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## An Olympic-Size Debate: Cost vs. Legacy

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## An Olympic-Size Debate: Cost vs. Legacy

**By Dick Crepeau**  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, June 20, 2012

The Games of the XXXth Olympiad will begin in London on July 27, and they have been anticipated in England with a combination of excitement, media hype, public indifference, anxiety, and debate.

I had the good fortune of spending the last five months of 2011 in London, while teaching in the FSU London Program, where I was able to witness these various reactions firsthand.

The legacy of the London Games is a subject being discussed and debated in the media and by public officials. Members of the London Organizing Committee stress the event's "legacy" as a way of reassuring the public that the extravagant cost of staging the games is a wise investment for the people of England – and not a public burden, as has been the case in Greece and China.

The budget has reached 15 billion English pounds (about \$23.7 billion), a significant increase from the original projected budget of less than 6 billion pounds (about \$9.5 billion). In the past few months the budget for the opening and closing ceremonies was doubled, and at the insistence of the United States, the security budget was also doubled.

This is a tough sell given the fact that unemployment is at a 17-year high, and an austerity budget has been implemented by the English government with a call for sacrifice by the English people. Undaunted by the task, Prime Minister David Cameron and London Mayor Boris Johnson continue to trumpet the benefits of the games, preferring to discuss the finances in terms of "investment" rather than "cost overrun."

The promised legacy is multifaceted. First, is the opportunity to present the best of Britain to the massive global television audience as well as to visitors. Of more long-term significance is the makeover of East London. Abandoned lands and urban blight have been replaced by the Olympic Park and the Westfield Mall in Stratford.

New public transport for East London includes a massive hub through which nearly every visitor will pass. Affordable housing is another part of the legacy with a projected 11,000 new housing units. The Olympic Village, or at least part of its 3,000 units, is included in that number.

The removal of residents from some East London neighborhoods, the increase in rents, and rising costs of housing in the area, offer a different legacy. Promises that 30 percent of jobs and construction contracts would go to locals were quietly abandoned shortly after the games were awarded to London.

Growing concerns in Britain over obesity are being addressed as part of the Olympic legacy. It was anticipated that the excitement generated by the games could be translated into an increase in public fitness and exercise programs. Sport England, the organization charged with achieving this part of the legacy, projected involvement of more than a million people in their programs. At the end of 2011 they had achieved about 11 percent of their goal.

So will there be any positive legacy at all for the Games?

Certainly the Westfield Mall at Stratford will do plenty of business during the games. The hotel and restaurant proprietors will do well, not so much by an increase in business, as by an increase in prices. The Olympic Park itself will be a positive addition to the neighborhood, while the new sports venues could make a significant contribution to the Stratford area.

Whether the profits and the long-term legacy of these venues can be sustained is the great unknown.

Some cities have successfully used the Olympics to transform themselves. Barcelona is generally cited as one of the best in this regard, as blighted areas were transformed, the city was opened to the sea by the construction of the Olympic Village and port, and the infrastructure was modernized.

At the other end of the spectrum, Athens and Beijing now feature underused, locked and rusting Olympic venues, many of which are still being paid for.

The Olympic Stadium in Montreal with its massive cost overruns was not completed until 1987 – 11 years after the games – and it took 30 years to pay off the debt. The current collapse of the Greek economy is attributed at least in part to massive debt incurred for the 2004 Olympics.

So what will be the legacy of London 2012?

At this stage it is difficult to offer a definitive answer. What we do know is that NBC will offer American television viewers an upbeat portrait of the games and its legacy. London 2012 officials will be quoted in all available media about the wondrous things happening to London and England as a result of the games.

The sporting events will be exciting as elite athletes from around the globe compete for their glory and our entertainment. The personal stories of the athletes will be inspiring. The pageantry of the opening and closing ceremonies will be breathtaking.

We will all get swept up in the “Olympic Spirit.”

None of this is legacy. The determination of that will come later.

What history tells us, however, is the chance of a positive legacy is somewhat less than 50-50.

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