*Research Paper*

# Leveraging the Olympics for waterfront revitalization

## Insights from Tokyo 2020 Olympic Village

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### Abstract

*With an upswing trend of embedding Olympic projects into long-term urban planning documents, the changing spatial strategy arises the rethinking of the growing uncertainty of mega-event-led catalyst effect. It is crucial to examine how the Olympic infrastructures are negotiated to facilitate regional updates, and further assess whether they are effective in contributing to waterfront revitalization. To address this issue, Tokyo 2020 Olympic Village was selected as a notable example for its objective transform Harumi Island into residential and commercial complexes. This programme is affiliated to Tokyo Waterfront City plan (rinkaifukutoshin) which was issued in 1986 and aimed to elevate the seaside area into a sub-centre. This leads to a detailed exploration of the strategic spatial pathway during planning, implementation, and post-event stages to explore its impaction on advancing the waterfront revitalization. Incorporating results were valid from documents of Bureau of Urban Development Tokyo Metropolitan Government and 1st Urban Development Projects Office. Special attention was given to evaluation and critically review the (in)active role played by Olympic Village within context of regional and architectural concepts since winning the bid in 2013. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of multi-level governance, characterized by collaboration and rivalry between the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) and national authorities in facilitating urban renewal. The study conclude the Olympic Village development was a path-dependent approach, and it was the historical and geographic factors influenced planning decisions to promote sustainable development.*

### Keywords

*Olympic-led Urbanization; Metropolitan Planning; Waterfront; Urban Policy COVID crisis; Urban resilience.*

## 1. Introduction: planning mage-events for urban transformation

It is academically recognized that mega-events act as a catalyst for area-based rebranding both materially and symbolically (Andranovich, Burbank and Heying, 2001; Gold and Gold, 2008; Chen, 2012; Cantillon, 2022). However, the so-called catalyst is tailored to the characteristics of Olympic cities (Husukić and Zejnilović, 2020), and evolved in accordance with International Olympic Committee (IOC) guidelines, local policies, and national vision. Recent studies pointed out that the growing uncertainty of Olympic-led urbanization highlights the interactions between detailed Olympic strategies and urban transformation (Jones, Di Vita and Ponzini, 2022; Ricordel, 2023). In 2014, Agenda 2020 marked a turning point for Olympic implementations to reduce investment and decentralizing the scope of the event to ease the pressure (IOC (International Olympic Committee), 2014). Subsequent bids embedded Olympic projects into certain urban development plans to advance new urban agendas and reconfigure the urban scale with appropriate

intervention, instead of ambitious urban development plan (Müller, 2015; Hu, 2024; Raco and Di Vita, 2024).

The Olympic initiative on waterfront revitalization evolves over the course of modern history. “Barcelona Model” stands as a repetitive approach to leverage the Olympics for urban projects such as Vila Olímpica and Diagonal Mar district (Camerin, 2019). The former industrial area was regenerated and decontaminated (International Olympic Committee, 2022b). The model exemplifies the importance of launching the projects ahead to the bid process, and effective governance and participatory processes are key to achieving and lasting positive outcomes in urban regeneration (Baroghi and Ribeiro, 2024). In the case of Athens, heavy investment for Olympic venues could result in a risk condition without support from strategic long-term plan. The Faliro Coastal Zone Olympic Sports Complex was built in the coastal zone, consisting of two indoor arenas and a beach volleyball centre. The budget was drained after the construction, leading to the desolation of several multi-million-euro stadiums and training centres for years. Afterwards, they have been demolished to build private residential complex, casino, and park. Rio de Janeiro 2016 basically followed the successful Barcelona model, but the outcomes raise doubts since it potentially exacerbated challenges for low-income communities through land valorization, unequal public funding (Baroghi and Ribeiro, 2024). Additionally, examples from London 2012 shows its aims to improve the environment for ethnically diverse and deprived communities in east London, and the ‘Grand Paris’ project accelerated by Paris 2024 for the development in Seine-Saint-Denis, shows that the Olympic urbanization could only be efficient with clear execution and legacy plan, as well as robust policy tools(Azzali, 2017; Geffroy *et al.*, 2021).

Meanwhile, there is an upswing trend of Olympic cities rehosting the Olympics, such as London (1908, 1948, 2012), Paris (1900, 1924, 2024), Beijing (2008, 2022), Tokyo (1964, 2020), and Los Angeles (1932, 1984, 2028). It is evident that the urban environment, social and economic benefits of historic Olympic cities have been indispensable with the repetitive events and failed bids(Hiller, 2006; Faure, 2024). Among these events, the newest approach exhibits a mix of historical memories and gentle urban acupuncture, facilitating the venues rooting into existing urban fabric (Languillon-Aussel, 2024; Ponzini *et al.*, 2024). Overall, successful Games haven't always led to successful urban waterfront projects. Consideration should be given to the geographic endurance and challenges of waterfront programs. In some cases, the thrive of waterfront region was an afterthought—a missed opportunity. With the uncertainty happens at every stage of the Olympic cycle, projects that fully integrated Olympic waterfronts into a broader urban planning could be more effective (Pinto and Lopes dos Santos, 2022).

## 2. Methodology

Aiming to contribute to the debate on Olympic facilities from urban scopes, the methodology of this research fundamentally combines three approaches. Firstly, Tokyo 2020 Olympic Village was selected as a notable case study for its objective to foster the Harumi area into residential and commercial complexes. This initiative is a staged urban development project advanced by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG), spanning from 2013 to 2025. It is affiliated to a broader Tokyo Waterfront City plan (rinkaifukutoshin) which was issued in 1986 and aimed to elevate the seaside area into a sub-center. In this context, the historical development process of the Harumi Island is explored in order to contextualizing the urbanization of the 2020 Olympic Games. Secondly, the study reviewed relevant literature in terms of Olympic village, Tokyo Olympic history, as well as the development plans and design proposals of Tokyo Bay area from government department and private firms. This also sources from Olympic Committee

archives and the Organizing committees of each Olympics. With special focus on Harumi, we expanded desk study to academic publications from Olympics bid for 1940, 1964 and 2016. Lastly, the field work has been conducted in July 2022 and July 2023, including the site visits to historical zone and Tokyo Bay Zone for Tokyo Olympics. Additionally, some quantitative data from periods before, during, and after the Tokyo 2020 Olympics were collected from TMG, Statistics Bureau Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Japan, and Policy Bureau of Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourisms. These serve as supplementary references for outcomes, encompassing metrics as sociated with housing, transportation, and economic development.

## 3. Olympic waterfront: spatial strategies for Tokyo 2020 Olympic Village

Tokyo has been significantly impacted by major events such as the 1964 and 2021 Olympics, as well as the G7 summits in 1979, 1986, and 1993 as a global city. Today, it becomes a vibrant metropolis of Japan's financial, cultural, and industrial hub with 37 million people. The turning point, however, is commonly recognized as the 1964 Olympics that brought modernity and global reputation to Japan (Languillon-Aussel, 2024). The 1964 scheme primarily located in the western and southern areas of Tokyo's hyper-center, leading to rapid urban transformations in Meiji, Komazawa, and Jingu. In the following decades, Tokyo experienced upswing economic growth and extensive urban expansion. While it comes to the 2020 Olympics, Japan has left behind the industrial age and advanced information era as a mature society (Gold and Gold, 2008). The bay area undoubtedly shoulders the ambition of waterfront subcenter and the new focus of the Tokyo metropolitan region.

### 3.1. Historical evolution of Tokyo waterfront sub-center

Land reclamation has been carried out along the coast of Tokyo Bay during Meiji period totalled an area of 249 $km^2$. It was initially set up as industrialized land with severe air and land pollution. Against the backdrop of rapid economic growth in the 1980s, Tokyo Teleport Plan (later named Waterfront Subcenter, Rinkai Fuku Toshin) was adopted in 1986 comprising several islands such as Harumi, Tokyosu, Daiba, Ariake (Faure, 2023b). The project was a comprehensive long-term development plan which aimed to transfer the teleport into a subcentre of Tokyo (Saito, 2003). The plot has been restructured since industry declined in the next few years. Despite the coordination issue has long been existed in the implementation process between Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG), Waterfront Development Account (WDA), the General Account (GA) and the Reclamation Account (RA), the objectives were united and articulated as a new business centre led by private sectors.

However, the project went stagnant soon after the bubble economy bursting out (Fig. 1). The economic recession hit the city, resulting in the inability of the private sector to finance the development program. During the Japan's "Lost Decade", several efforts was made to promote the construction but eventually to be fruitless. The project faced delays in 1992 and scaled down in 1993. It was ultimately cancelled in 1995 by Governor Yukio Aoshima. Within the period, debated existed between functional objectives and implementation approach in a changing landscape. Overall, Tokyo is characterized a 'state-centered' city planned and controlled by the national government alone (Saito, 2003). This ensured the sub-centre strategy in conjunction with built-up areas. It's slow but never stopped. As the construction proceeded in Daiba and Ariake, the islands were pictured as a new paradise of *Work, Live, Learn, and play*. The approaches greatly promoted the vitality of the area, where approximately 920 companies operated, 42,000 people worked and 7,900 people lived in 2007, and the number was steadily growing.

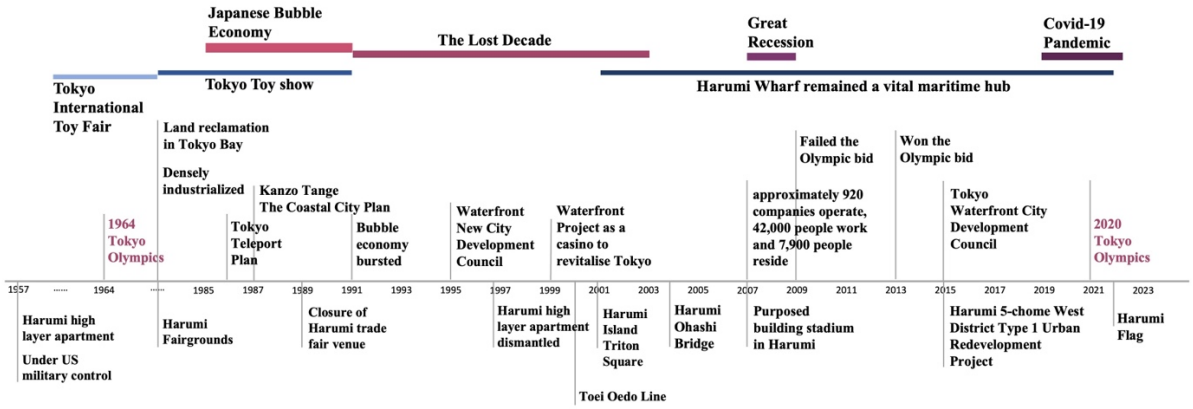


**Figure 1. Timeline of Tokyo waterfront subcenter strategies. Source: Authors.**

In Tokyo's case, the major goal is to increase the vitality of the sub-center by attracting the upper-middle-class and global investors, making it more competitive with other global cities. By the time of 2013, Tokyo's successful bid for the 2020 Olympics arises amid a grand rethinking of sustainable transition and technological innovation. The Olympic Village reflected this vision and support housing for the emerging waterfront subcenter while setting an example for ecological balance in dense areas. In 2015, the Olympic scheme was adopted and supervised by Tokyo Waterfront City Development Committee. Olympic Games provided the opportunity to advance major construction project on Harumi and Ariake, including the Olympic Village, Tokyo Ariake Arena, Aquatics Center, and Ariake Sports center. Along with the venues, transport infrastructures were built to connect these artificial islands and transport athletes during the Games. Even though all these projects were completed by 2020, the bay remained silenced for over a year before the actual Olympic Games were held in 2021.

## 3.2. Path dependency in the Olympic Village development

Zooming in the scopes to Harumi Island, it was filled as an artificial island in 1930s. Different from other bay islands, Harumi has long been a pioneer in Japanese residential complex and a transportation base. In 1957, Japan's first high-rise residences was built in Harumi which brought big shock through the nation. In the following decades, the International Trade Centre hosted several international exhibitions including Tokyo auto show, Tokyo International Toy Fair. Along the line, Harumi created the long-term imprinting effect of the residential and global reputation on cultural practices across local communities in Bay area. Additionally, there is no doubt that Tokyo 2020 aims to reverse the urbanization frontier towards the waterfront area, consolidating its multipolar urban structure. In the proposal for the 2016 Olympic bid, Harumi was delineated as the site for the stadiums while the Olympic Village located in Ariake-Kita. This proposal was restructured in the 2020 Olympic bid plan which holds most of the newly built Olympic venues in the larger islands of Ariake and Daiba. Harumi was set up to build Olympic village and railroad line connecting the islands to the central city. Since Tokyo 2020 is under the ambition of linking the existing area and waterfront area (Lützeler, 2020), Harumi is exquisitely located at the intersection of so-called "Historical Zone" and "Tokyo Bay Zone" (Fig. 2) (Languillon-Aussel, 2024). The intersection symbolizes the trend from tradition to modernity, as well as the link between 1968 Olympics and 2020 Olympics.

In this sense, the Olympic Village is essentially a housing scheme to create a sustainable neighbourhood. It takes advantage of the general recognition of innovative residential complex. The construction was incorporated into a compact, phased, and resilient plan with the investment of $2 billion. The Olympic Village includes 21 towers with each between 14 to 18 stories high, consisting of 5,632 units and capacity

of 12,000 residences (Fig. 3). It has been sold to the developers for a sixth of its market value before the game begins (Purkarthofer, 2020), and soon transformed into "Harumi Flag" after the games—a mixed-use development featuring schools, shops, apartments, restaurants, daycare centres, and senior welfare facilities (International Olympic Committee, 2022a). It would be not aligned with Agenda 2020 considering the events alone. However, with growing global companies housing in the bay area, HarumCi Flag provides essential support for the workforce of digital and technology companies in Toyosu, Daiba, and Ariake. While it was equipped with energy-saving technologies, the residential complex was set up as a model for waterfront infrastructures targeting digital and high-tech industries.

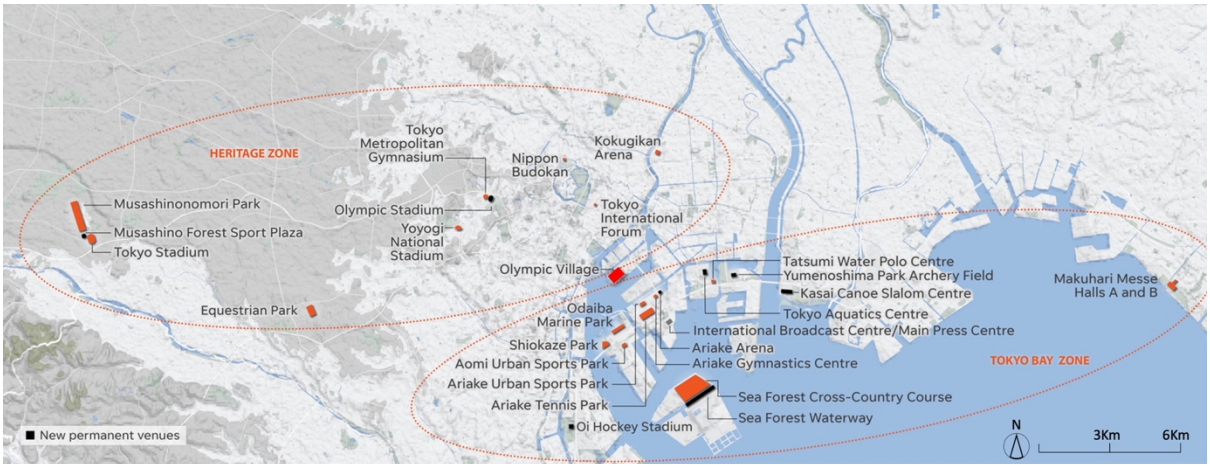


**Figure 2. Two zones of Tokyo 2020 venue's map. Source: https://eu.usatoday.com**

**Figure 3. Harumi Flag. Source: Carl Court/Getty Images.**

### 3.3. The role of policy network in the development process

As discussed, the construction of Olympic Village is clearly a path-dependent approach in the context of Harumi's residential reputation. In the governance of the waterfront development, it was the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) set up the basic framework while negotiating with central government. The relationship between the TMG and the national government is "mutual dependence with strong

rivalry" (Saito, 2003). Prior to the *Waterfront New City Centre Urban Development Promotion Plan* was released in 2005, the development of bay area was controlled by multiple strategies (table 1). This plan shifted the priorities to accommodate Olympic-related projects. This has proven to be an invigorating approach since the Olympic projects greatly enrich the vision with sports and leisure functions, instead of technology alone. During the bidding process, private sectors played a key role as Harumi Flag, Waterfront City Plaza, and Creation Centre was advanced under the Public–Private Partnerships. This approach mitigates the government fund and addresses the risk of overinvestment from income and enhances resilience to potential crises. Additionally, the bottom-up coordination bridges the gap between local needs and top-down planning, addressing the disparity in waterfront vitality and scarcity. As the advisory committee assists the decision-making process, the local community has kept a strong voice in the residential programme and raised the expectation for Olympics.

**Table 1 Development strategy on Tokyo Waterfront area Source: Authors.**

| Years | Urban plan/programme |
|---|---|
| 1986 | Tokyo Teleport Plan |
| 1987 | Basic Concept for Development of the Waterfront Subcenter |
| 1988 | Basic Plan for Development of the Waterfront Subcenter |
| 1989 | Waterfront Subcenter Development Project Plan |
| 1996 | Basic Policy for the Development of the Waterfront New City |
| 1997 | Toyosu and Harumi Development Plan |
| 2005 | Waterfront New City Center Urban Development Promotion Plan |
| 2022 | Tokyo Waterfront New City Digital Transformation Promotion Project |
| 2022 | Tokyo Bay eSG Project |

It cannot be neglected that Tokyo 2020 was essentially hosted in the year of 2021. As the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, Japanese central government announced its decision to postpone by one year the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic. The delay also led to numerous lawsuits from residents regarding postponed move-ins at the Harumi Flag housing complex. To date, most residence moved in after two-year waiting, however, the compensation remains unclear. In order to control the spread of pandemic, the “Bubble” was set up as an intricate system to surround certain Olympic venues for containing the movement (Dimmer and Solomon, 2024). This approach did limited people’s activity— though it was necessary for the emergency, resulting in limited economic and branding benefits of the new facilities. It could be significant but vague of the full financial impact.

Only one year after the Olympics, TMG took over the land together with the government and adopted the Tokyo Bay eSG project—a detailed action plan to restructure the waterfront after the Olympic. It soon acted to address the delayed handover of the Harumi Flag with most residents moving in by 2023. The project set four main objectives for the bay area, including the goal of achieving “net zero emissions and creating a city full of water and greenery.” As mentioned, the Olympic Village serves not only a residential support for the subcentre but also a pioneer of sustainable community of Harumi Island. What we can conclude from Tokyo’s case is that the Olympics accelerated urban transformation by enhancing risk resilience (Faure, 2023a). Mega-events have the potential to act as a piece within a compact, phased, and resilient urban framework, rather than being the decisive force.

## 4. Conclusion and discussion

Since 1984, the development of Tokyo’s waterfront area lies in the relentless effort of government-led approaches. The policy network of waterfront development illustrates the importance of mutual corporation and rivalry of TMG and central government, while the private sector advanced and revised the plan in accordance with the local needs. It was this friction promoted the strategy innovation for challenges to ensure the waterfront vision in compliance with the broader urban goals. The history path of Harumi

also proved the fragile implementation during the slumping economy. Since Tokyo 1964, TMG refined its reputation through a series of mega-events and built modern infrastructures. These events helped to rehabilitate the environment and set up its global image. With the shrink of Olympic investment, Olympic cities are trying to upgrade the Olympic pattern after the Barcelona Model. Tokyo 2020 also provided an example of waterfront area as a long-term legacy, while its connection with the built-up area is far more than Barcelona's practice. To facilitate this connection, the Olympic Village played a tie. Moreover, it has long existed in urban transformation practice, instead of the Olympics alone. This study analyses the contribution of Olympic for Tokyo waterfront revitalization, and the spatial correlation with the heritage urban zones.

Firstly, this study shifted the academic focus from the critique for overinvestment for mega-events to testify the investments. It is inevitable to build more structures for the Olympics to create resilient legacy. According to the Olympic report, the budget of $7.3 billion budget has expanded to over $25 billion in true outlays. Despite the criticism towards the "irrational" input for Olympic, Tokyo and Beijing did shorten the investment by centralizing the venues compared to Paris 2024. However, what is discussed in this paper is the growing practice to incorporate the Olympic projects into long-term urban plan. As a global city with over 400-year history, Tokyo basically rebuilt itself after the WWII. It should be justified to leverage the Olympics for the urban regeneration, especially given the limited land of Tokyo. Secondly, Harumi Island exhibits a path-independence approach in Olympic Village development. The character of the island was shaped by its history and geographical condition, leading to the decision for Olympic Village instead of venues. This also decided not only the Olympic projects served the athletes during the games, but also switched the emotion gap between the local community and upper-middle-classes. After the events, the renovation of "Harumi Flag" residential and commercial complex shows its commitment to sustainable and resilient urban community to match the upswing technology areas in the bay islands. These islands carry its character as an artificial islands and Tokyo's industrialization history, which was intentionally removed in the development of Daiba and Ariake but remained in Harumi. It was a deliberate approach rooted in its local identity. Third, the governed framework of Olympic projects highlights the corporation of public and private sectors. The non-publicly owned organisation could meet the local needs while in compliance with the top-down policies. Tokyo Olympics was proved to bridge the gap between the waterfront vitality and pandemic isolation crisis, which is fundamentally a method to enhance local governance system. The Olympic also enhance its ability of crisis management and urban resilience, especially under the circumstances that the Olympic scheme was submissive to urban development plan. As Tokyo moves forward, the legacy left by Olympic scheme in bay area would consistently impact the urban policy and strategy. It demonstrates how the strategy for mega-events bring benefits for the locals, and how to meet the contemporary challenges of growing population and severe climate.

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