



Beijing Transformed Again: An Exploration of the 2008 Olympic Building Program—Eroding the 'Figure' of a City or Opening Public Ground?

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The modern summer Olympic Games provide a direct stimulus for the rapid transformation of a host city by both private and public sector organizations with an agenda to not only provide the necessary games infrastructure, but also capitalize on this once-off opportunity to bathe the city in the spotlight of the international media. The building programs or urban growth machine that precedes the big event sees vast sums of public and private money mainlined into capital works that re-figure both a cities' form and image. The Games provide a rare opportunity to investigate a cities' transformation within a compressed time frame: the eight years between a bid city winning the Games and the actual event. Furthermore, the complex relations between citizen, city and nation-state highlighted in the flurry of media interest during this time, as well as during the Games, provide rich ground for the examination of often competing agendas between these interest groups.

The scope and scale of Beijing's 2008 Olympics mega-projects are an unprecedented example of the transformation of large portions of an ancient city for the explicit purpose of providing ground for venues and their associated public arenas. The resultant urban spaces have Western commentators critical of the expense and ostentation of the publicly funded infrastructure programs, as well as wary of the private sector use of the venues in a post-Game environment. This paper will review the discourse surrounding the building program where debate focuses on the prioritizing of political agendas to reconstruct the image of contemporary China at the apparent expense of Beijing's citizens. It will argue that the controversy surrounding Beijing's transformation needs to be viewed in the broader context of understanding the break-neck pace of modernization throughout Asia—a context that surfaces polarized views on the nature of the new urban terrains being generated. Post-urban theorists argue that rapid urban growth is creating new urban environments for which there is 'no adequate terminology or any conceptual framework to describe, interpret and understand exactly those forces that could redefine or revitalize it'. Alternatively, this emerging built form is considered anathema to the aspirations of New Urbanists that rightly query the sustainability of such growth, yet offer few solutions that are culturally, or indeed economically appropriate.

Rather than engaging in the rhetoric traded between the camps of those that claim to be either "New" or "Post" Urbanists, the paper will explore the mechanisms for recording/decoding the morphology of Beijing's games-fueled transformations. Traditional mechanisms of depicting 'before and after' snap shots of traditional figure-ground analyses (a two-dimensional view of landscape) will be juxtaposed with contemporary techniques for imaging the city. Mapping techniques have undergone significant transformations in recent years, providing Urbanists with more sophisticated techniques for linking physical maps to embedded, multidimensional dataset.

The results of these comparisons will be used to demonstrate the intensity of the controversy surrounding the concern for the loss of Beijing's traditional city morphology, and the gain of new forms of public space generated by "Game-space".