





Legacy Insights from Media Coverage of Atlanta 1996: Brisbane 2032 and Olympics Outside Mega Cities



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Abstract. The Brisbane 2032 Olympics and Paralympics signal a shift from mega-city hosts to a more regional and sustainable approach to staging the Games. Uniquely in a Summer Olympic bid, Brisbane's application was based on the hosts being from the broader Australian region of south-east Queensland. In appointing Brisbane, International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach outlined the importance of sustainability and economic responsibility, and recognised the long-term regional and national strategies around development in Australia. In this changing global sports ecosystem, this paper examines the legacies of Atlanta 1996, a smaller-scale Olympics through media coverage of this edition of the Games, including general and sports reporting. The findings outline areas for the Brisbane 2032 organisers to consider in delivering an Olympics that is sustainable for the hosts. The Games were most effective for fulfilling elements related to sports legacies and the economic focus on making a profit, or not requiring government funding. There are considerable positives in the Olympic stadium still being in use, along with the aquatic centre, and the continued popularity of the public space and broader developments based around the Centennial Olympic Park.

Keywords. Olympics, Brisbane 2032, Atlanta 1996, legacy, International Olympic Committee.

ES Perspectivas del legado de la cobertura mediática de Atlanta 1996: Brisbane 2032 y los Juegos Olímpicos fuera de las megaciudades

Resumen. Los Juegos Olímpicos y Paralímpicos de Brisbane 2032 marcan un cambio de sedes en megaciudades hacia un enfoque más regional y sostenible para la organización de los Juegos. Como un ejemplo único en una candidatura olímpica de verano, la solicitud de Brisbane se basó en la pertenencia de los anfitriones a la región australiana más amplia del sureste de Queensland. Al designar a Brisbane, el presidente del Comité Olímpico Internacional, Thomas Bach, destacó la importancia de la sostenibilidad y la responsabilidad económica, y reconoció las estrategias regionales y nacionales a largo plazo en torno al desarrollo de Australia. En este cambiante ecosistema deportivo global, este artículo examina el legado de Atlanta 1996, unos Juegos Olímpicos de menor escala, a través de la cobertura mediática de esta edición de los Juegos, que incluye reportajes generales y deportivos. Los hallazgos describen las áreas que los organizadores de Brisbane 2032 deben considerar para lograr unos Juegos Olímpicos sostenibles para los anfitriones. Se observa que los Juegos fueron más eficaces en el cumplimiento de los elementos relacionados con el legado deportivo y el enfoque económico en la obtención de beneficios, o en la no necesidad de financiación gubernamental.

Palabras clave. Juegos Olímpicos, Brisbane 2032, Atlanta 1996, legado, Comité Olímpico Internacional.

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1. Introduction

The Brisbane 2032 Olympics and Paralympics signal a shift from mega-city hosts to a more regional and sustainable approach to staging the Games. The refined approach to the event, aligning with the International Olympic Committee's (IOC, 2021; Olympics.com, 2021) sustainability goals, means Brisbane will interrupt a line of world cities dating back to 2000. With a history of the Games being substantially over budget (Baade & Matheson, 2016; Budzier & Flyvbjerg, 2024; Cervantes, 2021; Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2020; Seccombe, 2021), it is relevant to examine the legacies of Atlanta, a comparable host city to Brisbane in population, size and status.

This study analyses Atlanta 1996 by applying thematic analysis to the media's reporting in four U.S. publications of the Games' legacies, as seen through the reporting in the general news and sports sections of the publications, from 1996 to 2016. While scholarship in legacies has increased, Scheu and Preuss (2017) state much of the work has not been driven by data, and that future research would benefit from incorporating media articles to assess strengths and weaknesses of Olympic legacies. The results over two decades of media and sports reporting about Atlanta 1996 highlight lessons that can remain relevant to a host city, even more than three decades later, from an Olympics in a comparably smaller location. Providing these reflections is therefore valuable in outlining areas for Brisbane 2032 to consider for its longer-term legacies.

2. Background and literature review

The awarding of the 2032 Summer Olympics to Brisbane changed the focus of the Games from the recent mega-city tradition to a more regional context. Brisbane is Australia's third biggest metropolis, and this Games represents a major shift from the usual hosts of a nation's capital or major centres with immediate global recognition. Recently, the Olympics have been held in mega cities –Paris 2024, Tokyo 2021, Rio 2016, London 2012, Beijing 2008– which have grown from a definition of more than 5 million people to 10 million in the past two decades (Leaf, 2022). In 2004, Greece's capital Athens was the location, while Sydney 2000 occurred in Australia's largest city. Atlanta 1996 is therefore the most recent comparable Games to Brisbane in terms of size and national and global recognition.

Uniquely in a Summer Olympic bid contest, Brisbane's application was based on the hosts being from the broader region of south-east Queensland, although the Games have been branded as "Brisbane 2032". In appointing Brisbane, IOC President Thomas Bach outlined the importance of sustainability and economic responsibility in the bid. As Bach (Olympics.com, 2021) said: "This new approach is lighter, more collaborative, more compact, and has a positive impact." Officially, the IOC (Olympics.com, 2021) has outlined a flexible approach, away from mega-cities, that allows partnerships with regions and encourages the use of already-built venues, which align with the area's longer-term development.

The initial Brisbane bid budget was estimated at A\$5 billion (U.S.\$3.3 billion) and increased to A\$7

billion in 2023 (U.S.\$4.5 billion); even if costs double it would be less than the U.S.\$15.4 billion spent in Tokyo, Rio (U.S.\$13.7 billion), or London (U.S.\$14.9 billion) (Cervantes, 2021; Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2020; Ludlow, 2023; Seccombe, 2021). Since then, there have been concerns about the Brisbane bid, with delays in deciding on major venues, and the uncertainty extended by a change of Queensland Government in October, 2024. As Scheu and Preuss (2017, p. 1) state, Olympics hosts need "positive legacies to justify the hosting of the Games". What happens after the event is also crucial in the lead-up to, and hosting of, the 2032 Olympics and Paralympics. It is therefore important to investigate what can be learned from an Olympics in a comparatively-sized city. Understanding these elements can assist in delivering a regional Olympics that is sustainable for the hosts, which could then ensure the shift away from mega cities is viable in the long term.

2.1. Olympic Legacies

There is a considerable debate over Olympic legacies, and whether they are positive or negative for the host city and region (Brown, 2020; Preuss, 2007; Scheu & Preuss, 2017). Many recent Olympics have resulted in significant cost over-runs and increased negative perceptions, including Tokyo, Rio, London and Athens (Budzier & Flyvbjerg, 2024; Cervantes, 2021; Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2020; Seccombe, 2021). Flyvbjerg *et al.* (2020, p. 2) state the Olympics are "the largest, the highest-profile, and the most expensive mega event that exists" and that the local organizing committee guarantees the costs, which makes hosting them "financially risky". It is worth noting that there had been a growing sense of reluctance among potential bidders to take on this risk, although the success of the Paris Games resulted in greater interest in applications to host in 2036. On a smaller scale, Victoria withdrew as the 2026 Commonwealth Games host in July 2023 due to budget concerns. Brisbane was the only official nomination for 2032, having gained preferred status ahead of cities in India, Indonesia, Qatar, Spain, and Germany.

The IOC (2016) includes the impact of legacy in its Olympic Charter. It states Olympic legacy "encompasses all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated by the hosting of the Olympic Games" (The IOC, 2017; 2021). Preuss (2007, p. 211) defines legacy in mega sports events as "all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible structures created for and by a sport event that remain longer than the event itself". Girginov and Preuss (2022, p. 2) outline the importance of legacy in the contemporary Olympic movement, and state the Games have "a consequential relationship with social life", representing the "embodiment of Olympic aspirations for change in societal structures".

Legacy planning for Brisbane 2032 focuses primarily on economic, social, and environmental outcomes ten years after the Games (Queensland Government, 2023). The IOC (2017) expanded its focus on legacies to include the categories of organised sports development; human skills, networks, and innovation; social development through sport;

culture and creative development; urban development; environment enhancement; and economic value and brand equity. Similar to the IOC's (2017) categories, Scheu and Preuss (2017) noted six facets in their systematic review of Olympic-host legacies from 1896 to 2016: urban development; environmental enhancement; policy and governance; skills, knowledge, and networks; intellectual property; and beliefs and behaviour (Scheu *et al.*, 2021). Preuss (2007) argues measuring mega-event legacy has three obstacles, which include focusing on net rather than gross legacy, difficulties determining whether there are positive or negative value judgements, and complexities evaluating legacy over time. Scheu *et al.* (2021) note the increase of publications on legacy since 2008, with topics of beliefs and behaviour and urban development included most often in previous research. These prior studies provide scope for a detailed evaluation of the media coverage of legacy after Atlanta 1996, which can provide insights for Brisbane 2032.

Sustainable development of the Olympics, especially through justifying new facilities and the costs involved, has been evident since the 1930s (Brown, 2020). Baade and Matheson (2016, p. 207) note the tendency for Olympics to over-run budgets and highlight three major costs: general infrastructure, sports infrastructure, and operational costs. These combine with three major benefits: tourist spending during the Games, the Olympic legacy related to infrastructure and trade; and intangible benefits, which could include a "feel-good effect" (Baade & Matheson, 2016, p. 202). Additionally, Flyvbjerg *et al.* (2020) conclude there are six steps to better games management. These include "extreme randomness", which is the most challenging risk to manage, especially in relation to budgets (Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2020, p. 13). They also note the IOC's plans in 2014 to provide turnkey solutions for the Games to help reduce costs, which can be seen as a factor assisting Brisbane's successful nomination in utilising existing infrastructure.

2.2. The 1996 Atlanta Olympics and Paralympics

The closest recent comparison to Brisbane as an Olympic host is Atlanta, due to its population, size and status as a smaller city in its nation, and global aspirations at the time of the bid. In 1996, Atlanta was the United States' 11th largest city by population, with 3.5m people in the greater metropolitan area compared with Brisbane's 2.5m in 2021 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2021; United States Census Bureau, 1998). Both cities have elements of national and global recognition—for example, Atlanta has been described as the capital of the South—, but not in comparison with their respective nations' major global cities, including previous Olympic venues, such as Los Angeles 1984 and Sydney 2000. No city is an exact match, and there are differences in terms of geography, business, and cultural heritage. However, Brisbane 2032 is likely to gain more relevant hosting insights from a city of comparable size than the megapolis locations from Beijing 2008 through to Los Angeles 2028.

In Atlanta, French and Disher (1997) note, the Games were centralised, with most venues located within a few kilometres of the downtown area. Some events, such as rowing, equestrian, kayaking, sailing, and soccer, were hosted in satellite areas that provided aspects of a regional approach (Hoff & Leopkey, 2021). It is not unusual for Olympic events to be considerable distances from the host city, but the model planned for Brisbane 2032, which at the time of writing involved more than 30 venues across south-east Queensland, is a different, decentralised design.

At the conclusion of the 1996 event, IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch described Atlanta as "most exceptional" instead of the "best ever", his usual closing-ceremony response (Torpy, 2012; Rivenburgh, 2008). The phrase has often been referred to when discussing Atlanta's legacy, which Rivenburgh (2008) argues was an international image disaster. Scheu *et al.* (2021) report the Atlanta organising committee including in its mission statement the goal of leaving "a positive physical and spiritual legacy". In examining the legacy of Atlanta's Olympics, Scheu and Preuss (2017) found only eight empirical articles and three commentary pieces suitable for their systematic review. Urban development was a key element ahead of the Games, including the Centennial Olympic Park legacy and subsequent development. French and Disher (1997) found Atlanta was successful in developing short-term economic stimulus, sports facilities, and urban design elements, but there was minimal development in low-income areas (Brooks, 2020). Rutheiser (1996, p. 28) notes that, in contrast to Barcelona in 1992, Atlanta "failed to use the Games to regenerate its poverty-stricken heart". The limited number of articles provides scope for a longer study of the event's legacy through media reporting.

Similar to Brisbane's world city aspirations (Brisbane City Council, 2019), Atlanta was thinking global with its bid, aiming to be a great international city (Rutheiser, 1996), but "however, the Atlanta of the boosters' imagination contrasts markedly with the reality" (Rutheiser, 1996, p. 28). Scheu and Preuss (2017) note there were new sports facilities, such as the Olympic Stadium being converted for the Atlanta Braves baseball team. Hoff and Leopkey (2021) examined legacies from Atlanta, with themes of nostalgia, urban development, volunteering, community engagement, and sport development.

In terms of policy and governance, Baade and Matheson (2002) found gains in employment, but suggest they may have been short term, and therefore not to be considered a genuine legacy. Ratnatunga and Muthaly (2000, p. 60) note how the Olympics "devastated many Georgian businesses", which did not receive the windfalls expected when the bid was successful. While social sustainability and inclusiveness were aims, the main achievement was "no fiscal burden on the city, to the point where some would allege the Olympic Games in Atlanta were overly commercialised" (Minnaert, 2012, p. 366; Hoff & Leopkey, 2021). Ellis and Leopkey (2021, p. 43) argue Atlanta was a turning point in Olympic Games commercialisation, with the event noted for its greed, and described as the "Olympics of advertising". Atlanta was the corporate home of

Coca-Cola—this Games edition has sometimes been called the Coca-Cola Games—and there were suggestions the company, which had been aligned with the Olympics since 1928, had used commercial pressure to win the bid over Athens (Ellis & Leopkey, 2021). Overall, Malfas *et al.* (2004: 213) state that “the 1996 Atlanta Games serves as an illuminating case of the negative social impacts of a mega-sporting event”. In this context, it is important to note the media’s role in influencing perceptions, with its approaches to news selection and framing of the news (Entman, 2007), which often focus on negative elements, conflict or dispute (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017).

Despite an increase in legacy research recently, Scheu and Preuss (2017) and Scheu *et al.* (2021) argue there has been a focus on theoretical, conceptual or commentary scholarship, with limited studies being data driven, and most being conducted shortly after the Games have concluded. They outline the importance of future work being empirically focused, including adding media articles to assess legacies in future research. This study addresses these issues by expanding scholarship into the legacy of the Atlanta Olympics and analysing articles from four U.S.-based publications over 20 years, which provides a sufficient timeframe for understanding short- and long-term benefits or weaknesses. As a result of this literature review and gaps in scholarship, the overarching research question for this project is: What legacy elements are evident in media coverage of Atlanta 1996, and how can these provide insight for the hosts of Brisbane 2032?

3. Method

To examine and evaluate positive and negative legacies of the Atlanta Olympics, thematic analysis will be employed across four U.S.-based publications. Each article was examined qualitatively through thematic analysis, which allowed interpretation of the most important patterns in the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Initially, an inductive approach to the analysis was applied, providing specific examples that helped provide more general observations (Boyatzis, 1998) in relation to the media’s reporting of legacy elements of the 1996 Olympics. The thematic analysis process involved close readings of the text, followed by organising the data across the four U.S. publications utilizing a deductive process through themes related to legacy coverage (IOC, 2017; Scheu & Preuss, 2017).

The analysis involved four newspapers across national, metropolitan, and local publications: *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the *Gwinnett Daily Post*. *USA Today* (UT) is a national publication with associated reach, while *The New York Times* (NYT) is a major metropolitan masthead with a national and international focus. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) is the leading newspaper-based media outlet in the state of Georgia, while the *Gwinnett Daily Post* (GDP) is a community title within the greater Atlanta metropolitan area. These newspapers were selected to provide different levels of coverage on legacies of the same event from the host-country perspective across local, metropolitan and national contexts. This focus on “host” content ensured more

consistent reporting across the 20-year timeframe and a greater range of issues than if the analysis included international publications, which often concentrated on bigger-picture criticism (Torpy, 2012; Rivenburgh, 1998) before shifting attention to subsequent Olympics. The newspapers’ archives were searched in conjunction with the Proquest database for articles relating to the 1996 Olympics between September 1996 and December 2016. A total of 116 articles were examined, including 39 from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 30 from the *Gwinnett Daily Post*, 25 from *The New York Times* and 22 from *USA Today*.

An iterative process was employed to determine the sample before the thematic analysis. To be included, an article needed to mention both the Atlanta Olympics or Paralympics, and legacy. A variety of search terms and combinations were employed, based on variations of the 1996 Games titles and literature on legacy (Girginov & Preuss, 2022; IOC, 2017; Scheu & Preuss, 2017). These terms included Atlanta Olympics and legacy, Atlanta and Olympic legacy, Atlanta Paralympics legacy, and Atlanta 1996 legacy. The unit of analysis was articles collected from these publications from a month after the conclusion of the Atlanta Games until 20 years later. The thematic analysis focused on the content in the article, including the text and headline, but not images or captions. A close reading of suitable articles was completed by two researchers independently, who first made a decision on whether a story was justified in being included in the sample. After an initial reading, the researchers then placed each article into preliminary themes related to the legacy categories outlined by the IOC (2017) and Scheu and Preuss (2017). If there were disagreements over which category to situate an article, further detailed readings and discussions occurred to ensure a standard approach. These categories were further refined with another two close readings by the lead researcher. Not all topics aligned with those developed in previous scholarship, which allowed for other categories to emerge in a similar way to the study of Hoff & Leopkey (2021). By undertaking post-Olympic legacy evaluation, the study provides data-driven empirical evidence (Scheu & Preuss, 2017), which helps both in looking back on a previous Games through the context of publications in the host nation, and providing advice for future hosts and bid teams.

4. Results

The mentions of legacy in the four news publications have been combined over the 20-year sample to gain an understanding of shifts in the reflections over time. In the results, topics developed from the legacy categories of Scheu and Preuss (2017) and the IOC (2017) are presented, with an initial focus on the ten years after the Games, followed by the period from 2007 to 2016. Applying this chronological approach allows for the transition from short- and medium-term aims to longer-term reflections as they develop, including the contemporary legacy milestone of ten years after the Games (Queensland Government, 2023). While there is considerable reflection in the initial years after the Games, it is important to recognise that fully understanding legacies

takes time, and is why it is essential to consider these aspects over longer periods. The coverage of the specific themes differed across the sample and the four publications, but consistent elements were a greater focus on urban development, and economic value and brand equity, including through coverage of the major stadiums, the Centennial Olympic Park precinct, and the finance element of not leaving the host city in debt. Another prominent theme was beliefs and behaviour. A theme not related to previous research was the coverage around the Centennial Park bombing. While there were positive elements about aspects of the Games, the general overall perception was negative and conveyed a feeling of disappointment.

Initially, when examining the publications in the ten years after the Olympics, reporting included stories on both the immediate and overall legacy of the Games. Within two years of Atlanta 1996's conclusion, there was a general feeling that the event was good for the legacy of venues and sports-related topics, but not as positive for social and economic elements. *The New York Times* (July 20, 1997) asked whether there were significant legacies or if the Games was just a break in routine? The "consensus, even from some who worked to make the Games a success, seems to be that the lasting effect of this event fell short of expectations" that were "were just too ridiculously high". Similarly, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said in its one-year anniversary series that the city was still looking for its legacy. "The Games don't seem to have been the seminal moment in our city's history. They didn't make us an international economic power, cure all our social ills or uplift all our poor neighbourhoods ... They were simply a magical moment in time" (AJC, July 13, 1997). The article stated expectations were too high, with the author writing "we're disappointed and maybe even a little embarrassed" at how the Games turned out, including poor international media coverage and ongoing social problems such as "poverty, bad schools and crumbling streets and sewers" (AJC, July 13, 1997). *USA Today* (July 25, 1997) reported that "Atlanta has struggled with the hangover" and that "inflated expectations of the Olympic legacy were never met". Overall legacy views through the media reporting carried many negative connotations over the rest of the decade. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *The Gwinnett Post* reported detailed reflections during ten-year anniversary coverage. While *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (July 16, 2006) noted the growth as result of the Olympics as "almost unparalleled in the city's history", it also stated "the dramatic urban renewal that city boosters promised was neither immediate nor widespread". *The Gwinnett Daily Post* (July 14, 2006) remembered that Atlanta "did a poor job of preparing to be on the world stage".

The reporting between 2007 and 2016 highlighted views of the mega-event hardening with the benefits of hindsight. There were considerably fewer articles in this decade in comparison with the ten years immediately after the Games, highlighting changes in focus and interest as the issue became less newsworthy. In a 20-year reflection, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (July 17, 2016) noted how the Olympics had changed the city forever, even though

many of the signs were now gone. The Games had the most spectators, athletes and volunteers at the time, but never before had the criticism of a host city reached such Olympian heights. During the closing ceremony, the Olympic committee president pointedly declined to call the Games "the greatest ever", as per custom. Atlantans bristled at the Southern bumpkin caricatures penned by the European press (AJC, July 17, 2016). In the *Gwinnett Daily Post* (August 4, 2011), the Olympics "were not the city of Atlanta's finest hours—or days" after the people "were given a unique gift and didn't know what to do with it".

4.1. Urban development

The Games did contribute positive legacy elements that were conveyed through the media coverage, with a key focus on the theme of urban development, such as major venues. Successful transitions included the Olympic Stadium being remodelled into Turner Field, the baseball arena for the Major League team the Atlanta Braves, and new or renovated sports locations, such as the aquatic centre at Georgia Institute of Technology. This infrastructure allowed the Games to avoid "the white elephants of past ventures" related to major stadium usage, with this aspect positively reported on over the decade (AJC, February 24, 2002; July 16, 2006; UT, March 4, 1999). However, there was early concern about other venues, with *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (July 13, 1997) outlining the disappointing post-Games use of the equestrian and beach volleyball centres, and the tennis arena being closed for five months. These centres continued to be the focus of negative coverage. The volleyball and equestrian sites struggled to attract events or spectators, the tennis venue was in a state of disrepair, and the shooting range had been closed after being used at one point to store voting machines (AJC, November 10, 2004; July 16, 2006; GDP, July 22, 2006). More trivial venue discussions were reported around the purpose and placement of the Olympic cauldron. It was shifted so it did not interrupt the views of the baseball stadium, eliminating another Olympic remnant (AJC, July 13, 1997; NYT January 5, 1997).

In the 2007-2016 coverage, enough time had passed for concrete judgements on venue legacies. *The Gwinnett Daily Post* (July 19, 2016) recognised "the lack of actual structures left", apart from the renovated Olympic Stadium. While Atlanta avoided the "massive white elephants" like other Olympics, the tennis centre awaited demolition, the indoor volleyball stadium had been refurbished to host concerts, and the beach volleyball venue was being used to film *The Hunger Games* sequel (AJC, April 29, 2012; August 5, 2012; GDP, September 23, 2012). Even the positive legacies of infrastructure had a lifespan. The Atlanta Braves announced in 2013 they would leave their home 20 years after the Games. Described as "the Olympics' gift to Atlanta", the stadium became Georgia State's Football home ground in 2017 and remains the most visible Games venue (AJC, August 5, 2012; July 7, 2016; GDP, August 18, 2016; UT, November 13, 2013).

Outside of sports infrastructure, the Centennial Olympic Park was considered "Atlanta's most dynamic legacy" (UT, August 6, 1998), after being

transformed from a street of abandoned warehouses into a space attracting thousands of people each day. The view had changed from the paper's reporting a year earlier, when the Park was considered unrecognisable from the Games, except for its fountain, with red dirt and unfinished projects. The positive perceptions of this area, which included business and downtown development, continued across the decade (UT, March 4, 1999; AJC July 2, 2001). The Olympic Village becoming student housing for Georgia State University was also considered a valuable legacy in this period.

Atlanta's broader urban development was a focus in judging what the Games had achieved in the decade after the flame went out. *The New York Times* (October 31, 1999) noted how the downtown area of Atlanta was receiving more residents following Olympic-related construction. While *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (October 9, 2000) recalled how the organisers "decided to plop the centerpiece venue for the 1996 Summer Games in the heart of a slum", four years after the event "hundreds of new homes have been built and older ones rehabilitated. Drug-infested apartments have been demolished, and new townhouse complexes have gone up... [creating] a feeling of belief in these neighborhoods". The media coverage stated there was no jobs boom, with the city falling well short of creating the 77 000 new roles predicted by the Atlanta organizing committee (NYT, October 3, 2000; July 10, 2005).

The positive feelings towards the Park precinct remained in the coverage between 2007 and 2016, to the point where *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (June 16, 2015) reported that Atlanta had trouble "defining its Olympic legacy beyond Centennial Olympic Park". There was no doubt over the contribution of the Park, which organiser Billy Payne described as the "the most important physical legacy of our Games" (AJC, July 21, 2016; AJC, August 5, 2012; August 12, 2012; GDP, September 29, 2006). *The Gwinnett Daily Post* (July 11, 2016) reported the Park attracted \$2.2 billion of new development, including the Georgia Aquarium and a basketball arena for the Atlanta Hawks. During this time, it was reported that Atlanta re-emerged as a tourist destination, with visitors recommended specifically to visit the Park (NYT, March 30, 2007).

4.2 Economic value and brand equity

One of the most positive legacy elements of the Atlanta Games over the short and long-term was that taxpayers were not required to fund it, and the event finished debt-free (AJC, November 10, 1996; UT, July 25, 1997; August 6, 1998). A decade on, pride remained in the reporting that the \$1.7 billion cost was covered by the Atlanta organizing committee (AJC July 16, 2006, July 9, 2006), and this feeling continued to be portrayed in the media. For example, in 2016, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said the debt-free legacy remained "a significant outcome for any Games, especially in this era of tight-fisted, recession-wary governments" (AJC, July 17, 2016; August 12, 2012).

However, in the years immediately after the Games, coverage included conflicting reports of how well Atlanta was doing in terms of business,

infrastructure, and national and international recognition. While *USA Today* (August 6, 1998) reported two years after the Olympics that Atlanta was booming, hopes for further construction or new businesses had not occurred in the expected volume and problems of traffic, crime, housing and poverty remained (NYT, July 20, 1997; AJC, December 22, 1996; UT, July 25, 1997). In contrast, in 1997, Atlanta was voted the No.1 city to relocate to or expand businesses by United States and overseas CEOs (UT, August 6, 1998), and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (February 9, 1997) reported a poll saying the Olympic legacy was "overwhelmingly positive". Almost a decade later, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (July 16, 2006) described the growth of the city creating "a civic energy that led to international business investment and future development". But, the report noted, "as time passes, it's harder to definitively link new downtown development with the Games legacy". *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (July 19, 2006) also reported the city was not sold as a destination, due to the lack of attractions to convince people to visit once the Games concluded.

A considerable negative impact on Atlanta 1996 was the organization of the event and how it reflected on the city's image and branding. As *The New York Times* (January 27, 1999) reported, these Olympics were mocked as the "Bubba Games", and blighted by poor transport and issues with accommodation (GDP, July 14, 2006). The Games, through the views of athletes and IOC officials, "was marred by poor transportation and rampant commercialism, including gaudy advertising and gantlets of street vendors", the ambush marketing by Nike at an Adidas-sponsored event, and Coke logos being on every bus (NYT, December 5, 2004; May 7, 2006). Other regularly reported issues and memories were bus drivers getting lost, the failure of the IBM computer results system, and not enough hotel rooms for media, including a housing complex still being built when reporters arrived (NYT, September 10, 2000; AJC, July 19, 2006). These factors led to international newspaper reporting concluding that "Atlanta's staging of the Games was inept and appalling" (AJC, November 10, 1996).

Despite up to two decades passing, coverage between 2007 and 2016 still mentioned the poor Games organization. These articles included reminders of buses going to the wrong place or breaking down, computers struggling to update live scores, and how street vendors "clogged sidewalks and reinforced impressions of Southern tawdriness" (AJC, July 17, 2016; September 12, 2010). The "Bubba Games" were still being remembered for their media complaints, commercialism, and security problems (AJC August 5, 2012; August 12, 2012; August 24, 2008).

4.3. Beliefs and behaviour

Sport participation is an element in the beliefs and behaviour theme and athlete inspiration became a more prevalent issue in coverage as competitors inspired by Atlanta 1996 started to compete, or grow into adulthood. Initially, there were inclusions around hopes for further promotion of sports in Georgia, including kayaking receiving more participants (AJC,

October 2, 1998; UT, August 6, 1998). Later, *USA Today* (June 30, 2005) reported an 8% increase in swimming memberships across the nation following Atlanta 1996, which was higher than after the Sydney 2000 Games. In Athens in 2004, there was opportunity for athletes who started competing in track and field around the time of Atlanta to fulfil their promise (NYT, July 19, 2004). Women's soccer attracted new parents and their children following the 1996 Olympics, when the U.S. team won gold, and the Games were considered important in helping to start women's professional basketball (UT, April 13, 2001; July 9, 2001). Between 2007 and 2016, athlete inspiration was a smaller theme, with further mentions of greater interest in women's soccer and softball starting after the hosts' gold medals in 1996 (NYT, June 18, 2008). In one example, a U.S. kayaker said the Atlanta Olympics set him on his path towards London 2012 (AJC, July 22, 2012).

Culturally, there was limited reporting on changes in attitudes due to the Olympics. For example, *The New York Times* (July 14, 2001) concluded there was not less racism because of the Games. Another report noted that the Games did not leave "one truly memorable work of architecture" and the dream that the event could "turn Atlanta into Barcelona was naïve" (AJC, December 22, 1996). Memorabilia, such as stickers or clothing, spotted around the town was considered a more subtle legacy (UT, August 6, 1998). There were few mentions about cultural reflections of the Games, again showing a focus on the sporting-related aspects, in coverage from 2007 to 2016. Across the timeframe only two articles mentioned legacy in relation to the Paralympics as a standalone event, with one announcing funding for disabled events, and the other recognizing an Atlanta legacy group for honouring para-athlete excellence (AJC, May 3, 2007; GDP, November 26, 2016).

4.4. The Centennial Park bombing

The most haunting legacy of the Games was the Centennial Park bombing and while it does not fit within the themes outlined by Scheu and Preuss (2017) or the IOC (2017), it was a major part of the post-event coverage. The blast killed a woman and injured 100 people, and involved security guard Richard Jewell being considered a suspect at first and later a hero (NYT, July 20 1997; UT, July 25, 1997). In 2006, the blast was again remembered in detail following the conviction of Eric Rudolph (AJC, April 10, 2005; GDP, April 13, 2005). The bombing came after many of the early organisational problems of the Games had been fixed, but the "moment is so embedded in the Atlanta Games legacy, many think bombing in a word association test" (AJC April 10, 2005.) It is a difficult legacy to avoid from a random event, but it changed the tone of these Olympics (GDP, April 13, 2005). The legacy of this event continued to be a prominent part of coverage (GDP, July 19, 2016; August 2, 2012; AJC, September 12, 2010; August 5, 2012; August 24, 2008; UT, March 1, 2010). As *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (July 26, 2012) concluded: "Part of Atlanta's Olympic legacy is to never forget those victims or stop praying that all future Olympics remain tragedy-free."

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The media coverage of Atlanta's Olympic legacy highlighted a range of important elements and insights for future Games hosts from smaller cities. The results combine some well-known factors with lesser-understood micro issues. While the IOC's legacy guidelines (2017) were not in place for Atlanta, it was relevant to reflect on these elements in the themes of reporting, in conjunction with Scheu and Preuss's (2017) six facets of legacies. This approach places the results in both a theoretical and Olympic-focused practical context. Across the two ten-year time-frames, the four publications reported in most depth on urban development, particularly in relation to the Centennial Olympic Park, and the stadiums and related sports facilities. Venues fit within the IOC's (2017) organised sports development category, which includes areas for training and competition, and can be seen as supporting both the current and next generation of athletes. This element also links with the beliefs and behaviour theme, which includes athlete inspiration (AJC, October 2, 1998; July 22, 2012; NYT, June 18, 2008; UT, August 6, 1998), although it can take longer for this legacy to become noticeable.

Atlanta 1996 was reported through the media articles as achieving highly in aspects of the IOC's economic value and brand equity category, especially through not requiring government funding, and making a profit (Minnaert, 2012) (AJC, July 16, 2006; July 9, 2006; NYT, May 14, 2001; April 24, 2002; August 18, 2003; GDP, April 13, 2005). There were conflicting reports of how successful the city was in terms of business and infrastructure outside of the stadiums, as well as increasing the area's global profile and tourism, with the view of Atlanta not always being favourable internationally but still resulting in domestic benefits (AJC, July 13, 1997; November, 10 1996; July 19, 2006; UT, August 6, 1998; NYT, December 5, 2004; see also Ratnatunga & Muthaly, 2000). It is hard to argue that there was enhanced Olympic Movement brand equity, especially with Samaranch's sign off that the Games were merely "most exceptional" rather than the best ever, after an event which created an image disaster for the hosts (Rivenburgh, 2008; Torpy, 2012).

Through the media coverage, there was less focus on human skills, networks and innovation, or social development through sport. The lack of attention towards the Paralympic legacy was extremely limited, which is in contrast to the focus being placed on this event, and subsequent inclusion aspirations, of the Games in the Brisbane 2032 planning (Queensland Government, 2023). Culture and creative development were also not reflected in the media coverage as being a strength of the Games, including a lack of architecture (AJC, December 22, 1996). Apart from the Centennial Olympic Park, which predominantly applied to urban development, there was little reporting related to environment enhancement, particularly in matters related to protection or emissions, and there were mentions of traffic and haze returning a year after the Games (NYT, July 20, 1997). However, the global focus on climate—and related elements of sustainability—has changed considerably since 1996. There was minimal coverage on policy and governance, or intellectual property.

It is important to note that some Atlanta legacies lasted well beyond the ten-year time-frame that has become established for legacy planning (Queensland Government, 2023), while others aspects were struggling to be used within even two years of the Games. By the end of the 2016 data collection period, the Olympics had been in Sydney, Athens, Beijing, London, and Rio, providing multiple comparisons that could influence the reporting of the Atlanta legacy. Furthermore, news publications can be more likely to focus on negative or bad news, which means areas of conflict or dispute are published more frequently or prominently (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). This aspect was certainly relevant to the framing of the media reporting (Entman, 2007), and the overall analysis of Atlanta's legacy.

5.1. Lessons for Future Hosts

There are important insights in the findings for future hosts, including areas outside of traditional world or mega cities. In Atlanta, positive legacy elements focused predominantly on the major venues that continued to be used 20 years later. As many hosts in larger cities have found, including Athens and Rio, avoiding the "white elephants" of stadiums being left unused (AJC, February 24, 2002; July 16, 2006; UT, March 4, 1999) is a key element in avoiding criticism over costs and waste (Budzier & Flyvbjerg, 2024; Cervantes, 2021; Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2020). Ensuring venues remain in regular, relevant use after the Games helps to create a more sustainable approach to sporting infrastructure legacies, and assists in justifying the huge cost of developing these stadia to host the Olympics and Paralympics. Brisbane organisers and Queensland politicians have been wrestling with this issue during the series of delays and decision changes over major stadium plans. In March, 2025 a third plan was released by the Queensland Government, which included new major stadia, including a 63 000-seat venue for the athletics and a new aquatic complex. Legacy was described as being important in the decisions but the high costs resulted in shuffling the budget and removing some major projects. Atlanta achieved a successful legacy with its major venues, with the Olympic Stadium being repurposed twice for baseball and then American football, and still being used almost three decades later. The swimming centre remains, and has been retrofitted as a fully enclosed venue, ensuring another longer-term venue legacy. A major implication evident through the media reporting of Atlanta was to leave public spaces. The Centennial Olympic Park was seen through the coverage as the key legacy for Atlanta, due to its attracting of visitors and new development (AJC, April 29, 2012; July 17, 2016; GDP, July 11, 2016; NYT, March 30, 2007).

Media coverage can often amplify negative elements of legacy, particularly in relation to cost blow outs (Cervantes, 2021; Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2020; Seccombe, 2021). While Atlanta managed to avoid this on the big-ticket items of major stadiums, there were a range of uncomplimentary stories around smaller venues not being utilised (AJC, November 10, 2004; July 16, 2006; June 16, 2015; GDP, July 16, 2006; July 22, 2006). The city also suffered

when legacies were considered in coverage around the Centennial Park bombing, transport, telecommunications, and media accommodation (NYT, September 10, 2000; AJC, July 19, 2006; Hoff & Leopkey, 2021). In noting Games management risks, Flyvbjerg *et al.* (2020, p. 13) state "extreme randomness" is the most challenging to manage. This element was evident in the coverage of the bombing, which shifted the tone of the event (GDP, April 13, 2005) and became a defining memory (AJC, April 10, 2005; July 26, 2012). The nature of random events means they can be impossible to avoid, but completing an Olympics without these types of incidents is certainly beneficial to a host's legacy, and requires extensive contingency planning.

Furthermore, being careful of expectation management, and not raising hopes too high, is another key lesson for smaller hosts. This was evident in both the media coverage and academic scholarship of the Games. Atlanta's aims to be "the world's next great international city" (Rutheiser, 1996, p. 28) did not eventuate in the short or long term (AJC, July 13, 1997; GDP, August 4, 2011). This finding also highlights the negative social impacts, including the inability of the Games to solve social issues (Brooks, 2020; French & Disher, 1997; Malfas *et al.*, 2004) (AJC, July 13, 1997; NYT, July 14, 2001). In hosting an Olympics outside a mega city, it is also important for the area's image not to come across as backward, or as "Bubbas" in the case of Atlanta, which can make it a target for international media scorn (AJC, August 24, 2008; August 5, 2012; August 12, 2012; July 17, 2016; NYT, January 27, 1999). While many of the key findings in the media reports were similar to other Games, it is important to recognise that these descriptions remain relevant to future Olympics, including Brisbane 2032.

Assessing legacy through news coverage is only one avenue of examination, but it does provide a guide as to what the public, key figures, and journalists have thought over time, both through what people have recalled, or been encouraged to remember through framing of the coverage. It does not, therefore, provide the full picture of all legacies or achievements. In history, people tend to remember the things they were told to care about the most, including by the media's framing, such as events that were more sensational, intriguing, or negative (Entman, 2007; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). As a result, there may be elements that have been overlooked in the media coverage, such as cultural legacies or Paralympic achievements, because they were not considered "newsy" enough. This finding highlights the importance of effective strategic communication by the local organising committee, including executing plans which provide audiences with positive legacy elements across various platforms. It is also important to understand that it takes time to gather a comprehensive picture of legacies.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study reflect the differing views on positive and negative legacies of Atlanta 1996, the most recent host of a Games outside a mega city. These findings confirm that legacy is multidimensional, similar to broader approaches to

measuring legacy (Preuss, 2007), and can be either simplified or complicated by media and sports reporting, which often focuses on major newsworthy issues such as infrastructure and costs. When aspects of legacy are examined in isolation, such as Atlanta not being able to solve housing or race issues, or being too commercial (Brooks, 2020; Ellis & Leopkey, 2021; Minnaert, 2012), it can be easy to describe the entire event as a failure. However, it is rare for any type of mega event to achieve a positive legacy across all facets. Media also report from a variety of perspectives and do not always reflect the nuance of legacy in terms of objective measurement or benchmarking.

In relation to the over-arching research question, there are a variety of insights that Atlanta's smaller-scale Olympics can provide ahead of Brisbane 2032. Looking back through the media coverage, the Games were most effective for fulfilling elements related to sports legacies and the economic focus on making a profit, or not requiring government funding. There are considerable positives in the Olympic stadium still being in use, along with the aquatic centre, and the continued popularity of the public space and broader developments based around the Centennial Olympic Park. Rutheiser (1996) has noted

how the Atlanta organisers focused on Olympic venues instead of broader approaches to development and legacy. This argument has been reflected generally in the media coverage, although some of the smaller sporting facilities struggled and were closed or repurposed. While accepting that no legacy will be perfect, and that it is impossible to avoid some negative aspects, this analysis of Atlanta 1996 can help inform future Olympics host cities and bid applications, especially from the perspective of a relatively smaller host city. Understanding these elements can assist in ensuring Brisbane 2032 delivers a regional Olympics that is sustainable for the hosts, and allow the shift from mega cities to be viable in the long term. It is important to note that newspaper coverage tells only part of the story of a Games and future research into the legacy of mega-events –for big or small cities– needs to consider other areas for analysis in conjunction with media. Scheu and Preuss (2017) found there are often limited empirical research into past Olympic and Paralympic hosts and, as a result, gaining perceptions through interviews or surveys from other stakeholders, including the IOC, administrators and organizers from local committees, communications specialists and journalists themselves would help build a more comprehensive picture of legacy.

7. Authors' contribution

Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Data curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later re-use.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyse or synthesize study data.	Authors 1,2, 3
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models.	Author 1, 2, 3
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution. We would like to thank our research assistant, Evangeline Bryce, for her work in the initial stages of this project.	Author 1, 2, 3
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools.	Author 1, 2, 3
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components.	Author 1, 2, 3
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team.	Author 1
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs.	Author 1, 2, 3
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation.	Author 1, 2, 3
Writing/ original draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).	Author 1
Writing /review&editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision –including pre- or post-publication stages.	Author 2, 3

8. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

No artificial intelligence tools have been used in this article.

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