

Sport, we're told, lies at the heart of what it means to be Australian. But what does this mean? The Conversation, in partnership with [Griffith Review](#), is publishing a series of essays exploring the [role and place of sport in Australian life](#)

Why would a country whose greatest export is a bikini wax be awarded the Olympic Games? Brazil – where every night promises to be Carnivale, where every girl is apparently from Ipanema, and “the Brazilian” is what lies behind the thin strip of lycra that doubles as both the national costume and a barely-there swimsuit.

I've probably just answered my own question. The Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympic Games is an invitation to a city known for partying more than anything else. Certainly, the (mostly) men at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) who elected it as host city back in 2009 found it an invitation too good to refuse: in the final round of voting, for every tick given to Madrid, there were two for Rio.

Rio's bid promised a manageable budget of US\$2.82 billion – not excessive for the world's tenth-largest economy. Of course, the budget did not include infrastructure costs (as mandated by the IOC), despite the fact that cities use the Games as an excuse to mount large infrastructure programs that would be difficult to sell to a public otherwise.

It's remarkable how much inconvenience and belt-tightening a city's population is prepared to suffer if the promise at the end of it all is an Olympic Games. Just ask Sydney residents ahead of the 2000 Games, or Beijing residents ahead of 2008, or Londoners ahead of 2012.

An extensive legacy program was put in place for Rio de Janeiro, including the major redevelopment of the city's port; a new public transport network that would be accessible to two-thirds of Rio's 12 million residents (compared to less than a fifth at the time of the bid in 2009); and environmental improvements, such as the cleaning and regeneration of Rio's waterways, along with a new major water treatment facility and sewerage works.

Suspended reality: the ins and outs of Rio's Olympic bubble

Written by Tracy Holmes, Doctoral Student, University of Technology Sydney

As usual, the vision was impressive. Anybody who was anyone lined up to greet visiting Olympic officials, promising the first Games to be held in South America would be a spectacular success. The president of Brazil's Central Bank briefed the IOC personally.

Forecasts suggested the economy would continue to grow strongly while the inflation rate would continue downwards to around 3.5%. What could possibly go wrong?

Not only has Brazil been hit by the worst recession in 30 years, when commodity prices – the backbone of the Brazilian economy – collapsed and business confidence hit a severe low, but by the end of 2015 inflation was nearly three times the projected forecast, over 10%.

Impeachment proceedings against President Dilma Rousseff began in early 2016 for allegedly manipulating government accounts to hide the true state of the economy as she ran for re-election in October 2014. It's likely a caretaker head of state will now declare the Games open at a ceremony beamed around the world on August 5 from the country's most well-known stadium, the Maracanã.

Not far behind the security shield that will protect the Maracanã for the duration of the Games, public discontent will continue. For months in the lead up to the Games, teachers have been on strike because they haven't been paid; the hospital system was in crisis due to lack of funding; there were 91,000 new cases of the Zika virus in the first three months of 2016; and the sports minister, the health minister, and the head of the National Force for Public Security had all resigned. None of which the IOC could be blamed for.

However, a country with a history of economic and political volatility, such as Brazil's, was never going to provide a sure bet. Despite the obvious crisis unfolding with only a year to go, Thomas Bach, the IOC president, claimed:

The people of the city – the Cariocas – are already showing their enthusiasm.

He was right in one sense: the city's residents were enthusiastically embracing street protests

calling for the end of alleged corruption in the awarding of Olympic contracts. Residents who'd bought into the Olympic dream were starting to sense it was a party they might not get to enjoy after all.

That their enthusiasm was turning from pro-Olympic to anti-Olympic was a fact the IOC president seemed to have missed. Or, at least, wilfully ignored. Bach remained upbeat. But then he would, wouldn't he?

During April, at the ceremonial lighting of the Olympic torch in Olympia, Greece, concerns over Rio were swirling about so strongly they threatened to extinguish the flame. Bach remained on message though:

I remain convinced that the Olympic Games in Rio 2016 will be truly spectacular.

No doubt they will.

Particularly for the billions who will watch the worldwide coverage, beamed into homes by rights-holders who pay handsomely for the privilege. Rights-holders, such as NBC, BBC and the Seven Network don't fork out hundreds of millions of dollars so they can broadcast a balanced view of an Olympic host city.

Every dollar they spend is designed to mount coverage that pulls at the audience's heartstrings, keeping the viewer locked on while advertising dollars click through the television till.

For those inside the bubble, it's easy to get caught up in the romance of the Olympic Games. It traps you inside and shuts the rest of the world out, a lock-up for those who don't even realise it's happening. For two weeks, the "Olympic family" – as the IOC likes to call accredited personnel – is contained inside a security hub.

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In Rio, there will be 85,000 security agents contracted to watch over the Games. There will be helicopters buzzing overhead, marksmen located on building tops, and CCTV cameras trained on virtually anything that moves.

There will be 25,000 accredited media reporting on 10,000-plus athletes watched on by around 8,000 officials.

From inside the bubble, the rest of the world and whatever is happening in it becomes irrelevant. Very few of those on the inside ever venture beyond the Olympic perimeter to so much as meet a local, who might live only a few blocks from the main stadium.

Inside, everything is taken care of.

Olympic family members have their own transport system, with their own Olympic lanes on streets so they don't have to sit in city traffic, and their own cafés and restaurants at each venue.

At the main press centre and the international broadcast centre, everything a working journalist might need has also been built into the system – cafés, restaurants, a hair salon, massage room, chemist, laundry, bank and a newsagent are now standard offerings.

Wearing a sandwich-size Olympic accreditation around your neck for 16 days means, quite literally, the suspension of reality. You are caught in a world of fit, healthy, goal-driven athletes searching for gold.

Heads of state come in busloads, sponsors entertain their clients in plush surroundings, and the IOC members look on like proud grandparents hosting the ultimate party for their "Olympic family".

With early morning heats and late night finals, who's got time to stray out beyond the perimeter?

Local residents who live within a few blocks of the Maracanã Stadium in Rio won't have to practice their English, Chinese or German. The chances they will meet anybody from the Olympic family could be described as remote, at best.

With 100 days to go, Rousseff, Brazil's embattled president, could not bring herself to be as upbeat as her IOC counterpart. At celebrations marking the countdown she described the Games as being "in a totally adequate situation". Make of that what you will.

Surely the difference between "adequate" and "spectacular" is not just a matter of being lost in translation. She also has other things on her mind – defending herself at an impeachment trial being just one of them. Another is the ongoing threat of the Zika virus and an expected 16,000 cases of microcephaly before year's end.

Juliana Barbassa, Brazilian journalist and author of [Dancing with the Devil in the City of God](#) (2015), says Rio residents can be volatile – they may just as quickly suspend their anger once the Games begin and enjoy the party while it lasts.

However, she notes:

There are some very serious questions the protests were really tapping in on, key priorities for the population like 'where's the sewerage treatment plant we were promised? Where's the clean up of the bay at the centre of the city that we were promised? Why's all the money going to things that don't make a difference to our everyday quality of life?'

Only two years ago, Rio and a number of other Brazilian cities faced the same discontent ahead of the FIFA World Cup, although the president was still occupying her office and inflation hadn't hit 10%. Barbassa notes:

These are very big, very serious issues about governance and the tenor of our democracy but then the games start and people get really excited...when the ball is rolling Rio is a fantastic

place to be.

In 2009, when Rio was announced as the host of the 2016 Olympic Games, Barbassa decided to move back to Brazil as the Associated Press correspondent because it was “the place to be”.

She says now, though, the country is stuck in a perfect storm of internal, external and political forces dragging Brazil to a place that was unimaginable seven years ago:

It raises these larger questions that go beyond ‘can we hold these Games successfully?’ and go into ‘why are we doing this? Who’s gaining and who’s losing when we are spending so much money on one single event like this?’

Government documents show that the Games budget currently stands at almost US\$10 billion – a mix of both public and private funds – more than three times the budget given in the bid documents. To put that back into some perspective, the Games budget is 16 times more than that available to fight Zika. Barbassa was right – who’s gaining and who’s losing from this event?

Those who are tired of the negativity and the criticism will quite rightly cite expressions of doom leading up to almost every Olympic Games.

Ahead of Sydney’s 2000 Olympics, international media were writing about the imminent threat of Ross River virus infecting the world’s best athletes; ahead of Athens 2004, the dramas were so well documented there were rumours the IOC was contemplating stripping the event from Greece; Beijing 2008 was prepared so far in advance there were concerns the venues would be outdated before the Games began, not to mention the ever-present human rights issues; London 2012 had security issues so dire they had to call in the military to do the job.

Olympic-sized dramas are nothing new. Ahead of the running, jumping and lifting, the world’s media find fascination in issues that existed before a city became an Olympic host and will no doubt remain well after.

But Brazil's issues seem particularly onerous. Between winning the right to host a Games and actually staging the two-week sporting festival, there are seven years.

However, organising committees don't count the years, they count the Mondays – the limited number of weeks they have to get the job done. And it's a mighty job.

One Olympic Games is the equivalent of running 28 world championships in the same place concurrently. It involves the creation of a city within a city, to accommodate a sudden influx of almost 30,000 people requiring housing, feeding and transportation.

Teams from 200 nations need training venues outside of competition venues. Athletes and officials need translation services. They need medical facilities. The needs are extraordinary.

As a separate overlay, organisers are bound to create another layer for the media, which outnumbers athletes at the Games two to one. It is a well-known catchcry in Olympic organising circles that the primary goal of any Games is to "keep the media happy".

As long as their internet connections work, they have access to accommodation, food and alcohol, quick and efficient transport to all Olympic venues and friendly staff to cater to their needs, then the Games will be successful.

Organising committees have learnt the hard way to ignore the media's demands at their own peril.

This is the reality of every city that wins the right to host the world's biggest two-week sporting festival. Perhaps it is why the majority of cities bidding to hold future Games are those that have never had the experience: they need to seriously consider whether 16 short days of celebration are worth the seven years, the 365 Mondays of pain it takes to make it happen.

There is always a "but", however, and here it is. When the cauldron is lit inside the Olympic

stadium on August 5, 100s of 1000s of mobile phones will flash, and send images of the magical moment around the world. More than a billion people will be watching on television.

For the next 16 days, as Bach invites the youth of the world to come and compete fairly and cleanly, the planet's television-watching population will be momentarily transported to a mythical place, where the world is full of young, healthy men and women doing the simplest of things in the most remarkable ways.

They run faster, they jump higher, they lift stronger than any other. It is a thing of mastery, a thing of beauty. It is humankind excelling. It is a display of perfection, or at least the pursuit of it.

It is a two-week crescendo to what has been a lifetime pursuit for athletes from every dot on the map. It's a celebration of humanity unlike any other.

The street protests, the favelas, the price of iron ore, the failing economy and the impeachment of a president will be pushed to the background. Civil wars, refugees and Islamic State will be momentarily forgotten by those consumed by Olympic fever.

Whoever has the luxury of sitting back and watching the Games unfold on their plasma screens can imagine the world is good. The planet can celebrate with the victors and empathise with the losers. Young viewers will dare to dream their own Olympic fantasies.

In this bubble, the world is a joyful place. This is what the IOC trades in: suspended reality and the suspension of disbelief.

As far as the IOC is concerned, it doesn't need Rio to fix all its ills. It just needs them suspended for the two weeks while the world is watching. Once the flame is extinguished at the closing ceremony on August 21, the IOC members will board their planes and be gone.

The bills, the undelivered promises, the economic hangover will be left behind, to become

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somebody else's problem. The measure of the Games should not be the two weeks of the event but rather the two weeks following, once the five-ring circus has moved on and the damage can be assessed.

You can read the rest of Our Sporting Life [here](#).

Tracy Holmes does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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