

OPINION

The 'Games' of the Catalan capital

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The Summer Olympics of 1992 transformed a city that to a large extent over more than forty years had been the object of deep-rooted political scorn and a clear abandonment on an urban planning level. Now that approximately twenty years have gone by and it is easier to see things from a more critical and fresh perspective, it is a good time to look back on this period with a retrospective vision. The repercussions of the Games on the present and the future of the city have been evident, with positive effects, others more questionable, and with the fundamental problem being that Barcelona lacks the political weight of a capital city.

A positive vision: the reemergence of the city debate, the restructuring of cultural identity.

The principal legacy of the Olympic Games has been, without a doubt, the debate about the city, and with it the restructuring of the cultural identity of Catalonia and Barcelona. The respect and dignity restored to the Catalans and their capital, Barcelona. The demonstration that the citizens of Barcelona and Catalonia can organize a grand Olympic Games using our will, conviction and relatively few resources, a great deal fewer than what an Olympics today would cost.

The Barcelona Olympics brought down psychological barriers and revealed the drive of a creative city capable of making big projects a reality, but it was above all an well-calculated opportunity for a country that was depressed, neglected by Europe with strong history, at a time of hope that brought the Catalan and Spanish citizenry –that wanted to modernize and be open to the world– closer. With this catalyst the city was soon flooded with proposals, grand urbanism events were held because there were many neglected and abandoned areas in the city, and a lot of work to do.

A critical vision: the politicization of the city's success.

Barcelona has continued to modify itself along axes such as the Avinguda Diagonal (the upper and lower stretches), in areas such as carrer Tarragona, the 22@ neighborhood, the seafront stretching all the way to the Fòrum, the logistical area of Fira 2, the Zona Franca, or the expansion of the airport. On the other hand, little has been done in other parts of the metropolitan area; the real city has been neglected. Barcelona still has many neighborhoods that are not well connected, with symptoms of marginalization and, above all, with a high level of income inequality. The promotion of the city, the 'Barcelona' brand and the success of the city's transformation have not been accompanied by a sufficient show of humility and a profound study of the cultural and urbanistic inequality in the city. There is too much talk about successes and little about the problems, too much about tourism and business, and little about the spatial marginalization of certain neighborhoods. The internal political struggles about local, regional and state interests in the hands of the same parties have not had the level of rigor that the citizenry deserves.

A part of this reality is an answer to the growing promotion of the economic debate and the normalization of an unequal reality that is being tolerated, but there are other aspects that have had an influence.

A problem: the weak position of Barcelona as a capital.

Once the Games had ended there was an economic crisis (1993-1996) that marked the end of a period of expansion that had begun in the middle of the 1980s, and the city had a great debt to pay back. But there were also new challenges, and one of them was of great relevance: the beginning of the new world order, a new globalized stage where the great cities tended to integrate themselves in regional economies that competed among themselves, where the plurinational reality of Spain and fierce internal competition once again left Barcelona, and Catalonia, in unequal conditions. People thought twice about investing, and rethought their strategies as well, and the deficits in investment and the lack of willingness to invest in the metropolitan region of Barcelona became clear.

Barcelona had demonstrated what it could achieve with great events and investment in infrastructure, and Madrid, the capital of the Spanish state, also wanted to promote big events, be a city of business and, while they were at it, enjoy the best infrastructure in Spain. And so they did. Did they do it in the most rational of ways? It's clear that they did not, ever since then the Spanish state has invested intensely and disproportionately in creating a radial state surrounding Madrid. But also in an unfair way, since it disregarded the rest of the productive territories and their capacity to structure themselves as a network, as the great economies have shown themselves to be competitive, taxing them and prioritizing investment in all infrastructure that directly and indirectly benefited Madrid.

Because of this the city is still not prepared to exploit the great potential of the metropolitan area, of the metropolitan region or the Euro-region that links Valencia, Mallorca, Barcelona, Zaragoza, Toulouse and Montpellier. It is not prepared because in order for this to happen there needs to be a comprehensive project, a political and social consensus, and, above all, state support for a more just and competitive model of Spain, completely the opposite of today's reality and Spain's political will. As the city evolves, it is also becoming evident that there is a retrogression of the political debate and its direct impact on the Catalan metropolis.

Now the state is in a profound economic and financial crisis, and no one wants to talk about the principal problem of the crisis: the political and fiscal model of the territory. While this happens new voices are appearing, new sentiments, that push us to give authority, freedom and autonomy to a new regional order, with economic and cultural links, and put it ahead of today's inherited political order. The social control, encouraged by communication technologies, through knowledge, bringing new voices to the fore, new forms of stimulus, that are demanding changes, structural changes in the political and economic order. Time will tell.

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Photo provided by Andreu Marfull

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