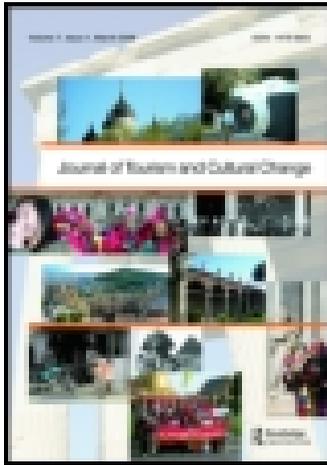


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### Olympic housing: a critical review of London 2012's legacy

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Olympic housing: a critical review of London 2012's legacy**, by Penny Bernstock, Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2014, ix + 207 pp., US\$109.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-409-42005-7

I watched London's 2012 Olympic Games on television just like many other viewers around the world – closely following its spectacular opening and closing ceremonies, and many days of sporting events and accomplishments in-between. The widely acclaimed Olympic sports spectacle, however, eclipsed its housing legacy that significantly impacted some of London's local communities. Peggy Bernstock sheds some light on this matter in her book *Olympic housing: A critical review of London 2012's legacy*.

The International Olympic Committee in 2002 introduced a new requirement for host cities to leave a legacy after the games, one that demonstrated a lasting commitment to socioeconomic, environmental, and public health issues. In *Olympic housing*, Bernstock critically analyzes the concept of 'legacy' and explores its multiple definitions via an in-depth study of London's 2012 Olympic housing. She gives us a detailed narrative of what was promised, what was actually delivered, and what its intentional or unintentional consequences were, from a sociological perspective. In the text, we hear the voices of displaced residents of various East London communities. Their stories reveal their experiences, who has benefitted from the move and who has not, and highlight the many shortcomings of housing plans and policies in the process.

Bernstock is methodical in her data collection. She undertakes an extensive literature review and takes us through a chronological history of events that went into the creation of the housing legacy. She studies planning policies, housing master plans and design, and housing statistics. She interviews the original residents of East London who were displaced by the creation of Olympic housing, and compares their perceptions of housing conditions, 'neighborhood', and 'community' before and after the move. Bernstock carefully studies this data and demonstrates how the housing legacy's goals of inclusivity and meeting local needs were ultimately undermined by various forces of the state and market.

In Chapter 1, Bernstock presents an overview of housing legacies in other previous Olympic host cities around the world as well as another London housing project known as the 'London Docklands' – a project that, as part of a community organization and as a Londoner, she has closely monitored over the years. In all cases, host cities after the Olympics converted athletes' villages into housing for sale, however, they were beset with financial issues and poor planning. Transformation of housing communities, unfortunately, led to displacement of the disadvantaged, evictions, homelessness, and inflation of property prices, contrary to original planning goals.

Bernstock discusses housing loss and displacement of residents in the East London community as a direct result of legacy housing in Chapter 2. Authorities gave priority to the timeline rather than the needs of residents; there was a lack of a social or emotional support system for the displaced. Existing social networks and groups were broken up

because of new individual housing provisions. In Chapter 3, she further expands on the effects of legacy housing in East London neighborhoods such as rising house and rent prices, and homelessness. She studies the various dimensions of affordable housing objectives and delivery, arguing that a significant chunk of it is not affordable to those who really need it. In Chapter 4, the author compares initial legacy commitments to what was actually delivered in the end; she describes how starting goals became diluted over time. A detailed study of housing schemes and master plans reveals a clear disconnect between planning documents and results. In Chapter 5, Bernstock studies the transformation of the Athletes' Village into 'East Village' after the games. She discusses its financing, design, and allocation policies in detail. She outlines the possible reasons why the Village did not become a model of social inclusivity as was initially promised.

Bernstock discusses the results of two empirical studies on the Stratford High Street project in Chapters 6 and 7 to see whether the housing units which were to create accelerated growth after the games were successful in doing so. The 'mixed communities' agenda', she says, did not succeed and there was a decline in planning gain; a trend toward creating more affordable housing off-site rather than on-site. Bernstock describes the nature of the relationship between the state and the market; she explains how their different agendas have resulted in the need for additional health and education infrastructure, and public subsidies via the case study of Stratford High Street. Residents' feedback in Stratford reveal many similarities with the outcomes of previous projects such as London's Docklands. We see that private gains have been made instead of public; affordable housing and other social agendas have taken a backseat. In Chapter 7, she tries to answer the question of whether Stratford will become gentrified on the basis of conversations with developers, real-estate agents, buyers, and renters. There is an evidence of class change, but mostly an increase of young professionals, she concludes, that is caused by regeneration, affordability, and potential for future gains. She also predicts that areas which typically housed working-class residents will gradually be taken over by the better off.

In her conclusion, Bernstock cautions that there is not enough evidence to assume a direct causal link between Olympic housing and a housing boom or an increase in property prices. Also, athletes' villages in host cities such Barcelona, Beijing, and Sydney may have benefitted from the price increase, but the one in Vancouver did not. There was an increase in rent, but negligible increase in property prices in former Olympic housing communities such as Stratford in East London, which also started to show significant divisions of 'new' and 'old'; the rich and the poor. The housing market, she implies, is influenced by a set of complex, interrelated factors that must be studied in more detail.

One benefit of Olympic housing that can be clearly seen, Bernstock points out, is the provision of well-designed, accessible housing for people with disabilities. This is one instance in which the policy of inclusion has been successful. We can also see that Olympic and Paralympic projects have created accelerated growth and regeneration in certain areas such as Stratford High Street, but whether they are directly responsible for the same on a larger scale or in other neighborhoods is debatable.

The Olympic housing legacy highlights an urgent need for affordable housing, says Bernstock; new developments have, time and again, only resulted in redistribution of land from lower income groups to higher income groups. On the basis of these current trends, she predicts that East London will ultimately become a prosperous, affluent neighborhood, with minimal impact on less advantaged groups. Bernstock suggests three goals for projects that aim for inclusivity: (1) Make them desirable to live for individuals and families from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds, (2) Create genuinely affordable housing, and (3) Create local employment opportunities. She asserts that the mechanisms

of affordable housing, including the way it is financed and delivered, need significant revision. If successfully implemented, they will reduce welfare dependency, shift the focus to creating local employment, and reduce additional losses of affordable housing in ‘Legacy’ projects, she says.

There are no images in this book other than the one on the cover and understandably so; Bernstock focuses more on the sociological effects of London’s Olympic housing legacy than its architecture. Some parts of the text that discuss housing design such as the design of the Athletes’ Village and its types of housing in Chapter 5, however, would have benefitted from being supplemented with select master plans and images of legacy housing visually depicting a timeline of what was designed, what was actually built, and how it appears now.

*Olympic housing*, overall, is well-researched and academically rigorous, indicative of Bernstock’s expertise on the subject. As an architecture researcher, I always ask one question of the constructed environment: how does it influence its inhabitants after it is built? Bernstock not only answers this question, but also goes into great detail of what happens to housing communities in host cities when the sports spectacle is over. Housing policy-makers, residential planners, developers, researchers, and future host cities that endeavor to create ‘legacy housing’ would be well advised to consult this book.

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