

## Event Urbanism and the Politics of Enthusiasm

by Amanda De Lisio

photography by Jon Pack and Gary Hustwit

Contemporary cities are in a state of constant flux due to the perpetual negotiation, by various actors, over what can be done in a city, by whom, and to what ends. Not unlike what occurs after human-made or so-called “natural” disasters, the staging of a sporting mega-event exacerbates this state of urban contestation with the construction of new, ultramodern athletic facilities. More often than not, as the literature on the subject suggests, event-related construction demands a minimum level of urban erasure. The site of a new stadium becomes what Yates McKee, in his article on the post-hurricane Katrina restoration of New Orleans, describes as an “ecological tabula rasa,” a return to the backformation of the heavily designed, controlled, and scripted spaces of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> A month after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Richard Baker (a Republican politician and then representative for the Sixth District of Louisiana) shamelessly said on national television: “We finally cleared up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” Given the consequences of disaster capitalism—or, what we could call “event capitalism,” in the case of the sporting mega-event—we ought to reconsider the parallels between the bioremediation of our cities and fantasies of urban erasure: both offer a false sense of naturalization that is imagined to cleanse the land, and the bodies within it, but do so in favour of an homogeneous vision for our collective future. The vision of mega-event-driven urbanization has failed to reconcile the extreme inequalities that increasingly afflict our supposedly global cities; in fact, as I argue below, the reification of extreme urban inequalities relating to the access to public space, exposure to environmental risk, and autocratic forms of decision-making and implementation are the repeated outcomes of the politics of enthusiasm driving event-led urbanism.

To develop a more critical theory of event-led urbanization and its attendant social and political economic legacies, it is useful to reflect more attentively on Naomi Klein’s well-known notion of “disaster capitalism,” which illustrates the parallel manner in which a mega-event, like an urban

crisis, can facilitate the implementation of a neoliberal “shock doctrine,” guided by extra-legal forms of governance that facilitate the permanent redistribution of the social spaces within local communities. Recent critical work done on the effects

Falco Olympic Beach Volleyball Center. The site is currently unused, though there was talk that it had been sold to an American company. Photograph: Jon Pack





of mega-events has clearly demonstrated how the processes of event-led urbanization work to physically entrench social inequalities in the urban form. The excessive policy manoeuvres, pushed through local governments in a moment of celebration, share with Klein's shock doctrine the dimension of necessity—in order to respond to a disaster, or to host a world-class mega-event, certain transformations of the city are presented as both imperative and *inevitable*. Shock is thus used to rationalize political economic restructuring at the level of policy, as well as the construction of new leisure and consumption facilities, the ultra-modern sanctuaries for bourgeois urban bodies. As Klein explains, the use of shock is a technique to impose a particular ideological goal, typically part of the neoliberal, corporatist impulse. The shock doctrine is therefore a practical tool for the analysis of mega-event urbanism because it can be used to effectively illustrate the aggressive implementation of radical (i.e. free-market-fundamentalist) policies without requiring democratic consent. The result, according to Klein, is disaster capitalism, a form of capitalist accumulation that relies on large-scale crises to create economic opportunities.

As a prime illustration of this economic shock therapy, Klein reviews the case of post-coup d'état Chile, which, under the dictatorial control of the US-backed General Pinochet, undertook the “most extreme capitalist makeover ever attempted anywhere,” one that, under the direction of Milton Friedman, created a “rapid-fire transformation of the economy—tax cuts, free trade, privatized services, cuts to social spending and deregulation,” facilitated by the speed, suddenness, and scope of the economic shift that followed the violent overthrow of socialist President Salvador Allende in 1973.<sup>2</sup> According to Friedman's logic, in order to restructure the dominant socialist economic model, some form of shock therapy or major collective trauma was needed to temporarily suspend the democratic process, or block it entirely, consequently and permanently transforming the environmental, social, and political tenor of local communities. If this case and its Cold War political stakes are somewhat extreme, there are, nevertheless, similar if somewhat smaller-scale political actions taken in the midst of environmental accidents and sporting

mega-events that also demand the reconfiguration of political processes by using a doctrine of shock, and enthusiasm, to institute new policies and their spatial realizations in the city. At the heart of disaster and event capitalism, then, is a need to facilitate capitalist accumulation by undermining, or outright destroying, existing social relations. This is not a new idea. As Klein has noted, the exploitation of crises has long been the mantra of Milton Friedman, pundit for unfettered capitalism and popularizer of the free market. In the tentatively titled, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), he wrote: “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”<sup>3</sup> But even Friedman cannot claim to be the inventor of this crisis-driven doctrine. As early as 1867, Karl Marx remarked that “[f]orce is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power.”<sup>4</sup> It was Marx who articulated the value of crises as a capitalist mechanism, one that could restructure and renew economic realities. As such, crises were considered an essential component to the dynamics of reproduction. For Marx, much like Friedman, an effective form of force and the sense of shock it created would lend to the extra-legal context needed to refashion cities in an authoritarian, anti-democratic manner. Later on, Marxist geographer Henri Lefebvre adapted this logic with his “theory of moments,” based on crises; a “moment” marked a significant period in which existing orthodoxies stood trial and could be radically overturned and altered. In disrupting the everyday, a sense of shock created an extra-legal context, thereby opening new possibilities.

In line with the recent work of Giorgio Agamben, mega-events can be said to create a “state of exception,” a theoretical concept that can be used to frame newly imposed strategies of (de)legalization crafted in moments of urban catalytic intervention such as international sporting events. In relation to the Olympic movement, the literature has vividly illustrated

Olympic Ski Jumps, Igman Mountain. A man prays beneath handmade Olympic rings on one of the jumps. I visited Sarajevo during Ramadan, which lasts there for 40 days, instead of the more customary 30. Photograph: Jon Pack





Olympic Bobsleigh and Luge Track, Trebević Mountain, Bosnia and Herzegovina. As I was taking photos, my guide made sure to remind me not to wander off the concrete path, as active landmines from the war are still buried throughout the area. Photograph: Jon Pack



Olympic Ski Jumps, Igman Mountain, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photograph: Jon Pack

the obvious state of exception created as a result of increased fragmentation and privatization imposed on behalf of the International Olympic Committee within host cities—before, during, and in the wake of an event. As seen in the cases of former host communities, non-governmental and private agencies invested in the event decide the vision for urban revitalization and leave few opportunities for the public to participate in processes that will drastically transform local communities. In addition, there is also a discussion emerging within the legal community regarding the tension between internationalism (i.e., the need for international sports to operate under a consistent, worldwide legal framework) and nationalism (i.e., the desire of each nation to preserve its sovereignty and ensure that its athlete-citizens are protected by its laws). A “state of exception” is thus seen to unfold as the interests of private parties are positioned outside the traditional rule of law. The International Olympic Committee and those affiliated with the Olympic Movement, as established within the Olympic Charter, secure the command of event-led urbanization and thus create the conditions under which they can manoeuvre within the economic, social, and political urban terrain—without strict adherence to the law.

It is especially troubling that this concentration of power awarded to sport governing bodies helps create an entire “zone of arbitrariness” in which the universal sovereign law (such as a national constitutional act) is dismissed in favour of political economic and social irrationalities, like hosting a billion-dollar party for urban elites. The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), a private, international arbitral body based in Lausanne, Switzerland, established by the International Olympic Committee in 1983, was designed to provide a forum for resolving sports-related disputes. The Swiss Federal Tribunal has ruled that the CAS has the same force and effect as a judgment rendered within a sovereign court. But the CAS is not an international court of law; it is an arbitration tribunal beholden to interested private parties. The globalization of sport has shifted the legal regulation of international sport governing bodies to private authorities. This growth in private self-governance has led to the development of a global sys-

tem of law that operates autonomously and independently from national legal systems. In such a context, mega-events can contribute to the trans-nationalization of the legal system, acting in favour of an elite few who are destined to profit from such events. This arbitrariness—initiated through the onslaught of private and public collaborations—has further constructed de-legalized geographies, imposed architectural and urban design redundancies, and made the term urbanization synonymous with gentrification.

The efforts of municipal parties in power to criminalize homelessness have often been cited as an inevitable outcome of event-led urbanization. Activities otherwise asserted as a basic human right, such as sitting, sleeping, and bathing, are heavily regulated in host cities during and after their mega-event. Under new anti-homelessness policies, the homeless are increasingly at risk of harassment and illegal arrest.<sup>5</sup> There is also an intensified investment in surveillance technologies and personnel, while urban architecture (even in spaces deemed public) is used to reinforce the law—park benches are shortened to hinder excessive loitering, retail doorways are gated, and public toilets are removed.<sup>6</sup>

In Atlanta, over 9,000 homeless people, mostly of African-American descent, were arrested for activities such as sleeping in parks, being on the street, or entering a parking lot without owning a car parked there. These behaviours became criminal in 1996, directly before the Summer Olympic event. In 2000, Athens authorities established a law that would allow land to be seized from communities for Olympic-related construction. These regulatory strategies, imposed prior to an internationally recognized event, disproportionately impact the poor, homeless, and otherwise marginalized and disadvantaged groups. Temporarily restructuring the urban landscape to appease an elite few has a permanent effect: cities become physically altered, and so do the bodies that are marginalized in the process. The outcomes of this process are remarkably difficult to reverse once they are written

Verso: Montreal Tower, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. Designed by Roger Tallibert. It was originally built to open and close the stadium roof. Now it's used solely to house the roof and keep it from collapsing into the stadium. Photograph: Jon Pack







Jesse Robinson Olympic Park, Compton. Jesse Robinson was president of the Southern Pacific Association of AAU, the Southern California governing body for all amateur sports and an advocate for local athletes in Compton. When he passed away in 1987, this small park off the 91 Freeway was named in his honour.  
Photograph: Gary Hustwit

into the legal system, physically rendered in stone, steel, and glass and cemented in the urban psyche.

The globalized sporting spectacle is a reflection of the broader political economic order, illuminating the same asymmetrical agenda designed to glorify human struggle and competition. Indeed, the territories attacked on the field or the court—spaces where powerful, sculpted bodies move and entertain us—are visual demonstrations of the contestations some have to deal with or avoid in their everyday lives. But while many remain oblivious to the manner in which heavily corporatized sport stadiums reify boundaries, those excluded from the spectacle cannot avoid it. For some, struggle is neither chosen nor celebrated; it is the consequence of a gluttonous few. The question haunting these transformative processes is whether or not event-led urbanization can treat communities—with their complex local memories, histories, and social relations—as erasable. Should the notion of an urban *tabula rasa*

be accepted as a necessary phase of urban (re)development? How can this logic of erasure for profit, and the neoliberal transformations sport has helped mobilized, be contested? Like the athlete injected with stanazolol, a sports mega-event is an injection of the neoliberal, corporatist imagination into the urban environment. Described by Guy Debord in the *Society of Spectacle*, the form of collective entertainment that results from such capitalist accumulation does little more than provide a social opiate. In the context of event-led urbanism, the politics of enthusiasm reverses this pacifying trend, creating instead a group of citizens actively cheering for the erasure of others in the name of a more capitalist urban vision. It is this peculiar investment—a desire to marvel at the high-functioning athleticism of foreign bodies staged to compete for our attention and enthusiasm—that conceals the more fundamental contest over the future of the city itself.✕

## Endnotes

- 1 Yates McKee, "Haunted Housing: Eco-Vanguardism, Eviction, and the Biopolitics of Sustainability in New Orleans," *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008): 84–113.
- 2 In his book *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), Milton Friedman advocated for minimizing the role of government and liberating the market as a means of creating political and social freedom. An economist and professor at the University of Chicago, Friedman acted as an adviser to General Pinochet.
- 3 Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), ix.
- 4 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (1990 [1867]).
- 5 Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics, and Activism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).
- 6 Don Mitchell, "The Annihilation of Space by Law: The Roots and Implications of Anti-Homeless Laws in the United States," *Antipode* 29, no. 3 (1997): 303–335.

## Bios

**Amanda De Lisio** is a doctoral student in the Department of Exercise Sciences at the University of Toronto. Her work addresses questions concerning human natures and social life under capitalist urbanization and how, specifically, these are reconfigured in the wake of a sport mega-events. Her previous graduate research, conducted at the University of British Columbia, evaluated the impact of school-based health policies—legacies of the 2010 Winter Olympics in the province of British Columbia—on student. Her current Ph.D. research considers the construction of the West Don Lands, the future home of the 2015 Pan/Parapan Athletes' Village in Toronto, Canada, as a case study to examine how event-led urban renewal processes pressurize socially just and environmentally sustainable development for host communities.

## Olympic City Project

In the Olympic City project, photographer **Jon Pack** and filmmaker **Gary Hustwit** work to share the physical and cultural legacies from former Olympic host cities around the world. Pack and Hustwit have travelled to and photographed Athens, Barcelona, Beijing, Berlin, Helsinki, Mexico City, Moscow, London, Los Angeles, Montreal, Lake Placid, Rome, and Sarajevo. The first book from their collection illustrates the tension between two disparate ideas—decay and rebirth—and how either is realized in host communities, post-Olympic event. Through the visual demonstration of the effects of event-led urbanism on local communities, the book has also drawn attention to the lived condition and begged the question of how people are transformed in the hosting of an internationally-recognized sporting event. Rather than side with mere critique, the project is a testament to the illusion of decadence so often purported in event hosting, and an attempt to record the repercussion on host cities, whether positive or negative. For more information on the project or to order a copy of the book, visit [olympiccityproject.com](http://olympiccityproject.com).