

THE 1992 BARCELONA OLYMPIC GAMES: THE PERFECT OPPORTUNITY FOR URBAN TRANSFORMATION



Josep M. Coll

Associate Senior Researcher, CIDOB

Thirteen gold, seven silver and two bronze medals were won by Spain at Barcelona '92, placing it sixth in the medal table – far and away the best performance in its Olympic Games history. Those were the games of the legendary “Dream Team” – the greatest basketball team ever assembled – of the jumping and sprinting great, Carl Lewis, the virtuoso gymnast, Vitaly Scherbo, and the giant swimmer, Alexander Popov. The last two competed under the flag of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which represented the former states of the old Soviet Union.

“The best Olympic Games in history”, as they were called by the president of the International Olympic Committee. And without doubt, they were a sporting and organisational success. But not only that. With the passing of time the sporting results have faded into the background, becoming an anecdote to go with the strategic plan that had a very clear objective when organising this mega-event: the urban transformation of the city.

Barcelona was chosen as the host of the XXVth Olympics in 1986, the same year that Spain, in the full flow of democratic development, joined the European Union. The games represented, on the one hand, an excellent opportunity for international opening up and, on the other, the urban transformation of a city that was eminently grey and industrial, despite its place on the warm, luminous Mediterranean.

The urban planning was structured into the completion of 12 projects scattered across the city: four were directly related to the Olympic infrastructure and led to a clear improvement of four of the city's neighbourhoods. The other projects were linked to the amelioration of transport, the opening up to the sea and the access to housing and services and involved the ring-roads, the Illa Diagonal shopping centre, the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA), the Glòries square, Port Vell and Maremàgnum.

This ambitious plan was implemented thanks to two key factors: the rising income of the Organizing Committee of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic

Games – COOB'92 – (\$1.678 billion) and the attraction of Olympic investment (\$8 billion). This investment was put into in road and transport infrastructure, housing, telecommunications, services, hotel facilities and environmental infrastructure. 61% of the investment went on civil engineering, which shows how essential it is to understanding the capacity to regenerate the city. Only 9.1% of the total investment was allocated to funding sports facilities.

The great capacity to attract investment was a success of the public-private management model that materialised with the mixed company, HOLSA, a consortium created by the Barcelona City Hall and the Spanish government. The Olympic works also attracted the interest of private investors, who provided 36.8% of the investment (a third of which came from foreign capital). The private initiative was directed to hotel investment, housing and business centres. The COOB'92 supported its commercial strategy by generating high expectations of the greater attractiveness of the city in prospect.

The excellent organisation and the large investment capacity over six years (1986-1992) had a remarkable social and economic impact on the city and its metropolitan area. The first effects were the fall in unemployment and the revival of the housing market through the construction boom. The general unemployment rate in Barcelona fell from 18.4% in 1986 to 9.4% in 1992 (while in Spain the reduction was less significant, falling from 20.9% to 15.5%).

The tourism boom that followed the Olympics was spectacular. Barcelona Airport went from receiving 2.9 million passengers in 1991 to 21 million in 2002. The games were a turning point for revaluing and repositioning the Barcelona brand on the global stage. It went from being an industrial city to being perceived as an international, avant-garde city that was business friendly and focussed on services, talent attraction and the Mediterranean quality of life.

Construction and tourism capitalised on the first wave of impacts. Over the years, Barcelona has consolidated the deep process of urban renewal, feeding the profits from its respective investments out across society and the entrepreneurial fabric. In fact, the post-Olympic economic impact on the Catalan capital was estimated to be \$20bn, the largest until Beijing in 2008. But the legacy of Barcelona '92 lies less in the economics than the social returns. The improvements to city planning, housing, transport and mobility, cultural institutions, sporting facilities, sanitation and the seafront are the main credentials of the public capital invested. The growth of hotel capacity and quality, of venues and offices, housing, the marina and business parks have been the main beneficiaries of the investment sponsored by private initiative. The Olympic income resulted in better strategic positioning for Barcelona in the world, increased competitiveness and attractiveness, raised income, attracted talent, and brought about greater social cohesion and well-being.

Nevertheless, not all the investments had the same fortune and impact. Some sports facilities, such as the Montjuïc Olympic Stadium and the Horta velodrome have been underused; the great stimulus to the construction and real estate sector opened up the floodgates to urban

speculation; and the expectations of social housing construction were not fulfilled at all. So the process was not all good news.

The government managed to provide continuity to the games with projects developed afterwards such as the Fórum de las Culturas and Plan 22@, which served to regenerate Diagonal Mar and Poblenou, respectively, while stimulating entrepreneurial activity and the climate for doing business. The passage of time, a great ally, has made Barcelona an international reference point for the organisation, investment and impact of an Olympic Games on a city in the long term.

The games were the boost the city needed to enter the world elite alongside cities like New York, Paris and London. This last city took inspiration from the Barcelona model of urban transformation when organising the 2012 games. Sebastian Coe, chairman of the London 2012 organising committee, said that "sport changed Barcelona's image, through creating ... more green space, opening the city to the sea, building housing at reasonable prices, and transforming the city's economy".

Barcelona was able, with great skill and inclusive leadership, to harness the widespread enthusiasm of the civil society to create structures of public and private consensus between the local, regional and state governments that reinforced the games' slogan: "Friends Forever". The bricks and the sun did the rest. It was nice while it lasted.

