

## (Weight)lifting the Olympic Heritage The “White Elephants” of Athens 2004

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### The Olympics of the second half of 20th century: High investments with high expectations

The Olympic Games were seen as, and often have been, especially during the second half of the 20th century, a catalyst for a city's development. The resulting sports facilities and notably infrastructures reshape the cities. In some cases, these legacies represent a real asset, as is the case for Munich after the Games in 1972.<sup>1</sup> In the last decades, new sports facilities and other constructions for the need of the Games have exceeded the actual need of a city, with the consequence that many structures were abandoned after the Games. The latter in combination with the emerging global awareness of environmental issues led the IOC to include as selective criteria the long-term utility of the facilities. The new official aim is to focus more on sustainability. Simultaneously, the preference for hosting cities shifted from wealthier countries to metropolises with existing sports infrastructures.

However, the question remains upon the future of the numerous existing structures on different sites. Some of these structures have been abandoned for several years, while some others are often used for other purposes. Especially the images of the numerous deserted Olympic areas in Athens are often used as a negative example of the Games' long-term consequences. Recently, after a long period of the states' inertia and the paralysation due to the financial crisis, the state has now turned to selling important infrastructures to foreign private investors, including some of the Olympic structures. What does this mean for the Olympic heritage in terms of preservation? How does this possibly affect the perception of the structures as Olympic heritage?

### A symbolically charged venue: Athens and its relation to the Modern Olympic Games

Greece has a strong connection to the Olympic Games as they originated here in antiquity. Athens hosted the first Olympiad in modern times thanks to Pierre de Coubertin in 1896. When the application of Athens for 2004 was finally successful, Greece was no exception in that line of high investments and even higher expectations. Consequently, construction sites emerged all over Athens. Overall, out of the 32 sports complexes used for the Games 18 were newly constructed, twelve were refurbished existing facilities and two were temporary. Additionally, seven complexes were constructed to host athletes and the media coverage. The image and functionality of the city changed within a few

years thanks to two additional metro lines, a new airport, a tramway and several highways. The constructions finished on time for the highly anticipated event. With the economy slowly growing and the country receiving a lot of publicity, many Greeks felt they were at the beginning of a new prosperous era.

After the Games, economic growth was slow and even reversed when the 2008 financial crisis hit the country particularly hard, exposing the poor condition of the economy and State finances. Over these years, the memory of the euphoric atmosphere of the Olympic Games was overshadowed by the reports on the high costs of the now abandoned sports sites. Most of the structures were rarely used or were completely abandoned. Although 95 % of the structures were permanent, there was no overall strategy for their use after the Games.

In the years that followed, a big number of public and private companies were created in order to manage the Olympic structures. The numerous changes and fusions reflect the “incapability of the government to productively utilise the extensive infrastructure of the Olympic Games”.



*Fig. 1 “Hellas weightlifting the Olympic Games 2004” (2019) on the basis of the painting “Grateful Hellas” (1858) by Theodoros Vryzakis. Source: Korinna Weber*

## The future of the Olympic heritage and the role of the private sector

In 2017 it was announced that the former airport Hellenikon with several Olympic complexes would be leased to a consortium of Arabic and Chinese investors, in order to create a luxury multi-purpose hub ("Hellenikon Project"). A similar future is foreseen for the OAKA complex, comprised of the Olympic stadium and other sports facilities, designed by star-architect Santiago Calatrava. In 2018, the "Athens Alive" project was presented to the public by a private investor, claiming to transform it into a "walkable sports and entertainment district" while "the legacy will be respected alongside a renewed model that focuses on a healthy, energetic, modern lifestyle".

The International Broadcast Center (IBC) was transformed into the shopping mall "Golden Hall" in 2008 and lately there are some thoughts of creating a museum about the history of the Olympic Games within the mall.

In 2013 the Olympic Weightlifting Hall was handed over to the public University of Piraeus for use as an academic lecture and conference centre.

A tendency for the future use of the Olympic structures is emerging as the complexes are leased or sold to private foreign investors. Most of the projects foresee a notable change of use, far from the Olympic legacy, mainly orientated towards an affluent consumer. The private sector is slowly starting to play the role of the state, the latter having failed to manage the Olympic heritage on the long-term and to maintain it properly even with alternative use. Although it seems that private investors will use the Olympic background as part of their marketing, the strategy of preserving the legacy becomes more of an economic rather than also a cultural question.



*Fig. 2 The IBC transformed into the "Golden Hall" shopping mall, 2012. Source: greece.com*

## Conclusion

Modern Olympic Games are seen as a big sporting event but also as an opportunity of a worldwide exposure of the hosting city that attracts thousands of visitors. For that purpose, many structures are constructed. But what happens to all these structures after the Games? Experience shows that many of them are abandoned due to bureaucracy, state inertia, and high maintenance cost. Until recently there has not been an organised plan of post-game use of these structures. It is very important that the hosting country in collaboration with IOC develop a strategic plan of post-game use of the Olympic heritage that will respond to the needs of the city and the local community. The example of Athens 2004 demonstrates clearly such a necessity. The question remains, what is worth saving as a testimony of the modern Olympic Games and what is or should be the role of the state and private initiatives to the management of the heritage of the Olympic Games?