



Opinion

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Mega-Events as Spaces of Exception: Strategies and Manifestations of Planning by Exception



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Opinion

Within the last 150 years, there has been a global increase of “substantial, prolonged and spectacular celebrations of human achievements”[1]. These celebrations, often referred to as mega-events are large-scale cultural, political, religious or sporting events of mass media appeal and international significance[2], which vary in type, size, impact, and organization and are not only about sport or culture anymore, but also about politics [3,4] the capitalist economy[5,6]. They are typically temporary affairs yet have permanent and costly outcomes.

Over the past several decades, it has become clear that mega-events are also about the transformation of cities, as city leaders start to view events as opportunities to achieve their urban agenda goals[7-9]. They have turned into a valuable tool for multi-layered processes of urban transformation and regeneration[10,11]. Mega-events are frequently presented by governments as an extraordinary opportunity for their host cities and are often realized through the temporary suspension of judicial laws, or through an imposition of the exceptional regulations[12]. Urban projects, with tangible and intangible outcomes (such as new laws and infrastructure) which for decades have experienced problems with implementation, may be realized in this environment while other urban projects get delayed, reduced in scope, or abandoned[13,14]. These processes undermine democratic decision-making and have an impact beyond the temporary event time frame and location.

Giorgio Agamben's concept of the state of exception describes temporary abolition of the rule of law through the provisional abandonment of “the distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers”[15]. The state of exception is realized via the sovereign's exclusive right to decide upon the transcendence of the rule of law for the common public good. Throughout this

work, Agamben's concept of exceptionality is deployed as the main pillar to theorize the unfolding of the exceptional practices initiated in cities through and for mega-events. Through three case studies from Glasgow (Scotland), Baku (Azerbaijan), and Tbilisi (Georgia) my doctoral research, using a mixed qualitative methods approach, investigated the ways of deploying, using and justifying the legal practices of exception in relation to mega-events and their impacts on various groups and spaces in host cities. Distinct events were selected to further explore this phenomenon. The three mega-events for analysis are the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, the Formula 1 Championship (European Grand Prix 2016 race) in Baku, and the 2015 European Youth Summer Olympic Festival in Tbilisi.

The first case from Glasgow examines the role the official discourses of exceptionality behind mega-events and related large-scale infrastructure planning related to the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games. It demonstrated the catalyzing role of Glasgow becoming the event host and the final approval and implementation of the controversial and costly infrastructure project, the M74 motorway extension. The article identifies relationships between the infrastructure project and the official political discourse behind the vitality of this road infrastructure, as well as presents the sense of urgency generated by the event deadline and the possibility of failing to host the event successfully through the official political discourse created by the local and national political elite.

The second case study from Baku explores the ways in which the organization of the heavily commercialized mega-event of Formula 1 race on city's public roads was facilitated through the creation of temporary “spaces of exception” in the city. This case study examines the impact of imposing event-related exceptional

temporary practices and restrictions. In Baku, the abandonment of the rule of law by the sovereign described by Agamben can be observed, as transitory exceptional practices are enforced to stage the event with exorbitant costs. It demonstrates exceptional spaces that were primarily tailored towards the needs of the F1 and the Azerbaijani political and economic elite while disregarding the local population's needs.

The third case investigates the strategic coupling between planning and construction in the creation of an athlete's village for the European Youth Olympic Festival 2015, and the creation of a Special Economic Zone in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. This work argues that a set of exceptional decisions and zoning changes were put in place through governmental executive decree in order to mobilize investments for an essential part of the event infrastructure-the athlete's village-which, as a result, laid the foundation for the creation of an exceptional space of tax-exemptions in an extra-legal special economic zone.

Mega-events represent a tool for imposing exceptional practices where procedures designed for regular planning practices and everyday life are compromised in the name of implementing event-related large-scale urban development projects or the events themselves that might not otherwise be realized. This exceptional method of staging mega-events greatly affects the urban environments of host cities. The case studies briefly outlined above were illustrations of those and the main points are summarized below.

The infrastructural project that was challenged multiple times over the decades benefited from the success of Glasgow and that gained the hosting rights of the major sporting event that provided extra impetus, argument and source of potential mobilization for the final approval of the project. The M74 extension project did not benefit from any legal exception because of the Games while in contrast to the case in Glasgow, two other cases studied within the dissertation research incurred some form of legal exceptions due to the events hosted in each respective cities.

While the physically delimited space of exception in Baku was seldom legally defined but present, the organizers successfully managed to use cities public spaces as the event infrastructure justified by promising international promotion and socio-economic development. The case from Baku represents echoing pattern from the literature discussing the problems of exceptionality, democracy and participation related to the mega-event organization. A process that values corporate profit and effective delivery over more pressing needs of the city such as transport, health care or education as well as participatory planning and democracy. Considering the authoritarian political environment of Azerbaijan this problem is even more acute to point out as the opportunities to object such exceptions is almost non-existent and highly risky.

The 2015 European Youth Olympic Festival, a relatively unimportant event, led to the urban transformation of considerable part of Tbilisi, where additional larger development is still slated to continue. Beyond establishing a dangerous precedent for decision-making through an executive rule in a young democracy such as Georgia, the mixing of such events with economic zones relying on exceptional legal practices has the propensity to lead to increasingly enclavized forms of urban development. Without greater consideration of the risks of urban development through exceptions, there is a real risk for cities such as Tbilisi acquiring even more problematic secluded zones.

As the 2015 EYOF hosted by Tbilisi was relatively humble and controlled major event it raises even greater concerns for what it might mean for the city to deploy much more extravagant and larger-scale events in association with especially zones economic spaces. Global mega-events and neoliberal growth in the competitive free-market enclaves of SEZs around the world already threaten to dispossess and displace thousands of people removing their livelihoods and cultures while handing over their lands to large private corporations for economic growth. Such a scenario would again introduce Agamben's concerns for personal rights into conversations on legal and spatial exception, raising even greater questions surrounding the future of urban development. With a broader understanding of how exceptional zones and mega-events are manipulating the progress of growth of cities, it is hoped that these issues can be avoided.

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