to leverage the global attention paid to the World Cup (Karg and Lock 2014).

After the closing ceremony, the international spotlight dims as the translocal, multi-scalar assemblage that imagined, produced, sold, and consumed the spectacle enters into a period of destructuring: fans switch off the television, internet groups go dormant, organizing committees dissolve, companies are disbanded, and sometimes workers join other mega-events as part of the international circuit of traveling consultants and policy experts (Prince 2012; Wood 2015). Meanwhile, preparations for the next World Cup are already underway; organizing committee members from future hosts observe the production and operational processes of previous World Cups. Though differing in the organizational details and urban footprint (number of venues and cities, for example, or length of the event), most

mega-events follow similar patterns of development, incrementally building complex networks that are both translocal and temporary.

Mega-events do not just result from the emergence of global networks; they also draw the attention of an international network of researchers, each focusing on a particular aspect of the preparations, event dynamics, or impacts. Broadly speaking, these scholars have isolated and analyzed a portion of the mega-event totality, discussing potential economic effects (Abelson 2011; Baade and Matheson 2004), environmental consequences (Karamichas 2013), rationales behind bidding and hosting (Wolfe 2015; Cornelissen 2010), or the varying reactions of host populations, from nationalism to popular support to resistance and opposition (Hiller and Wanner 2014). Other literature focuses more specifically on the built environment, for example on issues of urban regeneration (Smith 2014; Coaffee 2010), housing and gentrification (Blunden 2012), the securitization of space (Bennett and Haggerty 2012), and white elephant infrastructure (Horne and Whannel 2016, 42–47).

While the literature on mega-events is plentiful, it is dominated by case studies of individual events, and there is a need for more longitudinal and comparative research. This focus on case studies is partly due to the temporal and logistical challenges inherent in mega-events, where events might take place far from researchers' institutional bases, and where reliable information may be scarce, closely guarded, or only available in the host country's language(s). There are, however, some examples of comparative research between different host cities of one mega-event (Essex and Chalkley 2004), a focus on a single city undergoing change from a series of different mega-events (Alves dos Santos Junior et al. 2015), and examinations of failed mega-event bidding across different cities (Lauermann 2014b). At the same time, the majority of mega-events literature – even the comparative

research – tends to focus on the urban nodes of a global network while ignoring the flows and circulations between them.

## Techniques for researching global mega-events

The techniques typically required for conducting mega-events research depend on which aspects of mega-events will be examined, as shown in Table 1. These aspects often overlap and multiple techniques can be employed in order to present a more robust picture.

*[Table 1 near here]*

Archival research is the backbone of studies that cover multiple iterations of the same event, such as a long-term analysis of Olympic urban development (Gold and Gold 2010) or a detailed tracing of Olympic cost overruns (Zimbalist 2015; Flyvbjerg and Stewart 2012). Some researchers have used official archives, such as those at the Olympic Studies Centre in Lausanne (Lauer mann 2014a; Mascarenhas de Jesus 2013), but it is not necessary to have access to internal documents in order to pursue archival research. Many government documents and records are available online and bid committees sometimes make available their urbanization plans and provisional budgets. Archival research can also be used to trace the development of event coalitions or the history of event models, and it can provide researchers with material for discourse or statistical analysis.

Scholars employ statistical analysis in mega-events research to evaluate large volumes of data. It has been used to examine popular perception of events among host populations (Zhou and Ap 2009), to make sense of media reports collected via automated internet searches (Preuss and Alfs 2011), and to measure the economic impact of hosting (Baade and Matheson 2004). Analyses can be performed on primary data collected by the researcher, or they can be based on secondary data from governmental sources or polling firms. Statistical analysis can give weight to an argument that might otherwise be overly

reliant on qualitative data and may allow the researcher to generalize trends and findings. Ethnographic techniques are invaluable when conducting mega-event field research. Through fieldwork, (participant) observation, photography, recordings, field notes, interviews, and activist scholarship, researchers can achieve depth and nuance in their work, grounding the mega-event in local experience. Ethnographic research has been used to document protest against mega-events, from London (Giulianotti et al. 2015) and Poznań (Buchowski and Kowalska 2015), and to illuminate the plight of homeless youth during the 2010 Vancouver Olympics (Kennelly 2015). By embedding themselves in the host cities, researchers can provide a perspective grounded in lived experience. Scholars have used this perspective to answer questions of legacy on the local population after the mega-event is concluded (Waardenburg, Bergh, and Eekeren 2015), and to explore the implications of hosting on the city's homeless youth (Kennelly and Watt 2011).

Interviews provide depth and texture to mega-event research, bringing the human element squarely into focus. Scholars can make use of structured or semi-structured interviews, as well as informal conversations; transcribed or recorded, they can quote interview participants directly in their work or analyze interviews cumulatively to better communicate the lived experience of mega-events. In his examination of gentrification and the London 2012 Olympics, Watt (2013) includes interviews with residents of council housing, highlighting the human cost of mega-event ambition. Boykoff (2014) makes use of interviews with activists in order to explore dissent at the Olympics, and Alegi (2007) draws on interviews to understand the policy decisions behind Cape Town's controversial Green Point stadium. Other analyses use interviews to grasp the implications of creating securitized spaces through mega-events (Taylor and Toohey 2011), and to unpack some of the rationales behind hosting the event (Bolsmann and Brewster 2009).

Finally, mega-events are enmeshed in geopolitics, used by nations as a platform to convey messages and project power at multiple scales to different audiences. Researchers who wish to unpack this aspect of mega-events may find it useful to employ the tools of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis, used broadly here, is a range of techniques that can unpack texts, speech, maps, pictures, and other media (Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard 2013). As applied to mega-events, discourse analysis has been used to make sense of the development ideologies behind hosting the Olympics (Darnell 2012), and to explore the nuances of national image creation through hosting (Alekseyeva 2014). It can shine light on the symbolism in Olympic opening and closing ceremonies (Qing et al. 2010; Puijk 1999), and has been used to problematize the Olympic torch relay (McGillivray and Frew 2013) and to question organizers' discursive frameworks of environmental sustainability and legacy (Gaffney 2013).

## **Case study of global mega-events research: Brazil and Rio de Janeiro, 2003-2016 [Christopher Gaffney]**

In 2003, I was doing my dissertation fieldwork on the geography of football stadiums in Rio de Janeiro when the city was contracted to host the 2007 Pan American Games (Gaffney 2008). Since that time, Rio has gone through the most extensive cycle of event hosting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: 2007 Pan American Games, 2011 World Military Games, 2012 Rio+20 UN Conference on the Environment, 2013 Confederations Cup, 2013 World Youth Day, 2014 World Cup, and 2016 Summer Olympics. In addition to these events in Rio, the 2014 World Cup was realised in twelve cities across Brazil, each with localised processes and impacts (Alves dos Santos Junior, Gaffney, and Ribeiro 2015). While these



events were taking place in Brazil, the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and 2012 London Olympics were closely watched by Brazilians as models to follow (or not), allowing for comparative studies that increased the complexity and texture of research in the local context.

The most important first step that I took in preparing my initial research agenda was to contextualise the arrival of the contemporary wave of events in Brazil with previous events (Gaffney 2010). In successive eras of accelerated globalisation, Brazil had always sought to modify its infrastructure and image by hosting events that would push urban development agendas. For the 1922 centennial, for example, Rio de Janeiro demolished favelas and the hills on which they stood in the centre of town and built expansive, temporary structures to showcase Brazilian industry, agriculture, and the natural beauty of its then-capital city. In the aftermath of World War Two, Brazil hosted the 1950 World Cup, building stadiums on a massive scale that were showcases for its cutting-edge architects, engineers, and designers. In the early twenty first century, Brazil's economic and political fortunes were rising and they again sought to use the platform of mega-events to transform cities and to transmit political and governmental ideologies. Mega-events – although they may appear singular and exceptional – always need to be situated within larger historical, political, and economic contexts before setting out on an investigative path.

The second element of my research agenda was to reach out to local academics working on similar topics but from different disciplinary perspectives. Colleagues introduced me to sociologists, urban planners, architects, economists, and politicians who had an interest in collaborating on a large project. Through these connections, I worked with a team to develop a collaborative research project on the urban impacts of the 2014 World Cup that had nine research teams around Brazil. As a national co-coordinator of this project, I

helped to set the agenda for research, communicated frequently with researchers around Brazil, and was able to make on-site visits to nearly all of the World Cup host cities. While there were inevitably some frustrations with the process of managing such a large, longitudinal, and diverse project, the learning experience was as important for me personally as the academic output. I had a ringside seat to the processes, problems, and possibilities of conducting mega-event research on a national scale. In this sense, I built a network of scholars to grapple with the network of the event, as outlined above.

My research was facilitated by the fact that I lived in the city I was researching and spoke fluent Portuguese, thus, every time I stepped out the door, I was engaging in fieldwork. I was teaching about the process of mega-event hosting and the historical context of the city and was able to gather more information than I could possibly process on a daily basis. In addition to my role as an academic, I was a member of the foreign media and contributed my research to the burgeoning social movements that were resisting the implementation of mega-event governance paradigms and urbanisation projects. This triple role as academic, journalist, and activist would make many researchers uncomfortable, but I found that it gave me a unique perspective on the various levels at which the event operates. For instance, my strong media presence forced the event organisers to pay attention to me in ways that they would not have had I only been writing academic articles. As a result, I was invited to “exclusive” sports management conferences where I could talk face to face with event rights holders and their so-called stakeholders. On the other hand, I was on the streets holding protest banners and running from the tear gas and rubber bullets of Rio’s notoriously violent military police. I maintained a blog for many years and became a conduit for translating what was happening on the ground, in the halls of power, and in the Brazilian media for a foreign and Brazilian audiences.

This seemingly complex mix of research, media exposure, popular writing, and activism was inevitably influenced by my evolving knowledge of the urban transformations taking place in Rio. While I had started with a narrow range of focus, as I learned more about the city and event dynamics I began expanding my geographic and conceptual ranges. Of course, my disciplinary training as a geographer had encouraged a holistic view of my object of study but as I learned more about the specificities of Rio's and Brazil's urban political economy, urban planning regimes, political machinations, and social struggles, I began to connect those in ever more complex and specific ways to my research. Eventually, I wrote academic articles on public security, gentrification, transportation, stadiums and sports venues, the political economy of Brazilian football, urban social movements, smart city technology, and corrupt practices in event organising (among others). I used a melange of all of the techniques we have enumerated above, choosing investigative implements from this toolbox as they suited the object of study. I had not set out to write about more than one or two of these elements, but as the events emerged on the urban landscape and I connected with an increasingly diverse and geographically diffuse public, my research interests shifted accordingly.

It is impossible for one person to have a totalizing conception of a mega-event, and this is perhaps what makes it such an attractive, elusive, and difficult research area. Gaining the kind of access that I had to documents, public meetings, rights holders, and the media, while being a part of social movements contesting the mega-events was uncommon, infusing my academic work with a texture, nuance, and intensity that may only be possible while living within the context of the event. Much of the English-language literature that emerged out of the London 2012 Olympics was similarly situated, though perhaps less engaged with public pronouncements against the conjuncture of the events themselves. The close engagement with the local conditions is not, of course, a necessity for

understanding and researching urban dynamics but we should always keep in mind the geographic and social positions from which we conduct, read, and communicate scholarship.

The academic consensus is that global mega-events are causing more harm than good, yet there seems to be very little public interest in halting the march of the white elephants across globalised and globalising urban landscapes. Part of the problem lies in translating academic research to the broader public that consumes these events and in communicating directly with mega-event rights holders and local event coalitions that determine the urban futures of their host cities and countries. The role of researchers in the mega-event complex is under-theorized yet it is clear that many academics make their living on and off the mega-event industry as much as consultants, sports professionals, and stadium construction firms. Researchers have a role in shaping debates, public perception, and public policy - it is essential that we recognize this role and use it to minimize the damage that the current model of planning and execution of mega-events invariably brings.

The Brazilian experience of hosting mega-events was defined by massive public protest, endemic corruption, waste, incomplete, unnecessary, or ill-considered infrastructure, and some of the most exhilarating mega-parties on the planet. This 13-year cycle of hosting also brought unprecedented academic attention to the global phenomenon of mega-events – the Brazilian World Cup and Olympics produced records amounts of research, media reports, and documentation. As the dust settles after the 2016 Olympics and the global spotlight moves on, it will be important to maintain a focus on the long-term impacts of the events on Brazil and Rio de Janeiro. The forms that this research takes will be conditioned by the shifting dynamics on the ground but also by the interest of mega-event researchers in working outside the imminent epistemology of the event cycle.

## Reflections on conducting global mega-events research

Mega-events are an attractive access point to doing global urban research: they manifest the global in one location, leaving traces of that interaction on the urban landscape and in the collective consciousness of hundreds of millions of people. In mega-events, the global is not just something that is abstract, floating around somewhere. It comes together in a city and it causes very visual, material changes: the swanky stadium by Calatrava; the new high rises, financed with pension funds, that replace old tenements; global migrants and local hipsters that drive gentrification. In emerging economies, the mega-event is a mechanism for an accelerated insertion into the global, with the often-overplayed desire to join the club of rich countries and enjoy the recognition that comes with this.

But it would be misguided to conceive mega-events solely as global neoliberal steamrollers that flatten whichever city dares to host them. To really understand mega-events, one needs to see and research them as global phenomena, emerging from a web of relations, with very specific local articulations. As a consequence, one also needs to question any division between the global and the local. For while the Olympic Games may come with a standardized format that imposes similar requirements on hosts around the world, the social, political and material outcomes of Beijing 2008, London 2012, and Rio 2016 are strikingly different. These differences result from the constant intermingling of the local and the global – a division erased as global processes become localized and local processes go global.

Recognizing that mega-events are global urban phenomena also means recognizing that they come with many of the same contradictions as globalization. They create winners and losers; they mobilise some things and people and immobilise others; they are vanguards in the global shift towards consumerism; they foster the most unreflexive nationalism while

purporting to adhere to universalist ideals. While we can hone our analytical tools for doing global urban research with mega-events, we would do well not to forget that there is also a political side to these events that too often gets lost in the allure of the global spectacle.

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