

## **The Olympics as Media Space: The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games from the Interdisciplinary Perspective of Media and Design Studies**

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### **Abstract**

The Olympic Games have become a distinctive form of the mediated public sphere for global and national audiences, on the one hand, and a great social laboratory for the employment of cutting-edge communication technologies and design strategies, on the other hand. In our view, an interdisciplinary approach of media and design is particularly relevant to our attempt to investigate an intricate interplay between material and immaterial environments that are configured by the media, sports and creative industry complex throughout the Olympics. Our research aims to provide a critical analysis of key public spaces of the Beijing Olympics from the media/design perspective with particular reference to media space. First, the paper critically assesses the contributions and the limitations of media and design studies in our understanding of the Olympics in the age of new media. Second, analyzing the case of the National Stadium of the Beijing Olympics, the paper examines the roles of the Olympic architecture and media in the promotion and interpretation of architectural practice, before and after the completion of the Olympic venues. In doing so, we intend to draw out theoretical and methodological implications for developing an interdisciplinary research on the Olympic Games in the fields of media, design and urban studies.

### **I. Introduction**

The Olympic Games are among the largest-in-scale global media events, and have become a great social laboratory for the employment of cutting-edge communication

technologies and design strategies by leading industries of the host cities as well as the main transnational global corporate bodies. Organizing an Olympic Games involves multifaceted design and media endeavors of extravagant magnitude and expenditure, aiming to re-establish the power of the Olympic institution and its inherent principles (such as humanism and internationalism) and to express and reconfigure the culture of the host city/nation in physical and conceptual terms.

The Beijing Olympics is seen as an opportunity to upgrade China's global standing, and has led the city to expedite urban transformation by undertaking high-risk market-driven urban strategies, which produce a rupture with the physical and psychogeographical domain of everyday life. These spatial operations are paralleled by the frequent use of ancient Chinese iconography in the graphic design applications (emblem, torch, posters), rearticulated through the principles of contemporary design. These references to history become an ideal vehicle for expressing both contemporary Chinese nationalism and the state-corporate culture. This referential framework also fully responds to the demands of the global audience as it strives to consume the 'other' through registers of difference that often fall to stereotypical iconographies. Concurrently, the Olympic Games have become a distinctive form of the mediated public sphere for the global and national audiences. Global and local media have played a major role in articulating the collective experiences and disseminating the ideas of 'new Beijing and China' with the help of advanced communication technologies, such as mobile networks, the Internet, and the blogosphere.

In our view, a combined media and design perspective is particularly relevant for investigating the overall material and immaterial environment surrounding the

contemporary Olympics, an environment in which the integrated strategies of media technology and design practice are extensively utilized through global mega events and have tremendous impact on the formation of the social identities of national and global audiences. Our research is primarily concerned with a critical analysis of the key public spaces of the Beijing Olympics from the media/design perspective, focusing particularly on the complex interplay between physical and mediated spaces. For this purpose we are investigating the National stadium with particular reference to *the intertwining notions of a mediated physical space/aestheticized media space*. In this paper, we seek in particular to focus our attention on the theoretical and methodological aspects of our research, in order to approach Beijing's Olympic Stadium, as a media space, that is to say as both a physical and a mediated space articulated through multiple and complex enterprises that unfold in a variety of spaces beyond its specific location in Beijing.

## **II. Olympic Media Space through a Media Studies Perspective**

### **II-1. Media Studies and the Olympics**

In the fields of media and communication studies, various Olympic researches have been carried out so far, including political economics of the Olympic media industry; content analysis of Olympic symbols and images; audience and reception research on the effects of the Olympics on the formation of national identity; cultural analysis of the ideological and hegemonic aspects of the sporting events and so on. Since the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, the twofold—yet mutually interwoven—developments of the Olympics are noteworthy. At the geopolitical level, the Olympics have entered into a new stage of global society in a post-cold war era, having transformed the roles and maps of modern

nation-state systems. At the level of technological development, the media-scape of the Olympics has gradually shifted from the age of network television age via the period of 24-hour cable television to the era of the Internet-mediated mobile communication. Hence, there have been notable theoretical attempts to develop more interdisciplinary methodological perspectives on the Olympics which can reflect those continuous changes. Two recent reflections on the Olympic studies are particularly relevant to our attempt to develop an interdisciplinary approach to the Olympics as media space. One is Daniel Dayan's reappraisal of his theory of Media Events.<sup>1</sup> The other is John MacAloon's criticism of the use of the theory of the spectacle in Olympic research from the perspective of multi-genre events.<sup>2</sup> Both authors have made several important contributions to our understanding of the Olympics. Whilst their theories provided valuable departure points for a systematic approach to the Olympics, by themselves they constitute unsatisfactory bases for an analysis of the changing relations between the media and the Olympics in the post-television age of the 'global village', in the sense of Marshall McLuhan's famous terminology. By critically assessing the actualities of their accounts, we try to bring forth key aspects of the critical approach to the Olympics as media space.

## **II-2. The Olympics and Media Events**

In their groundbreaking work, *Media Events*, Dayan and Katz sought to associate the process of mass communication with an anthropological approach to ceremonial public occasions.<sup>3</sup> Examining the dynamics of large-scale public events through broadcast television, the authors characterized the main forms of the media events as contests, conquests and coronations, the forms of which are dramatic embodiments of Max Weber's

three types of authority (rationality, charisma, and tradition). By doing so, Dayan and Katz showed how a certain form of narrative genre bound up with electronic media attracted audience attention throughout the globe. In his recent article, Dayan offers a critical reflection on their theory of Media Events with particular focus on its applicability to the Beijing Olympics. Dayan argues that given the predictable nature of the Olympic formula, the Olympics tend to be no longer envisaged as 'events-on-their-own'. The Olympics are not conceived as 'messages' but as media.<sup>4</sup> I would like to mention three key revisions embedded in Dayan's reflections, each closely relevant for my concern with the Olympics as media space: the changing nature of public events; new media technology; and the dynamics of the formulation of collective identity.

First, in *Media Events*, the main functions of social occasions (e.g. rituals, festivals and games) were primarily concerned with those ceremonial and integral aspects that public events articulate. In the recent reflection, Dayan emphasizes a more neutral function of the Olympics, analogically characterizing them as 'palimpsests' that are used 'as blank slates, as empty stages available for all sorts of new dramaturgies besides their own'<sup>5</sup>. Despite its concern with the 'empty' mode of the event, the Media Events theory is still rooted in the (neo) Durkheimian approach to social occasions that tends to underestimate conflict-laden social occasions. As Roche critically points out, the formulation of the Media Events theory hinges upon three main actors involved with the events (the events organizer; television elites/organization and the viewing public) and thereby tends to pay insufficient attention to the role of the state.<sup>6</sup> The lack of any critical account of political power hinders the Media Events theory in assessing the interplay between the public events and political power more systematically. In their investigation

of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Larson and Park applied the theory of Media Events and analyzed the Seoul Olympics as a form of political communication.<sup>7</sup> They revealed the significant role of the military government of South Korea throughout the period of the Olympic bid and preparation, and highlighted the key role the Seoul Olympics played in not only the rapid economic modernization and even democratization of Korea, but also in social mobilization and the legitimization of the military dictatorship. By doing so, Larson and Park offered a critical conclusion that the Media Events theory without a careful consideration of the political conflict ‘tended to be salutes to the *status quo*.’<sup>8</sup>

Second, in relation to technological advancements, Dayan draws attention to the fundamentally altered television environment for the Beijing Olympics. The Media Events theory conceived radio to be a medium of segmentation and broadcast television a medium of national integration. Now, for Dayan, we are entering into a new television environment: television plays a role of segmentation rather than one of integration due to multiple channels generated by new media technology.<sup>9</sup> However, as Nick Couldry rightly indicates, Dayan and Katz’s argument ‘brackets out the growing complexity of the contemporary media audience’.<sup>10</sup> The new media technologies such as the Internet-mediated communications have engendered the distinct forms of media experience. The audiences in the post-broadcast television era are no longer passive recipients or homogeneous spectators; rather they are more actively engaged in the production and distribution of media events. As Dayan also notes, media technology would create and integrate communities larger than nations. If modern forms of imaged communities have been extensively grounded on one-way communication media (from print newspapers to radio and television), the new media technology would create a novel form of public

sphere (i.e. a virtual public space) predicated upon more participatory communication which primarily transcends localities. The driving forces of the social integration or segregation are less akin to the hitherto mass-reception of messages than to the individualized engagement in the creation of the events, which can be characterized as *networked individualism* in Manuel Castells' terminology.<sup>11</sup>

Third, Dayan also underlines the perceptual dimension of the media experience by maintaining that media events provide 'not only knowledge or information but also a shared experience', an experience which is grounded upon 'narrative continuity, visual proximity and shared temporality.'<sup>12</sup> Hence, unlike the cognitive and discursive functions of the normative model of the public sphere advocated mainly by Jürgen Habermas,<sup>13</sup> the formative logics of social identities articulated by public events are more deeply rooted in the sensuous encounters of the mediated images and symbols. The key features of the reception of the Olympics are grounded upon the aesthetic experiences of the spectacles created and disseminated by the global media and entertainment industry complex.

Addressing the critical reflections above, Dayan asserts that contemporary media events tend to be 'subverted (denounced), diverted (derailed), or perverted (hijacked)', having lost the power of enchantment. The understanding of the Olympics as media space necessitates a critical account of the aesthetic dimension of the media space, which entails an analysis of the bodily experiences of the physical and mediated realities, an aesthetics which originally refers to a study of the senses of human beings. Herein lies a contribution to critical design studies on space, which enables us to go beyond the shortcomings embedded in the abstract account of the spectacle (Guy Debord) and the narrow idea of the spectacle (John MacAloon).

### **II-3. The Olympics and the Spectacle**

Whereas the Media Events theory concerns the social and institutional functions of public events, MacAloon's ethnographic research primarily attempts to analyze the diverse and distinct types of Olympic experiences with which individual participants of the events are bounded. Throughout his numerous works, including his earlier work, "Cultural Performances, Cultural Theory", MacAloon has shown the methodological importance of ethnographic research based upon a detailed anthropological account in the Olympic studies.<sup>14</sup> In his recent article, "The Theory of Spectacle: Reviewing Olympic Ethnography", MacAloon reiterates the interpretive task of ethnography and criticizes the overly abstract and generalized application of the concepts of 'mega-events' and 'spectacle' into Olympic studies. MacAloon's methodological concern with neo-Marxist and cultural approaches is particularly relevant for our discussion.

'Mega-events' usually refers to 'large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events (e.g. World Fairs and the Olympics) which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance' and 'typically organized by variable combinations of national governmental and international non-governmental organizations', and thus can be said to be important elements in 'official versions of public culture.'<sup>15</sup> For MacAloon, however, the approach to the Olympics as a mega-event is no less than 'a monolithic understanding', which tends to erase empirical, cultural and conceptual distinctions among the performance genres. In MacAloon's view, the Olympic Games are a model of complex performance systems, uncovering "recognition,



characterization, and correlation of differential experiences among cultures, social segments, and layers of power within the Olympic movement and among its audience”.<sup>16</sup>

In a similar vein, MacAloon maintains that most approaches to the Olympics under the rubric of ‘spectacle’ overemphasize the predominance of the ‘pseudo-image’ and ‘the role of visual phenomena and symbolic codes in the transformation of the capitalist culture’.<sup>17</sup> A term like spectacle becomes ‘an imperialistic conception’, which is uncritically employed to denote a backcloth of social pathologies – such as ‘commercialization, alienation, hegemony, mass culture, simulacra, commodification, mediatization, and even globalization’ – and, further more, is utilized as ‘the encompassing trope for the decaying public sphere’.<sup>18</sup> MacAloon argues that ‘the spectacle’ should be carefully used only as a distinctive type of performative genre engaged in multiple interactions and functional dynamics with other genres like games, rites and festivals.

Despite some valuable contributions made by his various researches, the main features of the Olympic ethnography stressed by MacAloon have limited application to the analysis of the Olympic experiences in the age of global media. First, MacAloon’s ethnographic formula is grounded upon the distinctions between the performative genres, but it has become more difficult to distinguish the spectacle from other genres. The spectacles created through the opening or closing ceremonies and the competitions of the Olympics are a product, a work of art and a commodity, which are designed, created and disseminated by the creative, media, entertainment and sports industry complex. The multi-dimensional aspects of the spectacle indicate the interwoven relations between the industries, resulting in the Olympics as a hybrid genre between festivals, games and

rituals, between news, entertainment and sports, and between contests, conquests and coronation in Dayan and Katz's terminology. The unprecedented global scale of the Olympics has been rendered possible and maintained by those complicatedly networked industries.

Second, MacAloon differentiates the Olympics from other 'mega' productions of the global sports industry by their commitment to face-to-face intercultural interaction and education expressing the fundamental doubt about 'a thing as a festival via television or true spectacle experience for that matter'.<sup>19</sup> For him, there are indispensable differences between the direct encounter of the Olympic symbols (e.g. key characteristics of ritual and festival as exemplified by the Olympic flame relay) and the mediated experiences of the spectacle through media (e.g. the collective viewing of the opening or closing ceremonies). With respect to the growing roles of television in the Olympics, MacAloon asserts that the Olympics are 'not festival *by* television' but one '*with* television.' In my view, the current form of the commercialized and globally broadcast Olympics are one *for* television. Here, MacAloon's account of the ceremonial experience seems restricted to localized and face-to-face interactions. This is too narrow a definition to use as a basis for theorizing the way in which the development of media technology has impacted on the main aspects of the ceremonial and ritual experiences. The analytical question is concerned less with *what* the ontological natures of the Olympic experiences are than with *how* the mediated experiences of the spectacle are configured in connection with new forms of rituals or festivals conditioned by certain forms of communication technology. In the ceremonies of the Olympics, the configurations of time and space, and reality and virtual reality are largely shaped by means of the media technology causing a constant

blurring of the boundary between the lived experience of the rituals and the mediated experience of the spectacle. The Olympics as a media space creates techno-public spaces for global audiences in which certain forms of simultaneously shared, collective experiences are configured, shattered and reconstructed. The key characteristics of the Olympic experiences are not only founded on direct participation in the festival but also more increasingly become constructed through mediated engagements in the spectacle.

Third, MacAloon's stress on the 'real' and participatory experience of the Olympics leads him to underline their disenchantment function. However, from its inception, the Olympics have been inextricably bound up with the dynamics of politics and consumer culture, dynamics which have generated the functions of political propaganda and their commodification. Roche underlines the dual aspects of the Olympics as mega events, which provide power elites with hegemonic tools by which to promote their political visions, on the one hand, and the people with chances to affirm and challenge collective identities, on the other.<sup>20</sup> Here, MacAloon's ethnographic account of the spectacle seems to underestimate the major role of politics in forming the public events. As Dayan aptly points out, "MacAloon's process starts with skepticism (spectacle) and ends with belief (truth)".<sup>21</sup> Thus, MacAloon's ethnographic approach needs to take more critical account of the political dimension of the spectacle.

To develop a systematic analysis of the Olympics as Media Space, we draw upon a recent contribution to the study of media space made by Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy.<sup>22</sup>

They conceive media space to be 'both the kinds of spaces created by media, and the effects that existing spatial arrangements have on media forms as they materialize in

everyday life.’ In their view, media space holds twofold features: its materialist, ‘composed of objects (receivers, screens, cables, servers, transmitters) embedded in particular geographical power structure and reflective of particular economic sectors in capitalism’ and ‘spectral, evanescent characteristics’ which transcend ‘the material plane of existence’.<sup>23</sup> Their analytical framework consists of five levels in the process of connecting media and space:

*Level 1: The Study of Media Representation of Space*

*Level 2: The Study of Reconfigurations of Space through Media:*

*Level 3: The Study of the detailed spaces of media production and consumption.*

*Level 4: The study of the scale-effects, or complex entanglements of scale, which result from the operation of media in space.*

*Level 5: The study of how media-caused entanglements of scale are variously experienced and understood in particular places.*

This analytical framework guides us to grasp both material and immaterial dimensions of the Olympic media spaces more systematically. In the followings, we offer an analysis of the National Stadium of the Beijing Olympics with reference to media space.

### **III. Olympic Media Space through a Design Studies Perspective**

#### **III-1 Methodology from the perspective of design studies**

A design studies approach of an architectural space is strongly differentiated from that of an architectural history perspective. A design studies methodology looks at a designed artifact not only by privileging the intentionality of its producers, an attitude common in conventional architectural historiography, but most importantly by paying attention at processes of consumption and mediation, that expand beyond the architect’s

intentions. A design studies perspective of an architectural artifact addresses processes that bridge the physical and conceptual aspects of architecture, in other words what sociologist Henri Lefebvre has named the perceived, conceived and lived dimensions of space.<sup>24</sup>

In order to examine architecture's relation with the public sphere, which is imperative if we are focusing on an enterprise as an Olympic venue, the architectural artifact has to be removed from the exclusive realm of architectural historiography that isolates architecture from broader cultural nexuses and evaluates it through autonomous criteria. Conventional architectural historiography privileges architectural production, following a Pevsnerian tradition that valorizes a type of architecture that is perceived as pioneering for the prescriptive value that it carries for subsequent architectural productions, and thus overlooking what falls out of such elite paradigms. The repositioning of the architectural work from this exclusive realm to its being perceived as one among many cultural artifacts that belong to the broader realm of material culture is necessary in order to examine, and eventually restore, architecture's relation with public life. For this, various approaches that are not conventionally used by architectural historiography have to be employed.<sup>25</sup> Methods deriving from the areas of cultural theory, media studies and anthropology, such as response theory and ethnographic research, are paramount for addressing the realms of interpretation, appropriation and use that are paramount for understanding architecture's civic function. In the following, we will scrutinize the value derived from employing a media studies perspective in understanding the role of Olympic architecture as MediaSpace, before and after the completion of the Olympic venues, by outlining the role of the media in the promotion and interpretation of

architecture, taking as a case study the National Stadium of the Beijing Olympics, designed by the Swiss Architecture office of Herzog & De Meuron. Architectural critic Paul Goldberger offers an informative description of the building:

The concrete wall of the arena is wrapped with a latticework exterior of crisscrossing columns and beams, a tangle of twisting steel twigs. The lattice arcs upward and inward over the stadium's seats (there are ninety-one thousand), supporting a translucent roof and forming an oculus around the track. The center of the roof, over the field, has been left open. The engineering required to keep all this metal in the air is highly sophisticated: the building may look like a huge steel sculpture, but most of the beams are structural, not decorative. ... Much of the spectacle derives from the interplay of the steel lattice and the concrete shell underneath. The outer wall of the concrete structure is painted bright red--one of the building's few overtly nationalistic touches--and when lit up at night it shines through the latticework, an enormous red egg glowing inside its nest. On leaving, you experience the excitement of the knotted metal in a new way, looking out over Beijing through the wacky frame of the slanting columns.<sup>26</sup>

### **III-2 The Role of Media in Place Marketing and Starchitecture**

In a global level, media are the main carriers for “placing” the Olympic host-city “on the map,” a function that is highly sought in the contemporary climate of intensified city marketing. The Olympic venues acting simultaneously at the cognitive and aesthetic level, function as new, modern landmarks next to established ones, marking a new era for the nation. Officials see the Olympics as key moments in attempting to deconstruct established stereotypes about the nation or the host-city, and elevate its status as a global city. As a host-city’s urbanity is renovated, and new notions and norms of civility are introduced with the opportunity of the Olympics, the city is expected to become an ideal destination for both businesses and tourism.

Media are heavily implicated in the promotion and choice of architects who are involved in such high profile projects, and more broadly in the creation of an international

jet-set of *starchitects*. *Starchitecture* is a recent trend symptomatic of architecture's perception within the conditions of globalization. The model of the architect as a "hero," characteristic of modernity, has been replaced by that of the architect as a "star." A jet-set of *starchitects*, most of them established or on their way of becoming "global architects," such as Foster and Associates, Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Office of Metropolitan Architecture, Frank Gehry, etc. are invited to provide their services at various locations throughout the globe, particularly as satellite communication networks are developing in a fast pace. Their clients include governmental agencies or multinational corporations that seek such collaborations not only in order to be supplied with sound constructions, but also in order to increase their global prestige. The 2008 Olympic stadium in Beijing has been designed by the office of the Herzog and de Meuron, who are among the main *starchitects* today, in collaboration with the Chinese State Office, the ChinaArchitecture Design Institute. Other recent examples of employment of global architects in the design of Olympic facilities are those of US-based Peter Eisenman for the design of the Olympic Stadium for Leipzig's 2012 Olympic bid, and Santiago Calatrava's for the design of the Athens 2004 Olympic Stadium.

During the decision-making and construction process of an Olympic venue, media raise standards and expectations, emphasize both the symbolic and economic aspects of an Olympic venue, evaluate the process of work, and often apply pressure for change. In this sense, media have an active role in the way that an Olympic venue, is promoted, executed, and criticized, playing a major role in global and national perceptions of the Olympic works. Herzog & DeMeuron are established starchitects with a wide range of cultural and sports-related projects in their portfolio that are built in locations throughout the globe.

The celebratory tone with which the National Stadium was met in the media is largely based on the belief in the architects' capacity to fulfill major groundbreaking projects, as well as in China's determination to have a record-breaking stadium. As South China Monitoring Post wrote:

The Beijing Olympic Stadium is set to be a landmark that will put China's capital on the world map of amazing modern architecture. The building is breathtaking, with an innovative design that makes it a fitting showpiece for the world's largest sporting event. The unique design certainly has the "wow factor." ... The 2008 Olympics organising committee wanted a centrepiece that the world would notice and they have got it.<sup>27</sup>

Curiously enough, the Olympic Stadium's design is in some publications contributed not to Herzog and De Meuron, but to Ai Weiwei, a controversial Chinese artist founder of "Fake Studio," who is known for his denouncement of the current Chinese political regime. According to blog Boycott Beijing Olympics,

Ai Weiwei, said Beijing was using pomp and propaganda to hide the true face of China. He cited many human rights violation cases in Beijing resulted from the Olympics. An example is labor exploitation of constructions workers at the Beijing Olympics sites. He also criticized the Chinese Communist Party that its effort to stop air pollution in Beijing just for the Olympics was pathetic.<sup>28</sup>

Harzog and De Meuron have openly discussed in their interviews their collaboration with the artist during different stages of their project. According to critic Hugh Pearman who interviewed the architects,

Ai Weiwei encouraged them to develop the 'crazy, chaotic' structure of the stadium as far as it would go. He sketched a tree and a bird's nest to show that it would chime with Chinese culture, would not be seen as alien.

Due to Ai Weiwei controversial statements, and his parallel, seemingly contradictory collaboration in the design of the National Stadium, a secondary counter-star discourse is being generated that, for different reasons, proves to be interesting both for national and international audiences.



### **III-3 Media as Terrains of Proliferating Architectural Discourses**

There is a major proliferation of discourses that take place with the opportunity of the construction of an Olympic venue. Unlike typical architectural artifacts that attract primarily the interest of experts, Olympic architecture is being considered a public affair. As a large number of stakeholders are involved, their different and often conflicted interests result to a large diversity of viewpoints. A comparison between the discourses that surround Olympic venues in the mass media and in specialized publications addressed to architectural audiences indicates major differences among them. General media are often characterized by either figurative or mystified descriptions of architecture. The description of the National Stadium by Goldberger quoted above is a rare case of a responsible manner of introducing architectural topics to the general public. The nickname of the National Stadium, as bird's nest, is indicative of such figurative interpretations in terms of resemblance. The way a statement by Harry Gugger, an architect partner in Herzog and De Meuron's office was conveyed in the press is indicative of the mystifying tendency: "I think we sort of reinvented stadium architecture. ... You can't change the basic form of a stadium . . . but you can add a new architectural quality."<sup>29</sup> This new architectural quality is not explicated in the article for the non-expert knowledge, contributing to the further alienation of the architectural profession as one that remains incomprehensible by non-expert audiences.

Having said that however, it would be a mistake to extend this dichotomy and see a polarity between "serious" media (such as printed media and specialized press) on one hand, and mass media (such as television and interactive media) on the other.

Contrastingly to the above mentioned simplified way of delivering architectural criticism, a website by John Hill, an architecture student from NYC, follows a different approach:

While the basics of stadium design have changed very little since the Colosseum of ancient Rome - concentric corridor under seats with spectator distribution inwards to the different seating tiers - their aesthetics has changed dramatically. Lightweight steel structures have given way to longer spans and greater coverage and slick, modern designs. Subsequently, the roof has become important as the "fifth facade", especially to the home viewers seeing a stadium from the hovering blimp. In Beijing, the architects provided an irregular, oblong opening with a retractable roof, enabling games in inclement weather. ... Dominique Perrault's... recent design for a velodrome and pool in Berlin, along with this design, signal a potential shift in thinking about stadiums. Each design treats all surfaces equally, wrapping their skins in an attempt to create distinctive objects within the landscape, hopefully acting as catalysts for urban renewal. ... Definitely the most distinctive element in Herzog & De Meuron's winning design is its concrete structure. Appearing random, the concrete ribbons that start at the ground and curve over to the oculus are intersected by more ribbons that wrap the building around its perimeter. This system allows for resistance of forces in multiple directions, while also being the project's primary image generator. Together with the form, it helps to create something that appears like nothing before it in architecture.<sup>30</sup>

Obviously, in this account, mimetic references to birds' nests are missing, and emphasis is being placed on the architects' way of bridging structural with formal aspects of stadium design, as well as in situating the project in a wider genealogy. What is remarkable in this internet publication is that such an insider's understanding of architecture is not confined to the exclusive realm of experts, but is available in a medium of open access and can be retrieved through a simple online search by anyone interested. The blogosphere, besides giving the chance to members of communities of interest -- like the architecture student mentioned above -- to disseminate their knowledge, has also become a terrain of reflecting the opinions of non-specialized, general audience who are affected in direct or indirect manners by new architectural edifices.

### III-4 Architecture in the Blogosphere

Architecture for the Beijing Olympics has attracted major attention in the blogosphere. The fact that the “nicknames” of the buildings are so widely known beyond China is partially due to the large participation of international audiences in such online forums. The name “bird’s nest” has been fully accepted by the general public, as the official name of the stadium. According to magazine *Building*:

The project has been dubbed "the bird's nest" by the public and such symbolism is important in China. A bird's nest is a harmonious natural object and a dish eaten on special occasions. "Its clear they were looking for something architecturally dramatic. The overall excitement of the building will be amazing," says J Parrish, architectural director of Arup Sport.<sup>31</sup>

For many bloggers “the stadium is truly awesome,”<sup>32</sup> “a jewel of architecture,”<sup>33</sup> “huge, modern, very stylish, ... and[ with] a great sound system.”<sup>34</sup> Particularly for sports audiences a stadium is reminiscent of transformative experiences:

The feeling of awe and delicious expectation remains with me and I felt a small twinge of it when I first glimpsed the inside of the Bird's Nest.<sup>35</sup>

Other bloggers however express their estrangement characterizing it a “weird wonder,”<sup>36</sup> or in resemblance of barbed wire,<sup>37</sup> while the following chat room participant does not hesitate to express openly his/her dislike of the building:

But in terms of the design, I'm still not fond about it. Currently, it reminds me rather of a parking garage than of a stadium. And as a visitor, I'd feel somehow trapped inside that dense braiding. As a bird nest, it actually should actually express warmth and protection. But to me, this stadium appears (also on the computer graphics of its final looks) rather cool and repelling to me.<sup>38</sup>

With the development of new media, discussions on architecture are increasingly infused into the wider domains of the public. These views are live indications that “the meaning of a cultural artifact, as cultural theorists advocates of constructivism have taught us, cannot be frozen in time but is rather ongoing.”<sup>39</sup> For such reasons, it is particularly

important to pay attention to the meanings invested in the Olympic venues from the perspective of the wider, non-expert audience, as it is expressed before, during and beyond their specific Olympic functions.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Beijing Olympics are expected to be watched by 4,5 billion audiences worldwide. Only a small portion of this audience will experience the Olympics through their physical presence in the venues. Many more however have been and will be affected by them, as their production process influenced broader China's geography, by altering Beijing's physical environment, as well as several regions' demographics due to migration. The National Stadium of Beijing, in which the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, as well as the track and field Games will take place, has attracted the national and international interest much before the beginning of the Games. As much as the Olympic events are meant to express China's transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Olympic venues are also producing actual, physical changes. It is obvious that in order to comprehend the realm of operation of the Olympics, a parallel view of its physical and mediated aspects is necessitated. By bridging a media and a design perspective, we can expand the scope and restore the limitations of current approaches. Such approaches either overemphasize the media dimension of the Olympics, or overstress the process of architectural design. A combined design and media studies approach of Olympic Venues as a Mediaspace will scrutinize the corporeal experience of the Olympic venues and its subsequent ramifications in their broader environments, as well as their diverse interpretations by wider expert and non-expert publics.

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- <sup>1</sup> Daniel Dayan, Beyond Media Events: Disenchantment, Derailment, Disruption, in *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China (The New Media World)*, eds. Monroe Price and Daniel Dayan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 391-491.
- <sup>2</sup> John MacAloon, The Theory of Spectacle: Reviewing Olympic Ethnography, in *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup*, eds. Alan Tomilson and Christopher Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 15-39.
- <sup>3</sup> Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- <sup>4</sup> Daniel Dayan, Beyond Media Events, 391.
- <sup>5</sup> Daniel Dayan, Beyond Media Events, 391.
- <sup>6</sup> Maurice Roche, *Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 163-4.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Larson and H-S Park, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympic* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1993)
- <sup>8</sup> Larson and Park, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympic*, 245.
- <sup>9</sup> Dayan, Beyond Media Events 393
- <sup>10</sup> Nicky Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2003), 66.
- <sup>11</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- <sup>12</sup> Daniel Dayan, Beyond Media Events,
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