Sports Mega-Events and the Shaping of Urban Modernity in East Asia

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INTRODUCTION

Recent sociological research and investigative journalism have tended to look at the workings of International Sports Organizations (ISOs) and International Sports Federations (IFs) in examining the background to sports mega-events, such as the Summer Olympic Games and the Football World Cup. In addition to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA), media corporations, transnational sponsors, politicians, members of bid teams, and national sport organizations have been considered as constituent parts of the networks of power and influence that produce sports mega-events.

Both critics of and boosters for such events now conduct research into the organization and networks surrounding them and their impacts, legacies, and outcomes. With an interest in the production of the consumption of sport spectacles this chapter considers a less researched aspect: the agents and institutions that design and build the material infrastructure for sport and sports mega-events, the stadia and facilities. This chapter digs below the surface of the reified world of the material infrastructure of global cities to ask questions about the creators of the emblematic buildings and the leisure and sport spaces constructed to assist in the pursuit or maintenance of “world-class” status. As Ren Xuefei suggests, “social scientists have just begun to explore the linkage between architectural mega-projects and nation-building practices in global or globalizing cities.”

Previous research has identified the stadium as a site for multidisciplinary investigations into the meanings of urban leisure, and the economy and politics of sports spaces. Here my focus is on the builders, developers, designers, engineers, and especially architects responsible...
for the production of the material infrastructure—the stadia and sports facilities—that are increasingly required to be in some way as iconic as the people who design them.5

Reviews of the impact of sports mega-events on the urban environment have noted at least three vested interests involved in their production: sport, corporate, and urban. We agree with Harry Hiller that it is important to consider the controversial nature of urban developments related to sports mega-events. “Legacies” should not be considered to be simply positive ones.6 Hence with a focus following Hiller on “outcomes,” rather than impacts, or the warm word “legacy,” various studies have considered different phases and patterns of urban development that have resulted from the Olympic Games.7

This chapter has the following structure: in the next section we briefly consider the production of the material infrastructure and particularly the political economy of architecture and architects. Following this we outline the growth of what Sklair calls the “transnational capitalist class” (TCC) and the place of celebrity or signature architects or “starchitects” in it.8 Next we consider the increasing attraction of hosting sports mega-events and then specifically the hosting of sports-megas in East Asia. We conclude that architectural and urban legacies remain contested features of the urban environment in East Asian societies as elsewhere.

ARCHITECTURE AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE MATERIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF SPORTS MEGA-EVENTS

Until recently architects and architecture in general have not been a significant topic for sociological analysis. Partly this has been supported by the view that architecture is an artistic practice, the creation of individual genius, and therefore cannot be adequately understood by social theories, especially perhaps Marxist theory obsessed with rigid economic causes. It is possible however, as Garry Stevens has demonstrated, to produce a sound understanding of the social world of architecture and architectural education utilizing the theories of Pierre Bourdieu.9 The architectural “field” produces cultivated individuals with distinctive styles and tastes, but this architectural creativity is derived from a social process. Like other artistic practices contemporary architecture can be examined in Marxist and sociological terms by looking at the social relations of production within which it emerges and operates. These approaches pay attention to the institutions through which architects are educated, how building designs are produced, and hence how architecture is socially constructed.

The production and marketing of architectural icons and signature architects or “starchitects,” has grown since the 1980s. Whilst architecture may have an existence independent of those paying for it, it is unquestionably the case that “architecture is about power.”10 As Stevens notes, “The field of architecture is responsible for producing those parts of the built environment that the dominant classes use