

SPECTACULAR BEIJING: THE CONSPICUOUS CONSTRUCTION OF AN OLYMPIC METROPOLIS

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ABSTRACT: *This article presents a critical review of Beijing's Olympic redevelopment, and of the social, economic, and political impacts of hosting mega events as a means of urban image construction. Through an analysis of Olympic projects, city marketing initiatives, and their impact on the city's material and cultural landscape, this article postulates that Beijing's spatial restructuring and image construction program played an important role in exacerbating the profound inequalities that have come to epitomize China's transition to capitalism within an autocratic political system. Acting as a developmental engine legitimating large-scale urban transformations, the Olympics have helped concentrate economic and political power in the hands of a coalition of government leaders and private investors and allowed their interests to dominate the planning agenda. Beijing's spectacular Olympic preparations have in many ways acted as a propaganda tool and an instrument of pacification to divert popular attention from the shortcomings of China's rapid economic transformation, accompanied by rampant land speculation, corruption, and uneven development.*

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a new mode of entrepreneurial urban governance where cities, no longer strictly concerned with the regulation of urban growth, now focus on the creative deployment of resources to attract private investment and stimulate the local economy. According to David Harvey, this new entrepreneurialism is characterized by the central role of public-private partnerships, the speculative nature of the projects undertaken, and a shift away from concerns of collective consumption to the political economy of place (Harvey, 2001).

Urban entrepreneurialism is therefore largely based upon the manipulation of the urban landscape, harnessed as a cultural resource that can be capitalized upon and repackaged for new rounds of capital accumulation and consumption. In this context, urban imaging strategies have become key generators of symbolic capital, helping cities market and advertise themselves as they enter the global competition for visitors and capital. Urban imagineers and city marketers have thus learned to refashion the urban landscape for visual consumption, capitalizing upon spectacular architectural images and alluring urban iconography in the hope of producing real economic value (Hall, 1998; Zukin, 1995).

French intellectuals had anticipated, in the 1960s, how the image, the spectacle, and their consumption would dominate late 20th century society (Debord, 1967, 1988; Baudrillard, 1970). While everyday urban experience has been commodified, the city itself has been transformed into

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a space of performance, centered upon commodity display and symbolic consumption. Today, the spectacle has become essential to the survival of postindustrial cities, which, having been converted from centers of production into centers of consumption, must now reinvent themselves as entertainment destinations and urban spectacles (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Kearns & Philo, 1993).

The spectacle is so central to the new urban economy that one of the most effective ways for cities to enhance their world image is by staging global events, including world exhibitions, international conferences, or sports competitions like the World Cup or the Olympics, which both represent the ultimate prize in locational competition. Hosting high-profile events not only boosts global visibility by promoting the image of the city as a vital and dynamic place, but it also acts, locally, as a catalyst for development and a way to legitimize large-scale transformations, giving local governments the license to reprioritize the urban agenda without the public scrutiny they normally receive. It also enables existing plans to be “fast-tracked” through the planning and development stages while making it easier to rally investors to help finance those projects (Baade, 1996; Essex & Chalkey, 1998; Chalkey & Essex, 1999; Burbank, 2001).

China has been fast at catching up with the ideology of the spectacle that has come to dominate global society. Since winning the bid to host the 2008 Olympics, Beijing began reinventing both its physical landscape and international image to legitimate its claims to global city status. As a symbol of China’s emergence as a world leader, Beijing promised the best Olympics ever. But as the ambitious plan was carried out, it also became clear that the 2008 Games would be the most lavish ever staged, with investments of almost US\$40 billion: three times what Athens spent, and more than all the Summer Games since 1984 combined.

This paper presents a critical analysis of Beijing’s approach to urban image construction from a political economic perspective, using the ambitious Olympic model as a privileged moment to examine the social, economic, and political impacts of this urban policy. Guy Debord (1967, 1988) had warned of the depoliticizing potential of the spectacle and of its capacity to obscure the nature and effect of capitalism’s power and deprivations. In many ways, Beijing’s spectacular Olympic projects have acted as a smoke screen to hide the shortcomings of China’s breakneck marketization, accompanied by rampant land speculation, corruption, uneven development, and rising social inequities. This paper suggests that Beijing’s spectacular Olympic makeover epitomizes the rise of a new China, where the monotonous equality of socialism has been replaced by the spectacular inequalities of capitalism.

THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

Beijing’s Olympics-driven metamorphosis came in the midst of an extraordinary building boom that is transforming China’s landscape at a velocity perhaps unequalled in human history.¹ Although larger in scale, this spectacular urban revolution recalls earlier bursts of intensive construction that periodically transformed Beijing’s landscape throughout the 20th century in response to major shifts in ideology. In the late 1950s, for example, Mao commissioned a series of Soviet-inspired monuments to mark the rise of a new socialist nation, while in the late 1980s, Mayor Chen Xitong tried to reassert the capital’s distinctive Chinese character by imposing a neo-traditional design code (Broudehoux, 2001; Wu, 2006). The new round of conspicuous construction initiated by President Jiang Zemin in sight of the Olympics underscores China’s public emergence as an authoritarian nation fully committed to capitalism.

In its attempt to modernize its image and to leave a mark in Olympic history, Beijing has followed other aspiring world cities in exploiting the emblematic power of architecture as cultural capital.² Long used as a mark of distinction, helping cities capture the semiotic advantage over rival destinations, iconic architecture now plays a major role in the new political economy of signs. As tradable symbols of value, designer buildings have become essential tools of city

marketing. Motivated by what could be called the Bilbao effect,³ cities around the world have embarked on a competition for global preeminence by building the tallest, most daring, and most technologically advanced buildings. Displaying self-conscious innovation and ostentation, this spectacular architecture is now valued not only for its advertising power and ability to brand the urban skyline; it is also increasingly seen as a motor of economic development (Julier, 2005).

The staging of the Olympics itself, of course, is the primary competition, as each new host attempts to create monuments and spectacles more dazzling than those of its predecessor. While other cities have monumentalized the Olympics, Beijing's mega-projects are unprecedented, and reflect China's ambition to reclaim its position as a world leader. By inviting the world's leading architects to build spectacular Olympic venues, Beijing hoped to transform its outdated image as an ancient capital, frozen in tradition and red tape, turning itself into a forward-looking world metropolis. By pursuing symbols of progress, efficiency, and economic success in redesigning its capital city, China emphatically signaled that it no longer wished to "catch up" with the modern world, but that it had arrived on the world stage and now strived to get ahead. After winning the bid, Beijing thus commissioned a series of iconic Olympic projects, whose common denominators are of megalomaniac proportions, cutting-edge design bearing the signature of global celebrities, and a spectacular price tag.

The first *grand projet* with the Olympics deadline in mind was the National Theater (see Table 1). Conceived by President Jiang Zemin as a monument to his leadership, it was recently completed in spite of popular protest against its futuristic design, its foreign architect, its proximity to the nation's symbolic heart at Tiananmen, and its price tag, evaluated at ten times the state's yearly spending on poverty alleviation.⁴ Undeterred by the controversy, Beijing announced a new series of competitions for the design of the main Olympics venues. The result was more than a dozen superlative architectural objects, displaying some of the most spectacular design features ever seen, and blessed with a plethora of record-breaking architectural statistics. This global-scale architecture, meant to be seen from a helicopter, and experienced on large television screens, is symptomatic of the media-based economy of the new entrepreneurial city, and is entirely at the service of the spectacle.⁵

Among these Olympics venues, the National Stadium—dubbed the "bird's nest" by locals—is a huge basket-like structure made of 50,000 tons of intertwined steel pillars. The National Swim center, or Watercube, was designed as a giant box coated with a transparent teflon membrane mimicking water bubbles, upon which light and images can be projected. The Beijing Wukesong Cultural and Sport Center, a basketball stadium that doubles as a hotel and a shopping mall, boasts ten-story high LED-screen facades, used for the live broadcast of events taking place inside the stadium or elsewhere in the city, as well as for advertising.

TABLE 1

A Summary of Key Olympic Projects

Project	Architectural firm	Estimated cost
National Theater	Paul Andreu (France)	US\$350,000,000
National Stadium	Herzog & De Meuron (Switzerland)	US\$400,000,000
National Swim Center	PTW (Australia)	US\$100,000,000
Wukesong Center	Burkhardt & partners (Switzerland)	US\$543,000,000
Capital Airport	Norman Foster (UK)	US\$1,900,000,000
CCTV	OMA and Rem Koolhaas (Netherlands)	US\$600,000,000

Other Olympics-related projects include the International Airport's third terminal. Shaped as a kilometer-long dragon, it will be the largest building in the world, doubling the present capacity of the capital airport. An army of 35,000 construction workers has been working around the clock to ensure that it is ready for the opening of the Games. A last and highly controversial Olympics project is the new headquarters of CCTV, China's Central television network, a gravity-defying trapezoidal loop housing the party's main propaganda machine, which promises to be one of the world's most technically complex buildings. Apart from these projects and other venues built and upgraded for the Games, the city has also budgeted US\$7 billion to build new expressways, expand light rail and subway tracks, and improve urban streets and parks.

By turning a conservative socialist capital into a museum of architectural avant garde, these spectacular projects have succeeded in changing Beijing's world image as a conservative, old-fashioned capital and in keeping the city in the international spotlight. Some projects even appeared to be primarily driven by a publicity imperative. In 2003, Beijing attracted world attention by commissioning a proposal for remodeling its north-south axis to Albert Speer Junior, the son and namesake of Hitler's infamous architect. Speer vigorously lobbied city leaders to take up his plan for a monumental 15-mile-long axis, with the Olympic stadium and a new railway station at both extremities (Sudjic, 2005a). As can be expected, the project, whose scale eclipsed some of his father's work, caused quite a commotion worldwide, especially in Germany, where it awakened many ghosts from the past.⁶

Beijing's daring Olympics projects embody China's ambition to demonstrate its new capability, and the sophistication and willpower of its political leaders. Paradoxically, this intense movement of creative destruction may prove counterproductive as a long-term city marketing strategy. The novelty brought by brand-name architecture could be short-lived, as its serial reproduction, quickly imitated elsewhere, may rapidly erase any monopoly advantage. Furthermore, as the functionality and durability of image-conscious architecture becomes an accessory to its advertising potential, such architectural spectacles may be doomed to a rapid material and symbolic obsolescence. This monumental approach to urban image construction is also environmentally unsustainable, as China's construction boom already consumes one half of the world's annual production of concrete and one third of its steel output, pushing up world prices to the point that long closed iron ore mines throughout the world are now being reopened (Sudjic, 2005b).

THE PRICE OF OLYMPIC FAME

One cannot help but wonder how the Chinese government could afford such a lavish Olympic Potlatch, in a country where the national per capita annual income just barely reached the US\$1,000 mark.⁷ The bulk of Beijing's Olympics funds will come from the sale of sponsorship and broadcasting rights for the Games. Since the Olympics represent a unique opportunity for companies around the world to gain visibility, especially with the exploding Chinese market, the competition for official partnership is fierce, and Beijing's Olympic income is projected to be the largest in history.⁸

Even with such revenues, the state still had to rely on the private sector to build several projects, mostly through a build-operate-transfer system, where private investors responsible for overseeing construction become operators for a 30-year contract period.⁹ Despite being largely funded by the public sector, many Olympic facilities will thus be privatized and commercialized after the Games, turned into new leisure and consumption space for foreign visitors and local elites. Most projects have therefore been built with their post-Olympic functions in mind. The National Swim Center, for example, was designed as an entertainment palace, complete with wave pool, artificial beach, fitness club, skating rink, cinema, restaurants and shops. Other venues will be turned into professional sports stadiums and private health clubs.¹⁰ Few Beijingers, however, are aware that many of the Olympic facilities which are being built on the ashes of their old neighborhoods will

not be accessible to the general public, but will be turned into luxury resorts for China's new rich. The preparations for the Olympics will thus have contributed to the creation of new space of exclusion in the Beijing landscape, using public money to finance the construction of private reserves for the wealthy.

Moreover, the use of public-private partnerships does not guarantee the financial success of these investments. Although the construction of mega projects may represent a way to absorb surpluses of capital and labor and ensure stability in the face of rising discontent linked to major layoffs from state-owned enterprises, they often remain deficit-financed and entail high risks for the state if the investments do not return their value in due course, which could lead to a major fiscal crisis (Harvey, 2005).

The social impacts of hosting the Olympics are even worse when opportunity costs are considered. Local governments often forgo other opportunities when they choose to build sports infrastructures or subsidize mega events. But these investments do not always provide the greatest return in terms of increased economic activity, jobs, and other key economic indicators. By investing scarce resources in Olympic projects, governments often have to cut vital services, and subordinate welfare goals to the dictates of place competitiveness and the imperative of growth (Baade, 1994; de Lange, 1998; Owen, 2005). These projects not only represent a diversion of public resources away from investments and services that carry real social benefits, they often result in subsidies to the private sector. Evidence is showing that the main economic benefits of mega sporting events fall in the hands the global broadcasting industry, of local business owners, and real estate speculators who benefit from raised property values near newly revitalized areas. The costs of the Olympics, both social and financial, are generally borne by those at the bottom of the economic ladder who endure tax increases, inflation, soaring rents, and an enormous debt that undermines future welfare investments (Whitson & Macintosh, 1996; Burbank, 2001; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2004). Hosting mega events therefore raises important issues of social, spatial, and fiscal equity.

There is, so far, limited empirical evidence of significant positive economic impacts from hosting Olympic Games that could translate into tangible economic activity such as increases in per capita income and total employment.¹¹ The overly optimistic forecasts found in economic impact studies commissioned by city governments, which invariably project large cash inflows with long-term positive effects in the form of profits, jobs, and physical regeneration, generally serve as public relations tools to rationalize the pursuit of dubious urban policies. Although it is on the basis of these feasibility studies that large public funds are committed, they are rarely subjected to review and examination. While economic impacts may be at best transitory, public debt can be very real and lasting. Indeed, one of the most risky features of urban entrepreneurialism is that municipal governments must absorb the losses of the private sector's speculative investments (Harvey, 2001).

Today, investing in the hosting of hallmark events remains a high-risk public policy, with important expenditures on custom-built venues that could leave an embarrassing white elephant on the cityscape or cost the leadership a certain amount of face. While investing in iconic architectural projects can arguably yield positive economic impacts in repositioning cities as cultural destinations, such as in the case of Bilbao or Mitterand's Parisian *grand projets*, it is rarely the case with sporting facilities. Purpose-built Olympic venues have historically been difficult to convert into community facilities, because of their sheer size and competition-specific design (Baade, 1994; Whitson & Macintosh, 1996). They are often ill suited as professional sport venues, and cannot attract Olympian audiences on a regular basis.¹² As the example of Montreal's Olympic stadium testifies, these venues can become long-term financial drains for host cities. In 2006, Montreal finished paying off its 1976 Olympic debt, which ran to US\$3 billion in capital and interests, 25 times its original budget, an average of 30 million dollars a year for 30 years. The extravagant Olympic stadium and mismanaged Olympic Games failed to return the expected rise in tourism

activity and resulted in an important fiscal deficit for the city of Montreal.¹³ After years of tax increases, budgetary austerity, and cuts in vital public services, Montrealers are now considering tearing down the empty stadium, at an estimated cost of US\$250 million.

Barcelona's Olympic transformation has been widely cited as a success story and a model of entrepreneurial urban planning, with the 1992 Olympics acting as a catalyst for major infrastructure improvement and waterfront redevelopment. But recent studies demonstrate that despite Barcelona's reputation for successfully adapting to the new economy, the city did not experience the economic windfall or social benefits it had anticipated. Between 1985 and 1990, inflation in Barcelona increased dramatically, especially in the housing market, where prices rose by 235% (Marshall, 1996). After the Games, Barcelona's economy actually declined with the evaporation of the fictitious capital, leading to a rise in unemployment, and important cuts in the welfare system. Revitalization had a drastic effect on the poor, causing housing shortages, inflation, and displacement, while progressive social programs, such as public transportation and public housing, were neglected. For local critics, the main achievement of the Barcelona model has been to turn the city into one of the most gentrified European city centers (Marshall, 1996; McDonough, 1999; Monclus, 2003; Dodds, 2004).

Given the lack of evidence that investing in mega sporting events and large sports facilities can actually produce any substantial fiscal dividends, what makes cities adhere to this seemingly irrational economic logic and continue to pursue such projects? City governments are subjected to an incredible amount of pressure from local growth coalitions to keep up with rival cities. Even if it requires a substantial outlay of resources merely to compete, and despite mounting evidence that such investments are not always economically sound, most governments feel that they cannot afford to remain simple bystanders in the race and to stand the chance of losing out to national, regional, and global competition. In the case of rapidly developing economies such as China, the undertaking of major public works is also a means of social stabilization, as an outlet for absorbing surpluses of both labor and capital.

There are also important intangible benefits that make investing in mega events worthwhile for both civic leaders and urban growth coalitions. A substantial amount of symbolic capital can be acquired from supporting major events, a capital that can easily be converted into economic, political, and social power. City advocates and business elites use spectacular events and world-class architecture to emphasize their prominence in the city's symbolic economy. For politicians, these investments represent priceless assets for enhancing their political capital, acting as trophies for their economic development showcase and allowing them to reconfigure the landscape to suit their needs and ambitions.

This logic reveals the potency of the symbolic economy in contemporary society, a society marked by the centrality of the spectacle and the dominance of sign value over use value, where image and reputation often supersede economic rationality. The acquisition of symbolic capital through urban image construction has gained such ascendancy that many city leaders are now willing to sacrifice material logic for symbolic identity. But while many of the benefits of such investments may be intangible, losses in terms of reduced welfare programs and social dislocation are very tangible, although they are too often dismissed by development advocates as necessary collateral damage in the global race for symbolic preeminence.

THE COSTS OF BEIJING'S AMBITIONS

Part of what makes Beijing's Olympic construction truly extraordinary is that, despite its spectacular price tag, the construction cost of most Olympics projects was deceptively low, compared to what it would have been elsewhere.¹⁴ One of the conditions that made it possible for Beijing to splurge on extravagant Olympic projects is that most of the land on which they are built was

acquired at well below market value, thanks to the state's ability to confiscate land in the name of the public interest (Fang & Zhang, 2003). China's paradoxical status as a market economy led by an authoritarian state thus facilitated the demolition of entire city neighborhoods and mass eviction of residents for the Olympics. The Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Eviction estimates that by 2004, 300,000 citizens had been uprooted and saw their homes demolished to make way for Olympic facilities and infrastructure projects in Beijing (Wan, 2004). Residents were given a month's notice to leave and received compensation at a fraction of their property's value.

While many displaced residents accept their fate as a worthy sacrifice to allow for Beijing's glorious modernization, others resist evictions. But in the face of coercion, even violence, they often have no choice but to comply. Demolition companies hired by developers to clear the land prior to redevelopment routinely hire eviction squads to force "stubborn nails" or recalcitrant residents to leave. Some of their tactics include disconnecting utilities or deliberately damaging parts of a house so as to render it uninhabitable. Residents who resist are sometimes physically threatened and beaten by demolition squads. In some cases, night raids are conducted: residents are forcibly removed and their house is demolished with all their possessions inside (Lim, 2003, 2004). Such intimidation discourages residents from speaking to the media or complaining to authorities. Amnesty International's annual report for 2004 highlights the prevalence of such abuses, which it called "a human rights embarrassment for the Chinese authorities" (Macartney, 2005).

Every day groups of angry residents gather to petition the government over the demolition of their homes; and thousands have filed lawsuits against unfair evictions. But in China's current legal system, the interests of displaced residents are often subordinated to those of the rich and powerful. Lawsuits are rarely heard in court, and protesters are routinely intimidated into dropping charges through harassment, detaining, or police surveillance. In recent years, several lawyers protecting the rights of evicted residents have been arrested and charged with bogus allegations such as stealing state secrets (Markus, 2003; Verhovek, 2003).

The sense of dislocation and social upheaval from widespread demolitions and the psychological impact of living in constant fear of eviction is taking its toll on Beijingers, especially older residents (Lai & Lee, 2006). In addition to the psychological trauma of being ruthlessly uprooted from their homes, displaced Beijingers often suffer economic hardship, as they face increased cost of living due to their displacement away from schools, jobs, and services. Construction for the Olympics has also triggered a dramatic rise in property prices, making it less affordable for people to live near the city center. This loss of homes and communities is compounded by the distress at being powerless and disenfranchised. After fruitless attempts to save their homes or obtain fair compensation, some people have themselves turned to the spectacle in desperation, hoping to attract attention to their cause. In recent years, several individuals have committed suicide in the city's public spaces, often through spectacular self-immolation (Pocha, 2004).

Sadly, such brutal redevelopment tactics may bring dubious results in terms of urban image construction. By destroying Beijing's historical fabric and obliterating its unique cultural landscape, they effectively annihilate part of the city's competitive advantage and erase the particularities that had given Beijing its distinctive flavor. But for the state, the dispersal of neighborhood residents may serve a covert political agenda, as a way to facilitate social control and hinder the development of resistance movements, by breaking community networks, and the lowering of the organizational capacity of the masses.

STRANGERS IN THE CITY

A point of no return is reached when a reserve army waiting to be incorporated into the labour process becomes stigmatized as a permanently redundant mass, an excessive burden that cannot

be included now or in the future, in economy and society. This metamorphosis is [. . .] the real crisis of world capitalism (Breman, 2002, p. 13).

Another factor explaining how Beijing could afford building more than a dozen brand-name landmarks for the Olympics and allow the world's top architects to realize their dream projects was the exploitation of a vast, pliant, and disposable labor force. Construction costs in China are notoriously low thanks to China's army of migrant workers (an estimated 94 million) who enjoy few rights in the city and are easily exploited by greedy contractors. Paid an average of US\$4.87 a day, migrants work seven days a week under difficult conditions, camping out on the construction site, in makeshift barracks or on unfinished floors of construction projects. Denied full citizenship rights in the city, they have no claims to subsidized housing or education for their children (Yardley, 2004). It is not uncommon to hear of workers who are owed over a year's worth of back wages, or have been injured and received no compensation (Kahn and Yardley, 2004; Toy, 2006). China's construction boom has left a tangle of debts between developers, contractors, and subcontractors, which often results in workers not getting a paycheck. The Chinese government has evaluated unpaid migrant wages for 2003 alone at an extraordinary US\$12.1 billion.¹⁵

Beijing's Olympic boom has only made conditions worse for many workers, and violence against superiors, destruction of property, and mass protests by migrant workers are becoming increasingly common.¹⁶ Suicides by jumping off high-rise buildings have become such an occurrence among unpaid construction workers that a mandarin expression, "tiao lou xiu" (literally, *jumping off buildings to show*) was coined to name these desperate attempts to draw attention to their plight.

Beijing's Olympic transformations thus reveal with unusual clarity the paradoxes of China's spectacular economic miracle, based on a brutal regime of exploitation, exclusion and inequity. While Beijing's new prosperity and modern image depend largely upon their labor, migrants have been among the main casualties of China's fast-paced modernization. Olympic image construction efforts in Beijing were not limited to physical beautification but also included a series of social programs aiming at reforming its residents. Hosting mega events often pressures host cities to reinvent their image and transform their human environment through social reform and disciplining programs. As local governments seek to eliminate visible traces of poverty and decay while producing a tame and obedient citizenry to fit global expectations of civility, such tactics of social beautification may bring about a tightening of the social control apparatus and the imposition of new limits on civil liberties (Senn, 1999; Toohey, 2000).

In Beijing, these "civilizing" programs encourage locals to conform to the image of China as a friendly, enduring civilization embracing modernity, an image that is relentlessly constructed in Olympic slogans, logos, and other elements of Olympic branding.¹⁷ Focusing on hygiene, civility, and general attitude toward tourists, public interest messages in the press, on television, and on public billboards, teach proper use of public toilets, urge people to smile more, learn English, refrain from spitting, and to keep their shirt on in the summer.¹⁸

Expectedly, the main target of this civilization campaign is Beijing's mass of migrant workers, discursively depicted as a major threat to the image of civilized modernity conceived for the games. Their crude manners and unhygienic habits, often the result of their own destitution and exploitation, is seen as a proof of their need for reform. The ideological construction of the migrant as uncivilized, dangerous, and pathological has helped naturalize their exploitation and devalue their labor, thereby justifying their further abuse and legitimating their exclusion from full citizenship rights (Anagnost, 2004).

Excluded from representation as valued members of Chinese society in Olympic propaganda and marketing brochures, these structurally irrelevant migrants will likely be barred from active participation in the Olympics celebrations, even as simple bystanders. In the recent past, at

the occasion of major events held in the national capital, they were forcibly sent back to their hometowns, or banned from the city center.¹⁹ Their criminalization in the official media has proven effective in creating a psychosis around their presence, which will, predictably, help justify their expulsion before the Games, in the name of “security.”

The national image of prosperity constructed for the Games was thus built on the back of the poor, who were doubly taxed, first by the diversion of public funds for monumental projects, and then by their direct exploitation as workers or evictees. Expectedly, those who are paying for the Games through self-sacrifice and shrunken welfare programs will not be the ones who reap the benefits. What the masses can expect from the Games are inflation, restricted civil rights, and socio-spatial segregation. In despair, those marginalized by Beijing’s Olympic transformations have turned to the spectacle as a way to attract attention to their ordeal—by holding public protests, jumping off buildings, or through self-immolation. But their dramatic displays of misery and grief look like pathetic sideshows in the face of the Olympic grandeur.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

The regime of exploitation that has facilitated Beijing’s Olympic building boom is symptomatic of the great social divide that characterizes 21st century Chinese society. Once egalitarian, China has over the last 20 years become one of the world’s most polarized societies.²⁰ While economic liberalization has proved highly efficient in generating wealth, the benefits of the reforms have not been shared equally, and economic growth has been accompanied by rising prices, and lower standards of living for the very poor. The income divide between the urban rich and the rural poor is now greater than before the 1949 revolution and social disparities are said to compare unfavorably with some of Africa’s poorest nations.²¹ Social polarization may prove to be one of the most explosive issues facing 21st century China.

All over China, public expressions of discontent are increasingly heard from the millions who have lost homes, jobs, healthcare, and pensions. Recent allegations of corruption among Beijing Olympics officials over the misappropriation of Olympic funds are also fuelling anger. According to government reports, 3.76 million Chinese in 2004 were involved in 74,000 “mass incidents,” or an average of 203 a day, a ten-fold increase over a decade earlier (Cody, 2005; French, 2005). While tensions over the widening income gap, falling social services, and self-serving alliances between Party leaders and businessmen have increased, land-related disputes remain the chief engine of social disturbances in contemporary China (Marquand, 2004; Magnier, 2005; Pocha, 2005).

As the transformations for Beijing’s Olympics exacerbate social inequities, Chinese authorities are visibly worried about the potential consequences of unruly development for national stability. Throughout China, disputes over land confiscations and home evictions have led to violent clashes, which occasionally escalate into local insurrections.²² The Chinese Construction Ministry recently admitted having received three times as many complaints in the first quarter of 2004 as in the same period the previous year: by the end of June, 4,000 groups and more than 18,600 individuals throughout China had lodged petitions over allegedly illicit land transfers (Cody, 2004; Kurtenbach, 2005).

The centrality of land equity issues in recent social disturbances is hardly accidental. Land redistribution was one of the core tenets of the Communist Revolution. Growing awareness that much new wealth and corruption arise from real estate development and speculation, often at the direct expense of the poor, has sparked demands for a modicum of distributive justice.²³ Anger stems not just from the loss of residence and livelihood, but also from the violation of a fundamental citizenship right. The Communist Party that once fought alongside the workers against capitalist exploitation is now supporting the capitalists in their struggle against the workers.

And property that was once seized from rich landlords and redistributed to the poor is now being taken from the poor and passed on to developers and enterprising local governments. For many Chinese citizens, these transactions represent a breach in a social contract that has linked China's masses and the Communist Party since 1949. The growing perception that the state may no longer be able or willing to live up to its moral responsibility to support poor families and workers has begun eroding the popular allegiance that the Party still retained among the underprivileged.

CONTAINING CHAOS

Acutely aware of the explosive potential of the situation, the Chinese state fears that growing social unrest could undermine economic development, threaten national stability and, ultimately, weaken the Party's grip on power. A November 2004 editorial published by China's official news agency tacitly suggests that the nation is at a social "crossroads" that could lead to a "golden age of development," or a "contradictions-stricken age of chaos" (Marquand, 2004). Such surprisingly candid admissions testify to the important changes that took place in China's leadership in September 2004, as Hu Jintao gained full power following Jiang Zemin's resignation as head of the Chinese military.

Presented as populist, pragmatic, and transparent, Hu's government immediately initiated a series of measures to address mounting tensions and appease social discontent. The state publicly vowed to slow land confiscations, reduce demolitions, and ordered a freeze on the conversion of agricultural land to industrial use.²⁴ Similarly, to muffle public criticism of the state's Olympic program and address popular anxieties about the use of public funds to build vanity projects in the nation's capital, Hu's government called for a complete reassessment of the preparations for the Olympics, soon after it was revealed that Athens had exceeded its Olympic budget by 30%. Several venues were scaled down and their construction deadlines were pushed back a year.²⁵ While cuts in the expenditures for the Olympics were notable, especially in terms of steel consumption, these highly publicized initiatives appeared to be motivated more by a desire to dissipate anger and alleviate resentment than by a true commitment to financial austerity. In many cases, changes were superficial and did not dramatically affect the projects. Construction on all eleven new Olympic venues soon resumed.

Cost-cutting measures were accompanied by a change in the Olympic rhetoric as authorities began to talk about a "frugal and prudent" games, and sought to revive popular enthusiasm for the Olympics by recasting the event as "the people's games" (Chen, 2004; Fang, 2004; Hawthorne, 2004; Li, 2004; Watts, 2004). In its attempt to divert attention away from the nation's most pressing problems, the Hu government would increasingly brandish the Olympics as a propaganda tool to promote national cohesion and rally an increasingly divided people around a common cause.²⁶ By presenting the games as a grand patriotic endeavor, celebrating China's national pride and rightful claims to world power status, the state sought to deter public disturbances.

However, simple diversion tactics and symbolic pacification may prove insufficient to control public opinion. Ongoing repression against outspoken journalists, cyber dissidents, critical writers, liberal intellectuals, labor activists, and socially engaged lawyers, have instilled a climate of fear throughout China, which seeks to intimidate potential protesters and encourage self-policing.

In the summer of 2006, Beijing's Olympic preparations were shaken by a series of high-level corruption allegations over the misappropriation of Olympic funds. In June, Beijing vice mayor, Liu Zhihua, was removed from his post and accused of corruption and "degenerate living," charges for which he now faces the death penalty. Liu allegedly solicited more than US\$1 million in bribes while overseeing construction for the 2008 Olympics and acting as the final authority for citywide demolitions (Kahn, 2006; Magnier, 2006; O'Neil, 2006; Spencer, 2006). A few weeks after his arrest, the chief director of the Beijing 2008 Project Construction Headquarters Office,

the government-affiliated agency that supervises the Beijing Olympics venue construction, also left office amid corruption charges. The chairman of the city's largest state-owned development company was also detained in connection with a speculative development project on the west side of the Olympics park.²⁷

While foreign media reports painted Liu's downfall as a major blow to the official promise that the 2008 Olympics would be the "cleanest in history," the Beijing Olympic Games Organising Committee (BOCOG) was quick to distance itself from the scandal, insisting that Liu played no direct role in the preparations for the Olympics. The official media was less vocal on the affair, placing emphasis on Liu's sexual misdemeanors in a clear attempt to distract attention from the more serious implications of gross corruption at the heart of the controversial development program.²⁸

As the Olympics grow near, the state is obviously wary that different interest groups may use the international media presence generated by the Games as a platform to voice their discontent and make their plight heard. Authorities know that violent demonstrations could pose a serious threat to the operation of the Games, as was the case in Mexico City in 1968, and in Seoul in 1988, when students took advantage of the Olympics to lead major protests shortly before the Games.²⁹ While an incident-free Olympics could cause a shift in world opinion in favor of China, any violence associated with the Games could attract negative media attention and compromise the state's costly image construction efforts.

The test may very well come before the Games. At the end of 2007, Beijing's Olympics-driven construction boom will come to a complete halt when all construction sites in the city are scheduled to close down to let the dust settle in time for the Games. While some of the tens of thousands of construction workers may move on to other cities, and a few may return to their hometown voluntarily, the prospect of thousands of idle laid off workers loafing about in the capital during the months leading to the Games is worrisome. Only time will tell if the state's use of its monopoly of violence to quell dissent can be averted.

CONCLUSION

The Olympic Games would have played an important role in reinventing postsocialist Beijing, both physically and politically. Acting as a developmental engine, which legitimated large-scale urban transformations, the Olympics have accelerated the profound inequalities that have come to epitomize China's transition to capitalism within an autocratic political system. Urban restructuring has helped concentrate economic and political power in the hands of a coalition of government leaders and private investors with close links to the Communist Party by allowing their interests to dominate the planning agenda and reshape the urban landscape. By concentrating capital in certain sectors of the city, while depriving others of investments, Olympic redevelopment exacerbated preexisting socio-spatial polarization, further disenfranchising Beijing's new poor while allowing its new rich to expand their control over the urban core. On the national level, Beijing's Olympic transformation has also resulted in the further concentration of capital, both domestic and international, in one of China's metropolitan centers, thereby confirming the state's new urban bias and sharpening the ever-growing urban-rural divide.

In many ways, Beijing's spectacular reconstruction served as an instrument of pacification to divert popular attention from social problems and contradictions and to dwarf opposition to large-scale redevelopment. Through their monumental projects and patriotic recuperation, Beijing's Olympics preparations acted as an intoxicating spectacle to pacify the population, weaken its resistance, and erode its capacity to react. The social dislocation and loss of community ties that have resulted from the displacement of the underprivileged and their dispersal in the far suburbs have dwarfed the organizational power of the masses. The urban spectacle presented by

the Games may thus have helped conceal a thinly veiled political agenda. Under the pretense of a global event promoting China's international prestige and strengthening Beijing's economy, the Olympics could help consolidate the state's monopoly over power, and concentrate economic assets in the hands of a few, while making it easier to rule over a tame, distracted, and unorganized population.

As the Olympics deadline approaches, a new, dazzling city emerges from behind the cranes and construction fences. For many, post-socialist Beijing is a paradise of opportunity, creativity, and lifestyle; a city of endless possibilities, offering the promise of a bright future. But for the more critical, this new delirious Beijing is a city of competing egos, of selfish opportunism, and of broken promises. It is a city without urbanity, where megalomaniacal architectural objects are built on the ashes of an organic urban fabric. This new metropolis mirrors the society that builds and inhabits it: an increasingly individualist society that willfully sacrifices a more cohesive one, based on solidarity, where a predatory elite of private entrepreneurs, technocrats, and Party members preys on a disenfranchised and vulnerable populace. While Beijing's official new image is presented as the realization of a dream to see China's pride be restored, for those who are excluded from this representation the dream has turned into a nightmare of betrayed hopes, injustice, and despair. Time will tell if resistance to the spectacle is possible and if the spectacular rise of this new metropolis will succeed in mystifying Chinese citizens or diverting public attention from the human tragedies that take place in its shadow.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Over the last few years, China's rate of urbanization has stood at nearly 15% a year, transforming Chinese cities through frantic real-estate development and property speculation, and making the country more dependent upon foreign sources of raw materials and energy. According to some estimates, one billion square feet of offices, shops and apartments will be added to the Beijing skyline by 2008—the equivalent of three Manhattans—totaling US\$160 billion worth of construction (Mellor & Cheng, 2006).
- 2 For more on the role played by architecture in the new political economy of signs, see Miles and Miles, 2004; Crilley, 1993; Evans, 2003.
- 3 In reference to the urban renaissance enjoyed by the Spanish city of Bilbao, where the construction of a spectacular new art museum design by star architect Frank O. Gehry in 1997 fostered the growth of a new business district around the city's derelict dock area and placed the city in the international spotlight, boosting its cultural tourism and turning a run-down industrial backwater into a universal symbol of architectural innovation.
- 4 For more on the National Theater, see Broudehoux, 2004, pp. 225–231.
- 5 Because the real profits from the Olympic Games come from global broadcasting rights, Olympic venues are now designed in collaboration with television networks, to facilitate broadcasting and create an appealing television image for worldwide audiences.
- 6 In fact, Speer Jr. has had a well-established architectural practice for several years in China, and worked on several public commissions before this event. The media attention given to his entry for the Beijing axis may

- have been blown out of proportion by the international press, constantly searching for sensational stories about China. See Hall, 2003; Bernstein, 2003; August, 2003.
- 7 According to Beijing's National Bureau of Statistics, the average GNP reached US\$1,090 in 2003. www.stats.gov.cn/english/contactus.htm.
 - 8 Companies will pay US\$62 million for the right to be an official partner of the 2008 Olympics. Coca Cola alone will reportedly give US\$1 billion to Beijing, double its usual sponsorship commitment (Godfrey, 2004).
 - 9 For example, the National Stadium is built by the CITIC group, a transnational conglomerate that raised 42% of construction funds, while the remaining 58% were funded by the municipal government, through the State-owned Assets Management Company. The two companies jointly established the National Stadium company responsible for the investment, design, construction, operation, and management aspects of the venue for the games, which will then own the rights to operate the stadium for the next 30 years.
 - 10 Other examples include the Beijing Countryside Horse Racetrack, which will be turned into a golf course. For its part, the Olympic village will be converted into a commercial residential area, with privatized facilities including entertainment center, a convention center, and an international school (Ong, 2004).
 - 11 Some contend that prospects are even worse for developing countries where opportunity costs of providing state-of-the-art facilities are much higher and lack of modern infrastructures require significant additional investments. See Baade and Dye, 2002; Home and Manzenreiter, 2004; Owen, 2005.
 - 12 In this respect the examples of Seoul, Sydney, and Athens after the Olympics and of Japan after the 2002 World Cup are eloquent.
 - 13 Over those 30 years, the stadium accumulated US\$170 million in annual operating losses. Having lost its professional baseball team because of an inappropriate design, the stadium sits empty most of the time, apart from the occasional dog or car show. Even rock concerts are now held in the new hockey stadium better suited for such events. See Morin, 1997; Levine, 2003.
 - 14 According to some estimates, construction costs are ten times cheaper in China when compared to most of the industrialized world, and up to fourteen times when compared to world cities such as New York and London (Lubow, 2006).
 - 15 Vice-Premier Zeng Peiyan revealed in September 2004 that a total of 360 billion yuan (US\$43 billion) in unpaid wages remains owed to migrant workers at thousands of projects invested by the government or real estate developers. Given the state's notoriously unreliable statistics, this estimate must be seen as a conservative figure (Fu, 2004; Magnier, 2004).
 - 16 In October 2005, a migrant worker, Wang Binyu, was executed after killing four people in a rampage over unpaid wages (Toy, 2006).
 - 17 The Olympic mascots, the "Five Friendlies," these cuddly creatures whose respective names form the phrase "Beijing welcomes you" exemplify China's attempt to soften its image as one of the world's last great dictatorships, by presenting itself as the "friendly superpower." The evolution of Beijing's Olympic slogan similarly invokes the changing priorities of the Beijing Olympic committee in marketing the Games. From the initial "New Beijing, Great Olympics," which hinted at the transformation that was to come, the slogan evolved into "Green Olympics, High-Tech Olympics" in the early years after the bid was won, revealing the self-conscious attempts to reform the city's outdated image. In June 2005, a new slogan, "One World, One Dream" was coined, which testifies to China's mounting global aspirations.
 - 18 For more on the civilizing process in Beijing, especially on the city's so-called toilet revolution, see Broudehoux (2004, pp. 174–188). For a similar argument on the 1988 world exhibition, see also Bennett (1991, pp. 33–51).
 - 19 For example, on the Asian Games, see Broudehoux (2004, pp. 152–155).
 - 20 In fact, socialism never entirely eradicated social inequality, as society was organized according to a regime of uneven citizenship between rural and urban residents (Anagnost, 2004).

- 21 In June 2005, the Chinese leadership announced that poverty levels in China had risen for the first time since 1978, and that the richest 10% of the population now controlled 45% of the country's wealth while the poorest 10th held little more than 1%. Xinhua News Agency, in Goodman (2005). On rising inequalities, see also Wang (2003).
- 22 Farmers whose land is confiscated for urban expansion and residential development increasingly take their complaints to the street. For example, on August 20, 2004, hundreds of disgruntled farmers lined up bicycles and rickshaws to block traffic in a Beijing suburb, to protest land seizure on the city's outskirts. Similarly, in December 2005, Chinese police killed 20 protesters near Hong Kong who were demanding adequate compensation for land taken to build a power plant. Cody, 2004; Sam Crane, "In China, it's powerlessness to the people," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 18, 2005.
- 23 Nearly half of *Forbes Magazine's* list of the 100 richest individuals in China in 2004 were real estate developers (Pei, 2006). And a recent study of China's 20,000 richest people found that only 5% had made it on their own merit, and that more than 90% had connections to senior government or Party officials (Goodman, 2005; Pocha, 2005).
- 24 The Chinese parliament also announced its plan to abolish the country's long-standing agricultural taxes, putting an end to a levy that had burdened China's farmers for 2,600 years. The party's Central Committee also disciplined several officials involved in illegal land deals and expelled the former Land and Resources minister for taking more than US\$600,000 in bribes (Cody, 2004; Kurtenbach, 2005).
- 25 For example, the designers of the National Stadium were asked to reduce the amount of steel used in the project and to omit the planned retractable roof. But the project remained essentially unchanged.
- 26 The state would continue to play the nationalist card, in its attempt to convert pent up frustrations into patriotic fervor by redirecting popular resentment toward peripheral issues. In April 2005, Chinese authorities endorsed a series of anti-Japanese public demonstrations throughout China, allowing people to voice their anger after the publication of a Japanese history textbook that played down Japan's wartime atrocities. The 10,000 strong rally that took place on the streets of Beijing was the largest protest since 1999, when a series of similarly state-sanctioned demonstrations against the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade were held. But as the anti-Japanese protests began to gain momentum over a period of several days, the state discovered the important risks carried by such diversion tactics, and realized that public discontent, once unleashed, can be difficult to contain.
- 27 Partly owned by the Beijing city government and partly listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, Capital Land is the mainland's sixth-largest real estate company.
- 28 These include the case of Wang Shouye, a senior military official charged with accepting millions of U.S. dollars in bribes from contractors.
- 29 Weeks before the Mexico City Summer Games of 1968, thousands of students demonstrated to protest the wasting of public funds on Olympic preparations rather than on social welfare. The Mexican government, fearing that the Games would be cancelled, replied with a violent repression that killed hundreds and is now known as the Tlatelolco Massacre. The Games proceeded with little protest from the international community. Hoberman, John M., *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics and the Moral Order*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. In Seoul, Korean students and opposition groups deftly used the international media focus generated by the Olympic Games to further the fragile transition from a military dictatorship to a pluralist democracy. In June 1987, a massive popular mobilization erupted all over South Korea. In the face of this political crisis, the international community threatened to move the Olympics to a new location if a quick resolution was not found. Under such international pressure, the South Korean government finally conceded to the demonstrators' demands, and put forward a package of important democratic reforms, which ultimately forced General Chun to step down. As a result, the first democratic presidential elections in 16 years were held in December 1987. See Larson and Park (1993); de Lange (1998).

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