

# An Olympic Mosaic

Multidisciplinary Research and Dissemination of Olympic Studies  
CEO-UAB: 20 Years

## Editors

Emilio Fernández Peña  
Berta Cerezuela  
Miquel Gómez Benosa  
Chris Kennett  
Miquel de Moragas Spà



Centre d'Estudis Olímpics  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona



Ajuntament de Barcelona

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Centre d'Estudis Olímpics (CEO-UAB)  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
Campus UAB — Edifici N, planta 1  
E-08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès)  
Barcelona, Catalunya — Spain  
Tel. +34 93 581 19 92  
Fax: +34 93 581 21 39  
[ceoie@uab.cat](mailto:ceoie@uab.cat)  
<http://ceo.uab.cat>

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# The Shadow of Barcelona

## Isidre Rigau

**Sports Logistics Director, COOB'92; Advisor to the IOC**

With regard to the Olympics, saying that the shadow of Barcelona is long may seem overly pretentious, as may claiming that there is a before and an after the 1992 Olympics. Yet without stinting on the truth, we can say that much of the groundwork on which the Olympic Movement seeks to be built originated in what the referent of the city of Barcelona meant and still means.

Without considering myself an expert or scholar, more than 20 consecutive years of experience in studies related to the Olympics – either directly on the Organising Committees of Barcelona, Atlanta and Athens, or indirectly as a consultant for the IOC in the efforts of the Monitoring Commissions of the Organising Committees of Sydney, Salt Lake City, Athens, Turin and Beijing, and as a consultant for different committees for Spanish candidatures (Seville 2008, Madrid 2012 and 2016, Jaca 2014 and Barcelona Pyrenees 2022) – should be enough to reveal that I have a certain perspective on and knowledge of the field.

In this text, I have attempted to reflect on the key points that in my opinion both the Barcelona Olympics and the people who worked on them accomplished, which became benchmarks, and in some cases are still benchmarks, despite the fact that some people would like to hide it, an express reference to the post-Samaranch administration.

## 1. Reinventing the city

The Olympics were an excuse to reinvent the city and take a qualitative leap of more than 25 years in just six. They entailed a radical transformation that consolidated the ring roads, the airport, hotel capacities, the city's recovery of the beach and many more urban planning and architectural projects aimed at regaining the city's balance, improving its environmental quality and, in short, improving citizens' quality of life.

The projects in Sydney, Athens, Beijing and London have followed in the same footprints and borrowed elements from the transformation of Barcelona, some partially and others more profoundly.

The Olympics are the perfect excuse to revive projects that have been lying dormant for years in the cabinets of the different administrations.

## 2. The day after

On a clearly urban planning-based concept, the Olympics became an excuse to make investments and redress the city's lack of sports facilities.

We are proud that we can claim that Barcelona's Olympic facilities were the smallest in terms of capacity in the recent history of the Olympics, without losing sight of the requirements for the competitions and the demands of the international federations. Although put in this way it might seem easy, this was actually an arduous battle with the different international federations — the top authority in the organisation of sports competitions in the Olympics — which were used to asking for the moon.

For many years, the IOC had had an internal contradiction which, even though it likes to present it as resolved, is actually not. In order to organise Olympic Games – and in its zeal to stanch the gigantism of the Olympics – the IOC set minimum requirements (in terms of the capacity for spectators) which are contradicted by the ones demanded *sotto voce* by the international federations, the organisations that during the candidature phase ultimately approve the sports facilities proposed by the candidate cities. This contradiction is considerable, since in some cases it can exceed 50% of the capacity for spectators at the facilities.

Good proof of this is the 'bulges' that the recent Olympics have left in the guise of macro-facilities that are difficult to reuse, manage or make profitable in the future, especially when one of the factors most highly valued by the IOC itself is the concentration and proximity of the facilities (defended with many logistical factors that conceal the fact that the true motive is the ease of mobility of the members of the committee themselves).

I would mention familiar examples. I imagine it is still too early to issue a judgement on Beijing, but Athens is a flagrant example of what should not be done: they borrowed the Sydney model without taking into account the Barcelona model because of its proximity and culture. They built veritable monuments to the whims of the international federations, and one year after the Olympics, all the facilities were closed and the Greeks were debating what to do with them and how to manage them.

Barcelona, in contrast, clearly chose to prioritise the city's needs while making them compatible with the requirements of the international federations, which cost us a few mishaps. However, no one disputes the fact that Barcelona presented a model of sustainability that has been proven through the intensive use of the facilities by more than 250,000 members that practice sports today.

It is curious that thanks to the London 2012 candidature, now the English are the ones who see in Olympism the concept of legacy and sustainability, which they most likely learnt from Barcelona 20 years ago. Marketing stuff.

### **3. Barcelona, responsible for the technological failure of Atlanta**

I imagine that the title of this section is controversial, but I will try to explain it so as to leave no-one confused.

Barcelona made a huge push for technology. In fact, until Seoul 1988, the Olympics technologically represented the same thing as the sum of 28 world championships of 28 sports that were held simultaneously in the same city. I do not know whether everyone is held responsible for the important restrictions on the different media during the Olympics, but the IOC, aware of the increasing magnitude of the Olympics, began to restrict the number of media representatives during the Olympics. Thus, one national media operator (such as *La Vanguardia* or *El País*) could send two or three writers to the Olympics to report on the 28 sports represented, which meant that one journalist would be in one facility watching a competition, and in addition to writing about this sport, also had to keep abreast of what was happening in the other events, on which he also had to report.

## **Barcelona 1992, the first Olympics, technologically speaking**

In view of this ineluctable demand, Barcelona chose a kind of IT systems architecture that could offer customers, that is, the media, a sound service so that at any competition information could be obtained for any competition site in real time. Thus, what might actually seem simple entailed a high-risk venture back in 1988 – the year the decision was taken – since software had to be developed that could supply this service in a centralised fashion. EDS was commissioned with the project, and there is no need to outline the herculean effort entailed in developing this software or the number of hours and tests that were needed to reach the Olympics with the system ready to go.

The Barcelona Olympics were a success technologically speaking as well, and the challenge was then shifted to the forthcoming Olympics. Atlanta's main partner for both hardware and software was IBM, and despite the fact that the clearest choice would have been to start with the developments by EDS in Barcelona and improve on the software, they chose to base their IT on the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer. Why? The explanation is simple. EDS was IBM's main competitor in the American software market. The result is now famous: they did not finish either the development or the testing of the system on time.

As proof of the technological level and legacy that Barcelona brought to the Olympic Movement, we can mention the contribution of a company which, though its owners are neither Spanish nor Catalan, has Barcelona DNA: Atos Origin, formerly Sema-Schlumberger. Through its large events division, which is headquartered in Barcelona, it is the world sponsor of the IOC and is responsible for supplying the software and the integration of all the IT systems and databases for the Olympics. This division has a staff of 300 people, and right now it has major teams stationed in Singapore to support the first edition of the Youth Olympics, and in London, where it has sent more than 80 people two years before the Olympics begin. So it should come as no surprise that Catalan is spoken at the decision-making centres.

## **4. The important thing is to make the rankings**

Everyone knows the pronouncement by Baron de Coubertin, “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part”. This is surely one of the most widespread values in the Olympic Movement, referring to the effort of doing one's best, camaraderie and friendship above the competition itself.

The evolution of the Olympics towards a global product in which the desire to ensure the participation of the top athletes prevails contrasts with the gigantism that the event has attained.

In 1988, we revised the participation system that the IOC and the different international federations had used until then. The result was that we had a possible scenario of 22,000 athletes signed up, without counting the coaches and officials from the different delegations, and that this numerical information on participation by the different National Olympic Committees arrived only three months before the Olympics began, when the Olympic Village was already built and, in our case, was capable of holding 16,500 athletes and officials, without the possibility of improvising more housing and the corresponding services.

Therefore, we seriously suggested to the IOC a system that would limit the number of athletes and their delegations through each of the 28 sports; one would create a model of rankings that would ensure representation of all the teams in very popular sports like swimming and track and field, while in others, in a more detailed fashion, participation would be based on quotas by continents and rankings through world and continental championships.

Ultimately, the IOC clearly understood that the restrictions of the Olympic Village were real and difficult to solve, but it decided to pursue a different pathway, limiting national teams based on criteria of participation in previous Olympics, which would ensure minimal participation by each country. There is no need to cite the difficulty entailed in managing these quotas with the 172 participating countries in Barcelona.

In view of the experience of the 1992 Olympics, in Atlanta, the Barcelona proposal was fully implemented, since obviously it was much easier to manage 28 international federations than the 172 National Olympic Committees, in addition to providing added value to the competitions run by the international federations themselves, and the continental competitions organised by the IOC. This formula complemented the sports system and relied on the products of the IOC.

## 5. Image

The Olympics in Munich are very unlikely to figure in the collective imagination as exceptional ones because of the tragic episode that stained Olympism like never before. However, in terms of organisation, image and design, they were indeed a referent like no other edition had been before them: in terms of the design of the logo and the entire range of applications of the different pictograms of the sports, in terms of the signage and corporate image, and for the first time in terms of the use of a mascot as an element of identity and its different applications in merchandising.

Barcelona clearly adopted the reference of Munich<sup>19</sup> – most likely through cultural affinity, as Catalan design has always been closer to German or Swiss design than to any other referent or formal current – and proposed a logo based on the icon of the athlete and the primary colours of the Mediterranean expressed in an Oriental-style graphic that ended up constructing a language that extended to all the pictograms, sports and modalities, as well as all the services related to the programme of the sites.

This code and aesthetic were clearly incorporated into the corporate image of the Sydney and Beijing Olympics, translated into the local codes yet drawing from the same underpinnings.

Cobi, the mascot of the Barcelona Olympics, was created with the desire to make a break with the Disney tradition, even though it was hard to make it escape its universe of applications since the wide number of licenses and merchandising developed around the Olympics prevented it from being a real, surrealist alternative to the world of Disney.

## 6. Barcelona, design capital

“For the first time ever in the history of the Olympics...”. This is a recurring phrase among all the heads of communication of the different Organising Committees for the Olympic Games to stress the uniqueness of their Olympics. This phrase is rarely proven and aims to showcase their desire, interest and differentiation compared to preceding models.

I wanted to highlight a programme that did not continue on subsequent Organising Committees, perhaps because our Finestreta programme was not properly disseminated internationally, or simply because not all cities have the sensibility and cultural baggage (tradition) that Barcelona has in terms of design.

When we have the chance to participate in the Olympics, all of us who work and live in sports have the yearning to leave our mark, to bring the best of ourselves, sometimes through technological advances and other times through smaller contributions. The Olympics provide extraordinary resources that are rarely available to other sports organisations. The reality is that despite having these extraordinary resources at our disposal, time and energy are not as abundant when the challenge takes on the dimensions of the Olympics.

In Barcelona, we sports folks (the Directorate General of Sports of COOB '92) were right to launch a programme called Finestreta,

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19. The designer Oti Aicher was in charge of the image programme for Munich 1972 and worked as part of its Organising Committee. Barcelona 1992 chose an external team that centralised the bulk of the image programme (symbols, pictograms, signage, look, etc.) led by designer Josep Maria Trias. This team was also in charge of developing the graphic and volumetric applications of the mascot, designed by Xavier Mariscal.

whose goal was to make a detailed survey of all the sports equipment and facilities that affected the televised production, such as equestrianism obstacles; the judges' chairs in sports like tennis, badminton, synchronised swimming and table tennis; chalk holders for gymnastics, track and field and weightlifting; and supports for the official balls in water polo, handball and volleyball.

This programme was conducted for all 28 sports in the sports programme, working with the different heads of the sports organisations, making an in-depth inventory of each of their sports and noting their effects on the televised production. Thus, an extensive list was drawn up of the sports equipment, furniture and facilities that needed to be redesigned. To do this, we first enlisted the aid of professionals for the more complex design and production processes, such as chairs or obstacles in the different competitions, and catamarans for judges and television production crews in rowing and canoeing. Four design schools in the city also took part in this project, and their training programmes implemented exercises supervised by selected professors and students who joined the end of the production process along with the suppliers chosen to manufacture them.

The result was a set of more than 50 items designed just for the Olympics, some of which still appear in the catalogues of sports equipment suppliers. Thus, we can categorically claim that the expression "For the first time ever in the history of the Olympics..." is still valid.

## 7. The ceremonies, a made-for-TV spectacle

Seoul was an impressive mass spectacle: thousands of performers scattered around the stadium with rehearsals down to the millimetre and repetitions *ad infinitum*; a spectacle of Oriental culture yet quite distant from our own sensibilities. I think that all of us who had the chance to attend this performance live were rendered speechless, wondering how we could outdo such a huge deployment of resources.

Barcelona clearly strove for a spectacle planned and designed for television, with a great deal of control over the gestures and efforts; it focused on thrill over sheer quantity. Our Mediterranean version astounded the world and had a major impact on subsequent ceremonies: Atlanta, Sydney and Athens all followed in the footsteps of Barcelona.

The simplicity was incredible, particularly with the crucial movement of lighting the cauldron, a spectacle that had never before been envisioned with such tension and risk. Proof of the impact of this sequence is that the subsequent Olympic Games tried to outdo it, with more means and a higher budget, yet with iffy results:

- Atlanta: The thrill of giving Muhammad Ali, who was suffering from Parkinson's disease, the honour of lighting the flame meant a wobbly lighting and rise of the 'ball' that transferred the flame to the cauldron.
- Sydney: More than 40 million dollars were spent in an effort to go beyond the gesture of an arrow. A cascade of water covered the stairs on which the cauldron was mounted, and the flame and the cauldron emerged from the water and travelled awkwardly up to the final position.
- Athens: The cauldron lowered to the flame carrier, with no further ado.
- Beijing: The ante was upped. A huge technological deployment was personalised in the guise of an athlete who travelled around the entire upper reaches of the entire stadium until reaching the cauldron. It was exhausting for the spectators.

No one has achieved the simplicity and thrill of Barcelona, which to date has only been outdone in economic respects, but never in the end result.

Since Barcelona 1992, there have been recurring themes in the ceremonies, such as the change in the colour of the ground of the stadium from the sea blue to the red of the land that represents the desert in Australia, finally turning the entire stadium

into a vast sea that evokes the Aegean. It is also common to display a huge Olympic flag with the five rings representing the Olympic Movement emerging, unfolding, being raised or moved to cover the athletes.

Even though it was only hinted at in Barcelona – recall the movements of the figures suspended from balloons used by Els Comediants in the Closing Ceremony – the third dimension, that is, vertical movement, became the preamble to the three-dimensional stage in the Sydney Ceremonies and found its utmost expression in the Beijing Ceremonies.

All that remains is to explain our attempt to hold the Opening Ceremony of the Barcelona Olympics on a Friday for a variety of reasons. First, it meant that many athletes could attend it; secondly, one more day was allowed for the competitions, which meant that the calendar could be distributed in a less crowded fashion; and finally, a night-time or evening ceremony offered many more possibilities from the performance perspective than daylight did. Our proposal did not come to fruition simply because things have always been done this way. It was inevitable that what Barcelona had proposed was accepted in the Atlanta Olympics, since the number of female basketball and volleyball teams rose from eight to 12, which required 16 days of competition, that is, one more than the 15 in Barcelona.

### **Towards the concept of franchise**

Until the Barcelona Olympics, the franchisee (Organising Committee) was the lord and master of the product, while the IOC acted as the franchiser and was limited to the role of simple spectator of the product, even though it was its owner. Except for the aspects of protocol and rituals of the ceremonies, which are clearly contained in the Olympic Charter, the IOC had no authority to control the product and was left awaiting its return by the franchisee, while the latter was the one to bring all the added value, creativity and the organisational model.

After the organisational failure of the Atlanta Olympics, the pathway towards the culture of the franchise was inevitable. The franchiser (the IOC) had increasing control over the product, image, communication and services, and this was achieved by directly managing a series of key elements in the organisation – interaction of the software, rights and television production, international sponsorship, etc. – leaving ever smaller leeway for the Organising Committee or franchisee. Below we shall see how this concept attained crucial importance in today's culture of organising the Olympics.

## **8. Television rights**

Negotiating television rights for the Olympics was part of the IOC's process of evolution towards a franchise. In this growth of the product on a global scale, we should bear in mind that after two editions marred by a mutual boycott of the Western and Eastern blocs (Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984), the commercial value of television rights was uncertain. Starting in the Seoul Olympics, their value as a global product was confirmed.

Television rights represent the crux for the Organising Committee to achieve a balanced budget. Almost 40% of the revenues come from these rights, and of course each Organising Committee's interest is to match or exceed the agreement reached in the preceding games. The titanic effort made by the Barcelona 1992 Organising Committee was interpreted by the IOC as a threat to the interest of the Olympic Games.

After Barcelona 1992, the IOC negotiated broadcast rights directly with the television stations in the medium and long term for both the Summer and Winter Games, with a scenario of continuity and without the risk of breaking the market.

## 9. With hands in pockets

We were visited by the IOC's Coordination Commission in charge of keeping track of the efforts of the Barcelona 1992 Organising Committee. Their monitoring was based on personal experiences and lacked any semblance of a method. They would come for three or four days and listen to the explanations of COOB'92, and at most visit the construction sites of the most emblematic facilities.

The change of the Winter Games to alternate with the Summer Games took place in 1992. The Albertville Olympics were the last Winter Games that fell in the same year as the Summer Games. Therefore, Barcelona had a unique opportunity to learn from and observe the Seoul Games, since the proximity of the Albertville Olympics vastly curtailed the possibility of modifying or comparing the organisational hypotheses. An ambitious observation plan was concocted for Seoul using the technology available back then: cameras and video cameras, recorders, binoculars, numerous forms and an exhaustive observation and learning methodology were all placed at the disposal of the observers.

## 10. Reinventing the wheel

When the Seoul 1988 Olympics ended, we received nothing, or next to nothing, from its Organising Committee. Only the results from our observations, in addition to their manuals, written in Korean – a top priority target of our desire to learn – were left after a month working with the sports directors. That and little more, such as a handful of meetings with the Director of Sports in Seoul.

I recall that at most we were advised by a sports expert, the Yugoslav Artur Takac, who had been in charge of organising the Mediterranean Games in Split in 1979, an expert in athletics and a trusted colleague of Samaranch. The Director of Sports of the IOC at that time, Walter Troëger, also helped us by visiting us a couple of times and trying to explain to us his experience with other Organising Committees, a totally enthusiastic and honest effort.

In 1990, Gilbert Felli was appointed Sports Director of the IOC, endowing this post with a professional dimension for the first time. Therefore, we in the Sports Department of COOB'92 were the first ones who somehow taught the work that had to be done, among other reasons because Felli's experience had revolved around winter sports as the Councillor of Sports in Lausanne City Council.

We learned that, bearing in mind that the Olympic Games are the most comprehensive event that exists in terms of their organisation, it makes no sense for there to be no transfer of knowledge, for example regarding the size, procedures, conclusions, good things and things that should not be repeated, among others. Some of us wanted to transfer this knowledge, and after grabbing the papers, files and diskettes, we travelled to Atlanta to help them plan the sports division. Obviously this should not be a voluntary mechanism.

In 1995, along with Jordi López Benasat, Director of Technology of Barcelona'92, we delivered to the IOC a document that expressed this concern, that is, how we could guarantee the transfer of the knowledge generated by one Organising Committee to the following in order to help it grasp the complexity of the organisation by supplying magnitudes and information, as well as guidelines on good practices.

The document suggested creating an organisation independent of the IOC which would guarantee the transmission of knowledge from one Olympics to the next by including the people who had made the organisation of the previous Olympics possible as external consultants. The goal was to develop standards of reference and adapt them continuously to the evolution in the needs and the development of technologies related to the Olympic organisations. It included a feasibility plan with the structural costs and ways of generating revenues through potential clients such as aspiring cities and candidates, the Organising Committees for the Summer and Winter Games, and other organisers of multi-sports and multi-site events. We got no

formal response, but we assume that our proposal did not drop into a bottomless pit since a similar programme was put into practice at the Sydney Olympics in conjunction with Monash University, which included a business plan quite similar to the one we proposed six years earlier.<sup>20</sup> Very mysterious. We still hope for at least an honorific mention of our proposal. It is clear that the Saxons know how to sell better, or that it dovetailed with Samaranch's absence from the IOC's ranks.

## 11. Observation plan

The organisational problems that became evident during the Atlanta Olympics made the IOC realise the complexity of organising the Olympics, unquestionably the most complex logistical operation on Earth: a single productive cycle almost eight years long (six years in the days of Barcelona'92) between the formation of the Organising Committee for the Olympic Games and its liquidation, which evolves from 0 to 150,000 people working or assisting in different functions and then disappears. All of this happens in only seven years and with goals that are published and known by everyone in the literal sense of the word, and with 17,000 journalists representing all the media in the world within the organisation.

The IOC was aware of the risk entailed in organising the Olympic Games and that the result of seven years of work could only be seen in the 16 days that the operation lasted. Atlanta placed serious questions on the table: Who runs the Olympics? Who owns them? Things started to come into focus for the IOC as it noted how easy it was for the entire organisational effort to go to the wind.

For this reason, for the Sydney Olympics, we designed an ambitious observation plan for the IOC in which 60 people participated, and we had the honour of developing the concept and working plan and coordinating the observation team. For the first time in the history of the Olympics, part of the work and the methodology was the same as the ones used in the COOB's observation of the Seoul Olympics.

Starting in 1997, a methodology was launched to support the Coordination Commission of the efforts of the Organising Committee, which consisted of six-monthly reports, monitoring the local press, total and utter sifting and revision of the steering plan – from the period before and after the Olympics – organised by topics, and sending this study to the different members of the Commission before beginning the journey of clarifying the questions that were asked during the visit and at the different presentations by the Organising Committee.

This study was developed under the supervision of Pere Miró by staff in Barcelona who had worked on organising the 1992 Olympics, and it culminated in the development of an Olympics operations manual for the IOC, which set forth a working method for the main centre of IOC operations and defined the procedures and system of monitoring, communication and reports from the IOC and the Organising Committee during the operation of the Sydney Olympics.

After the Sydney Olympics, the IOC adopted an observation programme that includes the different Organising Committees for the Summer and Winter Games, the candidate cities for future Olympic Games and other continental organising committees so that the observation efforts are compatible in time with the operational efforts of the Organising Committee. The first IOC observation programmes for Sydney 2000 and Salt Lake City 2002 were designed by the author of this article based on the experiences yielded from the observation plan that COOB'92 performed in Seoul in 1988.

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20. In 1998, the IOC and the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) agreed to create a knowledge transfer programme known as Transfer of Knowledge (TOK). Later on, in February 2002, the IOC and Monash Ed (owned by Monash University, Cambridge Consulting Services and Equiset) created the company Olympic Games Knowledge Services (OGKS) to manage the TOK and offer customised services to the organising committees of other kinds of events.

## 12. With local folk

The Barcelona Olympics were the challenge of a city, a region and a country that viewed the event as the opportunity to set aside the 'mañana' so deeply rooted in the Spanish culture of the day. It was an update in modernity, effective management and teamwork. There is no element that distorts the quality of the management of the Olympics, and there is no note of negative issues related to the management, economic results or other aspects of the way the Barcelona Olympics were organised.

The Olympics were massively organised and conducted by local folk, professionals from the country's companies and public administration, along with the inestimable contributions from fantastic professionals and important suppliers. This is, of course, a far cry from the 'circus' of experts that accompanies the organisation of the Olympic Games today, many of them the offspring of Barcelona'92, such as television production (Manuel Romero directs the Olympic Broadcasting Services) and the development of the software that supports the management of the Olympics (the aforementioned Atos Origin).

## Conclusion

As the franchiser of the Olympics, the IOC has stretched further than desirable. As it becomes more than a simple consultancy and grants executive functions, the excess zealousness to control the Olympics for reasons of security, risk control, standardisation and homogenisation can actually limit the creative capacity of the cities, countries and Organising Committees. We hope that the Olympics never stop being a challenge for these cities, countries and Organising Committees, one that requires them to give the best of themselves to the benefit of all of us who enjoy the Olympic Games.