

When infrastructure meets sport

By [Joel Finlay](#)

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AMSTELVEEN, NETHERLANDS: The world is currently awash with many major infrastructure projects in various stages of development as national and state or provincial governments look to facilitate rapid economic growth or to rebuild the crumbling infrastructure of yesteryear. These projects rarely progress at any great pace and can often be bedevilled by political and financial concerns. However, if there is one thing that can act as a catalyst for breaking through a political impasse, it is the award of a major international multi-sport event.



In fact, it may be the single most reliable way of fast-tracking infrastructure improvements.

It seems undeniable that the award of a major international sporting project like the Olympic Games or FIFA World Cup virtually guarantees to speed up infrastructure decision-making processes, to circumvent political deadlock and to make things happen.

The magnitude of what these events require from their host country and city, together with the compressed, six year timescale for making this a reality are two of the most powerful tools available for kick-starting stalled infrastructure projects. This tells you as much about the power of the games as it does about how utterly becalmed some projects can become if this is what is required to get them moving again.

This is why some are so keen to host major events

It also goes some way to explaining why many countries (and cities) are so keen to host these events. Sure, there is the prestige and glamour of being the host but the way in which the projects can expedite infrastructure development is not lost on any savvy government. My fear here though would be that as these games projects grow ever more vast - with expectations of what will be delivered being ramped up every time as each organiser tries to out-perform their predecessor - there may yet come a tipping point at which even the accelerated delivery of shiny new infrastructure assets is not worth the enormous investment of time and money.

For the time being though, countries are still lining up to throw their hat in the ring, keen for the games-driven mandate to get things done. As an example of what can be achieved, they need look no further than Vancouver, host of the most recent Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. For years, Vancouver and its surrounding region had been unable to resolve the municipal politics which had stalled developments on the Canada Line underground network and the upgrading of the Sea-to-Sky Highway. Both projects were deemed essential for the transport of visitors to the Games and the award of those Games shattered the political and financial impasse which had held them back.

A note of caution

However, there is still a note of caution. Major sports events may guarantee progress on infrastructure projects - but they do not guarantee the sustainable, commercial success of such projects. In this regard, I believe that organisers of any significant event have to improve the integration between sporting and civic infrastructure. We often hear of white elephant sports stadia left behind after a major event - and this is often indicative of a failure to integrate sporting and civic needs. These events should bring about long-term infrastructure improvements, not just an architectural wonder which people marvel at for a month but which becomes a civic burden thereafter.

I don't think this integration issue is given enough attention. The two different types of infrastructure development are often undertaken by different groups, with different aims, objectives and accountabilities. Better integration of the two can go a long way to securing a sustainable financial future for many of these venues - as well as avoiding costly over-runs during the build process. For example, for a venue to remain sustainable it needs to be able to attract a home team or to be easily accessed by community-based users; something which is made far harder with insufficient transport links. If this sounds obvious, ask yourself how Vancouver nevertheless ended up with a magnificent indoor speed skating dome located over a mile from the nearest underground station.

What about *after* the event

Housing developers - the likes of whom build athletes' villages - are far more aware of the need to integrate with civic infrastructure. The same applies to the commercial sports community who have years of experience in making their stadia as accessible as possible. However, there are just as many non-commercial groups involved within major games projects who lack any real experience in delivering this kind of infrastructure asset.

With this in mind, it may be time to challenge the assertion that all event stadia need to be permanent developments. This is an unpopular view as it sits uneasily with the talk of leaving behind a legacy and being seen to wow the world with the quality of venues. However, dedicated venues for certain smaller niche sports simply cannot be financially sustainable in the long-term. They may help to raise the profile of the sport in the short-term, but very quickly these venues require financial support to supplement their own revenue streams.

It's not hard to find examples of such venues in previous games cities being propped up by government support under the banner of junior or Olympic development. The answer here could easily lie in temporary facilities - but this could also result in a loss of face from an admission that organisers couldn't provide something permanent and viable.

There's a flip side

While host countries may appreciate the stimulus which major events apply to their infrastructure programmes, the flip side to this is the massive media scrutiny which comes with it. Again, this may sound obvious but I do believe that it still comes as a shock to most organisers. The world is watching and the relevant games governing body is rarely slow to make public their displeasure if it feels progress is sluggish.

Alongside this and the inter-dependence of sporting and civic infrastructure, the third aspect which typically surprises organisers is the sheer complexity of the required financing. Experience of dealing with this is invaluable and since the 1996 Atlanta and the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, a whole industry has sprung up offering support and advice to event organisers around the world. This is unsurprising, seeing as a lack of experience in the planning process for any major sporting event can have severe ramifications further down the line.

It's fascinating to see the manner in which the award of a major international sporting event can cause political concerns to be put aside in favour of simply getting things done; a case of sport succeeding where politics could not. However, this

sporting 'über-catalyst' comes at a price as the sheer complexity and scale of what lies beyond that award can be difficult to comprehend.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joel Finlay is part of KPMG's Global Infrastructure Group and the views and opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of KPMG International cooperative or its member firms. All information provided is of a general nature and is not intended to address the circumstances of any particular individual or entity.

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