Olympic Balance: What Vancouver-Whistler Can Learn from Beijing
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Summary
Preparing for 2010, officials in Vancouver-Whistler will seek to balance the demands of a colossal sporting event with priorities expressed in their own urban plans. All Olympic hosts share the same dilemma: planning the games is often at odds with planning a city. This has certainly been the case in Canada where Calgary and Montreal have left a mixed legacy of hits and misses. As a supplement to these lessons learned, Vancouver-Whistler can look toward Beijing for a useful precedent as well. In the build-up to 2008, Beijing is striving to ensure that its master/official plan guides its Olympic endeavour.

Sommaire
Dans le cadre des préparatifs de 2010, les responsables de Vancouver-Whistler cherchent à faire la part entre les besoins associés à une manifestation sportive de colossales proportions et les priorités énoncées dans leurs plans urbains. Toutes les villes hôtes d'olympiaades connaissent le même dilemme : la planification des Jeux va souvent à l'encontre de la planification urbaine. Ce fut certainement le cas au Canada, où Calgary et Montréal connaissent un legs de hauts et de bas. Outre ces leçons, Vancouver-Whistler peut aussi se servir de Beijing comme d'un précédent utile. En prévision de 2008, Beijing s'efforce de faire en sorte que son plan officiel oriente l'initiative olympique.

Under the right circumstances, the Olympics can support long-term planning objectives by driving enormous investments in infrastructure, athletics and housing. Striking the right balance between Olympic plans and official plans, however, has been a daunting challenge for Canadian cities that have hosted the event. Facing great expectations and mixed legacies, Vancouver-Whistler should look not only to Canada's past Olympic hosts but also to Beijing for guidance in the build-up to 2010.

The Olympics create a rare convergence of priorities through which coordinated government spending becomes possible, particularly in Canada. This is one of the main reasons that boosters in Toronto were so excited about the 2008 summer games. A successful bid could have delivered the political will and financial resources necessary to follow through on a decades-old commitment to rehabilitate the city's waterfront. Those plans were cast into disarray when Beijing was awarded the 2008 Olympics. Torontonians were understandably disappointed by this result, but history suggests that the waterfront may do just as well, or better, without the Olympics. Canada's past experience highlights the pitfalls that planners face when the world's most important sporting event comes to town.

Canadian Olympics: Hits and Misses
Calgary boasts a proud Olympic legacy. The 1988 winter games stimulated a joint half-billion-dollar investment from all three levels of government, and although a 1993 audit suggests that organizers probably lost money, the event created training facilities, student residences and community assets that have been embraced as benefits to the entire city. The Olympics also forced municipal officials to scrap one of their own plans. Victoria Park, a downtrodden neighbourhood with a sketchy reputation, was selected as the location for Calgary's Saddledome. Angry residents regarded the arena as being at odds with a redevelopment strategy that they had endorsed and planners had adopted for the beleaguered area. In the end, the needs of the Olympics usurped Calgary's plan for Victoria Park, out of which frustrated locals have been moving ever since.

Montreal, for its part, offers the classic cautionary tale. Patronage, price gouging and delay transformed the 1976 Olympics into a financial sinkhole. What began as a no-frills concept became a billion-dollar scandal. Worse, there was no meaningful relationship between the Olympic plan and Montreal's official plan. Infamously, Mayor Jean Drapeau selected east end green space for the Olympic Park without consulting his planning department. When councilors publicly took the
Canadian efforts to bind city planning to Olympic planning tell a story of best intentions undermined by the demands of a marquee world event. The results have been checkered enough that a helpful international precedent ought to be welcome.

**China’s Megalopolis: Context and Limitations**

Beijing’s intent to use the Olympics as a catalyst is every bit as ambitious as anything previously contemplated in Canada. The 2008 Olympics will transform a northern section of that historic city into a gleaming new residential and recreational complex. Before discussing how this initiative applies to Vancouver-Whistler, however, it will be useful to highlight some of the ways in which planning in these cities necessarily differs.

Beijing resists comparison to Canadian cities because of its sheer size and density. The crushing population and scarcity of developable land stretch Beijing outwards in a pattern of tireless growth that would stagger Canadian opponents of so-called urban sprawl. Furthermore, the private land market in China is only a few decades old. Contemporary urban planning is, likewise, still a work in progress. Many of the ideals and standards that underlie the profession in Canada are counterintuitive to Chinese planners.

Despite these differences, Beijing’s determination to link its Olympic plan with its master/official plans offers a pertinent yardstick against which efforts in Vancouver-Whistler can be measured. All Olympic hosts share this burden.

### 2008: “New Beijing/Great Olympics”

Beijing’s main Olympic complex will be located in the Chaoyang district, north of the ancient city core. That core, where contemporary Canadian planners might expect to find a high-rise Central Business District (CBD), is actually a world heritage site of near incalculable value.

The Forbidden City, historic home of Chinese emperors, sits at the centre of Beijing. Around the Forbidden City are the “hutong” neighbourhoods, with squat homes arranged in tiny squares around open courtyards. The city is short and flat at the center. Its tallest buildings and densest developments are at the periphery.

The core is encircled by six ring roads, each amounting to a multilane highway by Canadian standards. The third and fourth rings cut through the vast Chaoyang district: one of the busiest and most densely populated regions in Beijing. One hundred and fifty foreign embassies share space with office towers, industrial plants and, of course, hundreds of thousands of residents in Chaoyang. The 2008 sporting complex, known as the Olympic Green, will soon be added to this dynamic mix.

The Olympic Green will straddle both sides of the fourth ring, borrowing venues from the existing Asian Games Village left behind from 1990. It will feature outdoor and indoor stadiums, residences for athletes and coaches, a broadcasting centre and an exhibition hall. Local organizers fully expect the Olympic Green to support objectives expressed in the city’s 20-year master plan and five-year official plan. Like all large-scale projects in Beijing, the Green began as a demolition. One of the many peculiarities of this city is that there is really no such thing as vacant land. Prior to the city’s selection as host for 2008, the site was already a bustling, ad-hoc home to small businesses and hundreds of residents. It had been in limbo for years, held by a development corporation in the expectation that Beijing would be awarded the games.

The wholesale redevelopment of this unplanned borough is part of the city’s larger agenda in Chaoyang. However, the relationship between Beijing’s Olympic plan and its master/official plans is best expressed not through this site on its own but, rather, through synergies that exist between the Olympic project and complementary initiatives endorsed in the city’s larger urban strategy.

### Olympic Balance: Cues and Complements

Beijing’s 20-year master plan outlines a bold agenda, emphasizing the city’s function as a cultural/political power centre and its aspiration to attract new high-tech businesses and tertiary industries. It anticipates a major expansion of subway and light-rail transit services to outlying regions that will continue to grow as the ring road network pushes ever outward. These will draw more residents away from the ancient core and allow for the establishment of modern infrastructure and utilities.

New environmental safeguards, parks and athletic facilities, with the Olympic Green specifically targeted as a strategic site, will accompany these measures.

The objectives of the master plan are translated into project-specific deliverables in the five-year official plan. Beijing will erect a high-rise business district,
symbolizing its ascent to world-class metropolis, in time for the 2008 games. New subway lines, rail links and a fleet of low-emission buses will provide sustainable transportation services during and after the Olympics.

The Green will bring thousands of housing units, reflecting new per-capita space standards and environmental considerations, into the commercial market. The Green will include 600 hectares of forest, mirroring an environmental commitment through which the city also plans to build greenbelts along rivers, highways and rail lines. In these ways, the Olympic plan takes its cues from the master/official plans.

Will the 2008 Olympics deliver on all the expectations included in Beijing's master and official plans? Certainly not. Olympic projects will provide complementary showcases that underscore the core principles of these guiding documents. This strategy acknowledges the primacy of the master and official plans, providing support without falling into the trap of thinking that the games could ever fully realize their broad objectives. In part, this reflects Beijing's dazzling enormity. No single undertaking, not even the Olympics, could ever address the mountain of issues facing a city of that size. Nonetheless, this also reflects a recognition of the fact that the Olympics, even if they cannot turn a city's boldest aspirations into reality, can still respect the spirit and intent of its plans.

This is the lesson that Vancouver-Whistler can learn from Beijing. Organizing the Olympic games is an honour and a burden that can take on a life all its own. In its grandeur and complexity, the planning process sometimes puts the needs of the event ahead of the priorities of its host city. This phenomenon is part of Canada's Olympic legacy.

By looking to Beijing, organizers in Vancouver-Whistler will find that when a city allows its own agenda to guide its Olympic plan, the right balance can be struck. Let the official plan lead and the Olympics will follow.