

# The importance of effective sports venue planning in the post-Olympic usage: The case study of Peristeri Olympic Hall

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## Aim of paper and research questions

Athens has become one of the Olympic cities enjoying a heritage of numerous venues and an oversupply waiting to be exploited satisfying a rather hesitating local sports market (Theakou et al., 2007). The Peristeri Olympic Hall presents a unique example of combining the gigantic Olympic standards with the effective post-Olympic sports participation development. The investigation into the capability of Olympic venues to generate efficient future usage has highlighted a number of key areas which will be influential in determining the extent, nature and depth of pre-Games venue and overall planning.

## Literature review

One of the greatest challenges Olympic Games are increasingly facing is focused on the weakness of the local organisers to accommodate the games without jeopardizing future local sport needs (Westerbeek et al., 2006). Most frequently, Olympic cities face an exaggerated sport venues reality the day after the Games are over where planning has failed to forecast future usage and development, focusing primarily on the organisation of the games (Searle, 2002).

## Research design and data analysis

For the collection of data in this research, semi-structured interviews and analysis of written documents mostly unpublished were employed, at all levels of the policy community. All relevant levels of local government were represented. Starting at the 'widest' central government level, in terms of post-Olympic policy responsibility, representatives of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games Organising Committee and mainly the "owner" of the Olympic Hall i.e. the Mayor of the City of Peristeri were thoroughly interviewed. Organised interviews were used to extract local planners' perceptions on their decisions (or non decisions) in sports facility policy making, the factors that influence local government activity or inactivity, problematic or promising issues related to pre-Games planning of the facility leading to sports development in the locality. Secondary data was provided by written documents obtained from local municipality departments as well as the Athens 2004 Olympic Organising Authority referring to venue design and planning, policy announcements and developmental proposals. Taking into consideration that reliable evaluation is achieved by comparisons of data elicited by alternative forms, the combination of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis is used here achieving 'triangulation', through the use of a variety of data sources. The benefit of obtaining unpublished local and central governmental material on policy issues and future developments enhanced the validity of the results produced by the interviews.

## Results

An initial threat of excessive organisational and societal burden for the City of Peristeri has turned into a unique opportunity for urban regeneration and most importantly a catalytic factor for increased sports participation for the local community (Bowdin et al., 2006).

Local planners had already designed a multi-use sports complex facility when the announcement for the staging of the Olympic boxing competition suggested a major rearrangement of the initial plans in order to facilitate the capacity of 8,500 seats and an additional surface requirement of more than 10,000 sqm. The local limited facility would have to adjust all plans and operations in order to become an Olympic venue. The Olympic Committee would fiercely enforce the Olympic standards in order to meet the requirements of the Olympic sport while the local government should safeguard the planning of the facility designed to satisfy local humble sports needs (Overton, 2000).

The representatives of the local government strongly underlined that the greatest challenge they had to face was the excessive operational burden opposed on their city mechanism that disoriented their planning towards satisfying Olympic requirements. All sporting grounds surrounding the main arena would not be built but only after the Games, while the whole of the surface available should now be effectively designed to accommodate the enormous spatial demands of the broadcasting, press and logistics' partners. The construction of the supplementary seating area would prohibit other sporting fields to be completed. This rearrangement of space to accommodate the gigantic Olympic players became an educating process for local planners towards the new standards and identity set by the Games on the local community and the advanced developmental path to follow.

The documents and the representatives of the Olympic Committee planners focused on the challenge faced in the process of applying Olympic requirements to an evidently restricted venue capability designed to satisfy local amateur sporting needs. It was repeatedly emphasised in interviews that the design of a flexible and half temporary Olympic venue would not have been materialised without the realisation by all sides that the legacy left from the Games should match the magnitude and nature of the local users.

## Discussion and conclusion

The most important issue towards achieving sustainable sporting participation for the local community suggested the satisfaction of all inelastic Olympic requirements through a skilful exercise of temporary construction elements and flexible operating mechanisms. While Athens was increasingly being overloaded by high class – oversized sport venues to create a positive Olympic image, the Peristeri Olympic venue presented an exercise where efficient venue planning and comprehensive community consensus would prove that Olympic results can be achieved. The pressures exercised by the International Federation and International Olympic Committee made the process of venue and services' planning a difficult task in the face of fierce media craving for Olympic inefficiency stories (Kriemadis & Vrondou, 2009). Only days after the Games, all temporary constructions were removed giving room to the initial plans to be completed including the minimisation of the main arena to only 3,500 capacity. Following the Athens 2004 Olympic Games Peristeri government presented a whole developmental scheme for all different parts of the venue offering art and sporting opportunities for more than 2,000 participants only few months after the Games were completed.

While there will inevitably be significant debate, whether Olympic standards can be compromised towards planning for the local community Peristeri has offered a unique case where the design and implementation of flexible rather than permanent – high cost facilities can satisfy sustainable venue and sport potentialities.

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