

a problem of **Olympic** Proportions

**who gets all
those homes
built for athletes
after the Olympics
leave town?**

Loose earth stirs on the ground of the Olympic Village in the dry air of Athens's early summer. During the 2004 Olympic Games the housing complex teemed with more than 20,000 athletes and other foreign visitors. More recently, with the grunt of electric drills and the hum of small trucks hauling plywood, it transformed into a bustling construction site for what was slated to become a permanent settlement.

As far as one can see, low-slung buildings — two-, three- and four-story multi-family dwellings — are laid out meticulously over the site. Each floor is rimmed with a brightly-painted veranda, the most popular living space for ordinary Greeks. There they cook, nap, chug ouzo, hang laundry.

A sleek glass sliding door separates the veranda from the rest of the apartment. All of the 2,292 apartments in the complex are equipped with central air and ample closet and storage space. The garage underneath each building provides at least one indoor parking space for every family — a rarity in Greece.

But what makes the complex even more unusual, not only in Greece, but among Olympic host cities throughout the world, is that after the star athletes and international press corps have long left town, this beautifully-appointed housing did not turn into sleek student dormitories or luxurious condos. The entire village became home to low-income families, with some 10,000 people moving in this past February.

A Legacy of Destroying Low-Income Neighborhoods

No other cities that have hosted the Games had the political will to turn a spanking new, multi-million dollar development into housing that benefits those who need it most.

TEXT
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PHOTOS
Andreas Guskos (opposite page)
Violet Law (following pages)

"Often the Olympics's organizing committee will promise affordable housing as a legacy after the Olympics are gone, but it is only a tiny percentage of the housing," said Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, author of *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics and Activism*. "They don't want to convert (the village) into affordable housing because they will lose a lot of money."

In her 2000 book, the University of Toronto sociologist found that hosting the Olympics invariably wreaks havoc upon a city's poor. The homeless are swept up and jailed. Families are evicted so that swaths of low-income neighborhoods can be wiped out for new development. What Lenskyj calls "the housing legacy of the Olympics" has been overwhelmingly devastating.

In Atlanta in the early 1990s, in two of the city's oldest and largest public housing projects, Techwood and Clark Howell, nearly 1,200 units were razed to make room for downtown redevelopment triggered by the construction of infrastructure for the 1996 games.

The fight for a more positive Olympic housing legacy is now raging in Canada. Activists in Vancouver, host of the 2010 games, have organized to score a promise from the city's government that more than half of the village be set aside as affordable housing units for low- and middle-income families. But this early commitment has recently been curtailed by newly-elected conservative city council members.

For housing activists, the Greek example and the Vancouver struggle can be instructive. Few people have any use for a velodrome or an aquatic center. And as we've realized in Hurricane Katrina's wake, stadiums prove to be lousy quarters for shelter. But one fixture of the Games is always up for grabs: the Olympic Village.

Why Greece?

After World War II, the migration in Greece from rural villages to the capital was massive. Today, Athens is a sprawling metropolis of eight million people,

a place two-thirds of all Greeks call home. Since many Greeks moved without any prospect for employment, finding a place to live became the surest way for them to establish a foothold in the city. In 1954, the country's Ministry of Labor and Social Security established the Labor Housing Organization (known as *Organismos Ergatikis Katoikias* or OEK, pronounced OH-ehk).

OEK allocates housing aid a bit like the U.S. Social Security Administration distributes retirement funds. All Greek wage-earners are required to pay about one percent of their salaries into the housing fund and their employers match the contribution. Only those workers who have contributed a sufficient amount but cannot afford to buy a house are entitled to assistance.

"The state of Greece gave birth to OEK to solve the problem of workers and housing," said OEK's director of public relations Evi Kaila. "The government wants to shelter the people who don't have the income to buy in the private market."

OEK typically sells the homes it builds at cost and provides interest-free loans to homebuyers. The homeownership rate stood as high as 83 percent nationally by the time the Olympics returned to the founding country. Even though what OEK produces amounts to less than 10 percent of the homes built annually around the country, according to University of Thessaly planning and regional development professor Thomas Maloutas, it builds as much as 95 percent of the public-sector housing.

With so much expertise in housing development, the government put OEK in charge of building the Olympic Village soon after Athens won the bid to host the 2004 games. It was the first time in the history of the Olympics that a social housing organization has taken over the construction.

The Olympic Village is the largest project ever executed by OEK, which had to contract five construction firms to complete the E320.5 million project. On the 306-acre site in Acharnes, located nine miles northwest of Athens, the Olympic and Paralympic village today has blossomed into a newfangled town.

Below: an aerial view of the Olympic village in Athens, Greece



with a health clinic, a fire station, schools, day-care centers and a church. An ancient aqueduct has been preserved as part of the landscaped green space. Residents will also have access to a swimming pool, two gyms and the track and field facilities. The village is connected to the commuter train network by bus lines, and some government offices have also been relocated there to create a job base.

In early 2005, a national lottery was held to assign the housing to some 2,000 families.

As much as this outcome is worth emulating, not all of the housing stories coming out of the Greek Olympic Games were quite so rosy. In the years leading up to 2004, many Roma people in and around Athens were evicted from their settlements by state authorities, according to reports by the Geneva-based Center on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE). More than ten Roma homes were reportedly bulldozed or burned to the ground.

Beyond this, seven construction workers died in what was believed to be the worst accident in housing construction in the history of modern Greece. "We say the Olympic Village is constructed with blood," said Christina Kospini, who covers labor issues for *Kathimerini*, Greece's largest daily.

Start Organizing Now

No one died before the 1996 Atlanta Games, but the death knell for downtown public housing was definitively sounded.

The housing projects, Techwood and Clark Howell homes, had powerful, land-hungry neighbors — with the Coca-Cola corporate headquarters one street to the west and Georgia Tech to the north. These movers and shakers held sway over the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), which prepared the bid in a process shrouded in secrecy. Soon after the bid was awarded in August 1992, local activists began to organize in earnest against the demolition. But it was already too late.

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So, your city wants to host the Olympics ...

Neil deMause, co-author of *Field of Schemes: How the Great Stadium Swindle Turns Public Money into Private Profit*, considers how activists should respond to their city's desire to host the Olympic Games.

CLAMOR: Los Angeles is gearing up to bid to host the Games for the third time. Do you see any benefits of having a U.S. city as the designated Olympic host?

Neil deMause: A lot of people now feel that you should pick some city somewhere in the globe [to host all future Olympics]. That would be the ideal. That will lessen the impact of the Olympics. That way you already have the infrastructure in place, the stadium built.

The way they do it now, every four years some city will have to build the new stadium, the arena, the swimming pool, the velodrome, the beach volleyball court. It's a waste of money and efforts.



The Olympics seem mostly to benefit developers — movers and shakers of the host city. Do you have any suggestions on how the grassroots can get a fair shake?

If we're hosting the Olympics, we want the construction to benefit those who actually live here. You can try to negotiate a community benefits agreement. One of the best examples is around the building of Los Angeles International Airport and the Staples Stadium. You get everybody to the table, and there are opportunities to negotiate.

What do you think activists can negotiate for? And how?

Use your imagination. You have something they need, which is public support. And they're concerned about public support. "If you don't give us what we want, we're going to protest the bid and tell the IOC it doesn't have the public's support." The last thing the IOC wants is lots of people holding picket signs during the Olympics.

The main thing is to start really early. Once your city has gotten the bid, why should they give you anything? It's very much politics. The Olympics is nothing if not a giant political game. You have to start as soon as your city announces its interest in hosting.

Bring in housing advocates, union activists, transportation activists. On the bright side, it's a great opportunity for coalition building. You get everybody together to think about what you really want for your city.

- Violet Law

"The minute the bid is mentioned," is the time to get organized according to Anita Beatty, a long-time housing advocate who, as director of the city's Metro Task Force on Homelessness, galvanized the opposition. "Get the commitment from the local government before the bid is prepared so that there will be no net loss of public housing and shelters."

Vancouver's activists apparently have taken Beatty's advice to heart.

In 2001, as the city was preparing to bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics, housing, labor, transportation, and environmental advocates formed the watchdog group Impact on Communities Coalition, to negotiate with city officials for commitments to make sure the Games leave a beneficial legacy for all citizens.

The group, led by housing advocate Linda Mix, lobbied successfully to protect tenants from inflated rent and evictions. As a single mother raising a toddler in the 1980s, Mix remembered being forced out from her downtown apartment when her landlord jacked up the rent during the 1986 World Expo.

Further, her group won a promise from the city to convert two-thirds of the 600 housing units planned for the Olympic Village into affordable homes for families of low-to-moderate income. But after the city's November 2005 election, conservative new council members cut back the commitment to about 120 units.

"We had all of the good work our city council has done around the housing legacy pretty close to being wiped out by the new city council. It is heart-breaking," said Mix. "You can see how vulnerable the so-called legacy can be."

In later phases of the development in the South False Creek community, where the Vancouver Olympic Village is sited, Mix hopes her group can again push for more affordable housing. Meanwhile, the coalition is working closely with the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) to make sure that all the commitments are carried out.

"VANOC does not want to have a black eye," said Mix. "If we start to see mass eviction and erosion of those protections, we'll be yelling as loud as we can."

Ultimately, host city officials can do well by following their counterparts in Athens, who claim to have lived by this philosophy: "We want the Games to be at the service of the city, and not the city at the service of the Games." ■

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