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Nov 04, 2016 by [Michele Acuto](#)

The Olympics Go Downtown for Tokyo 2020

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It is Tokyo, after all. It was nearly 6am when a few thousand supporters gathered at Komazawa Stadium, one of the key venues for Tokyo's 1964 games, exploded in celebration as International Olympic Committee Jacques Rogge held up the winning envelope marked "Tokyo 2020." With Madrid ousted at the first round, the Tokyo-Istanbul competition boosted the hopes of the Japanese bidders that eventually took the final vote by a large margin: 60 to 36.

Tokyo had been seen as the favorite in the race for a while. As the situation in Istanbul and neighboring Syria deteriorated, the Japanese case surged in confidence despite the concerns over the Fukushima disaster. The media response, as well as most of the official questioning

at the IOC, was focused on the challenges brought about by these security concerns. News reports on the Olympic bids echoed with the government's crackdown on protesters in the streets of Istanbul, the stalling Syrian crisis in the Middle East, the growing concern about radioactive waters and health safety caused by the never-ending Japanese saga with the nuclear power plant. These themes will no doubt remain part of the "Tokyo 2020" reports for the weeks to come. Yet it might, amid all of the discussion, be worth taking a quick step into what the games mean for the city and for the world of spectators and visitors that will be engaging with the Japanese capital.

After half a century, the Olympics are back in town. Downtown to be precise. As the games are set to head for the largest urban area in the world, a record that Tokyo has held since 1955, media and bid officers have started calling the event the "downtown games." The vast majority (28 of 33) of the venues and activities will be located in the Tokyo Bay zone, within an eight kilometer radius from the centrally located Olympic village. The main stadium will be situated in the city's heritage zone between the imperial palace and town hall.

Tokyo is promising the most urbanised games, in the most urbanised city, for the most urbanised century. Needless to say, such a vision poses mammoth challenges even for one of the most efficient metropolises in the world. Although most of the core infrastructure will be completed well ahead of the event, the city will need to deliver crucial improvements in transportation and environmental conservation.

Second-time lucky Tokyo had taken a pragmatic approach to this bid: keep the best of the (failed) 2016 bid plan, and "improve the rest" to offer a more effective call for the games to head East twelve years after Beijing 2008. Tokyo's bid built extensively on the experience of London 2012, highlighting the "global city" connection between the two metropolises, stressing the importance of urban retrofit versus new development, and having a strong emphasis on recasting some of the parameters of daily life in the city.

With London, the games brought a greater push for green spaces, non-motorised mobility routes and intersected substantially with initiatives designed to shape the everyday life of Londoners in the long term.

London invested more than £11 million in walking and cycling routes leading to games venues, and has been promoting an Active Travel Programme managed and delivered by Transport for London (a body part of the Greater London Authority) aimed at enhancing sustainable alternatives to public services such as cycling.

Tokyo follows suit by referencing these developments directly across many of the candidature files and initiatives that, devised for the 2016 Games, took new life in the winning bid. For example, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government established a Bureau of Sports aimed at implementing the "City of Sports – Tokyo" program that seeks to allow "anybody, anytime, anywhere" to enjoy sport in the city. Yet the focus of the Olympics in Tokyo will be even more centered on the role of the city as a vehicle for development, celebration, connectivity and more generally as the future of humanity. The Olympics offer a unique window for sub-national authorities such as the Greater London Authority or the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, allowing for substantial public diplomacy initiatives. While the UK had pledged to make London 2012 a "cutting edge example of sustainability," and the "greenest games ever," Tokyo promises us to allow people to "discover tomorrow" in a celebration of "dynamic

innovation.”

The games offer a window of opportunity for Tokyo, that has for the past few decades taken a secondary stage in promoting this global city leadership for environmental, social, and economic challenges, at least relative to Western giants like New York and London or emerging Global South voices like Mexico City and Rio, to reassert an East Asian, urban voice. If Tokyo 2020 will truly have to be the “downtown games” it is then time for the city to demonstrate what challenges and opportunities the urban century reserves for us. The bid is a hopeful start, but much more work lies ahead to take the world downtown.

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