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Athens 2004: A longitudinal study of sports infrastructure and tourism legacies

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Background and Objectives

Preserving the legacy of the Olympic Games is a core interest of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). As part of their bid documents, interested cities must provide information detailing how the benefits of hosting the Games will be sustained as legacies in the post-Olympic period (IOC, 2009). Hosting an Olympic Games requires substantial investment (Chalip, 2002; Owen, 2005) as it is necessary to update and modernize both hard and soft infrastructure. Further, cities hope such rejuvenation strategies will present a positive image to an international audience and increase tourism. Existing research has tended to focus on short and medium term impacts or legacies (Garcia, 2003), rather than focusing on long term sustainable benefits. Given the significant investment by host cities and the emphasis the IOC places on legacy, this study evaluates the sport and tourism related legacies of hosting the 2004 Olympic Games on the host city of Athens.

Methods

Measuring legacies associated with mega events is difficult (Preuss, 2007) and traditional quantitative methods may not be appropriate. This study adopted a longitudinal “bottom up” (Preuss, 2007) mixed method approach to gather data over the post Athens Olympic Games period of 2004-2009. The primary methods used were observation of Athens and the Olympic facilities for 10 days during June/July 2005 and a follow-up observation visit in September 2009. During these two phases photographs and field notes were taken. Interviews (formal and informal) were conducted in 2005 with key stake holders in tourism, the Olympic sports facility management company, former 2004 organizing committee members, Greek academics, and residents of Athens. Various secondary data sources were used including government reports, newspapers and tourism marketing materials. All data sources were analyzed using content and thematic analysis.

Results

The legacy for the sports facilities over the six year period appears to be mixed. While some facilities see continual usage, others are faced with disrepair and neglect. Even those facilities that are used, lack any reference to the role that they played in the Athens Olympic Games. Upgrades on existing football stadia seem to be positive. For example, SEF

stadium seems to have achieved the goal of modern stadia to be a seven day a week facility. The Peace and Friendship Stadium also upgraded is a working facility and actively commemorates its role in the 2004 Olympics. However, many facilities sit in disrepair awaiting their fate and others have been turned into non-sports usage with no acknowledgement of their former Olympic role. At Irina, home of the Olympic Park and Stadium, despite still being used there sense of neglect. In 2005, there was talk of an Olympic Stadium tour, a staple tourist attraction in most former Olympic cities, but there is still no tour. During our first visit, the Olympic Park and Stadium had hosted a number of events. Four years later, the main stadium hosts a football team and the Hellenic Basketball Federation occupies the basketball facility. Virtually all signage indicating a primary 2004 Olympic Games role has been removed and there is evidence of disrepair in the park surrounds. Regarding tourism legacies, while not directly working with the Athens Organizing Committee the Greek National Tourism Organization did expect increased numbers of international visitors during and subsequent to the Games, and goals for sport tourism. However, in 2005 there was no real attempt to leverage the Olympics in their advertizing campaign using the slogan “Live your myth” with a focus on ancient Greece. Likewise, their current campaign celebrates Greece as 5000 years old. Statistics from the GNTO confirm that for 2005 there was only a slight increase in international tourists. Since then tourism in general has been affected by the recession and so it is hard to determine the tourism legacies of the 2004 Olympic Games.

Conclusion/Application to Practice

The sporting and tourism legacies of the 2004 Olympics for Athens and Greece more generally seem to be mixed. Prior to the Games, expectations were high for both tourism and new sporting facilities. While facilities were built under the scrutiny of the international press who doubted that the Greeks would be ready on time, many of them today have been left to await their fate, or are not appropriate for general use as evidenced by the city of Patras and their Olympic facilities (Papadimitrou & Zervou, 2009). Where the facilities are compatible with Greek sporting interests the situation seems to be different as is the case with upgrades to several football stadia and the use of the basketball facilities by the national federation. In terms of tourism and the expressed interest in sport tourism, there seems to be little evidence of any leveraging of the Games (Chalip, 2004) or significant increases in international tourists. Despite attempts to establish a stadium tour which is currently the main revenue generator for stadium in Beijing (Steinmetz, 2009), five years after the Games there is no tour and very little around the city to indicate that Athens ever hosted the Olympic Games. While Olympic legacies are expected to last long after the Games, this study, conducted six years after the Athens Olympic Games, indicates that unless significant changes are made there will be limited lasting sport or tourism legacy from the Athens Games. The lesson overall appears to be that if there is no active strategy for legacy following a mega event the long term benefits will be lost (Preuss, 2007).