

“Rio Redux- A Second Life for the City’s Olympic Architecture” Excerpt Transcript

Excerpt from [August 12, 2016](#) episode of Science Friday.

<p>IRA FLATOW</p>	<p>Right now in Rio they're in the thick of the 2016 Games. But in just over a week, the excitement will be over, the crowds will have gone. All that will be left is billions of dollars' worth of new infrastructure, including \$38 million spent on a 20,000-seat Olympics aquatic stadium-- a venue Rio couldn't even come close to filling again. The white elephant is a problem that every host city faces, but one for which Rio has come up with a creative solution.</p> <p>Joining me now to talk about it is Sam Lubell. He's a contributing writer for "Wired." Welcome to "Science Friday," Sam.</p>
<p>SAM LUBELL</p>	<p>Thanks, Ira.</p>
<p>FLATOW</p>	<p>This is always a problem with Olympic Villages or World's Fairs. I know here in New York we still have buildings left over from the '39 World's Fair, right?</p>
<p>LUBELL</p>	<p>That is definitely true. Any big event that challenges-- of course you need to accommodate many, many people, but after that you're not going to have those crowds anymore. So what do you do with those buildings after everybody leaves?</p>
<p>FLATOW</p>	<p>And what does Rio have in store for its Olympic infrastructure after the Games?</p>
<p>LUBELL</p>	<p>Well, Rio is following a trend that the International Olympic Committee sort of set a standard, or set an initiative to change this white elephant problem. Certainly Athens and Beijing are two of the poster children for empty Olympic parks that have sort of ghost-like buildings sitting there empty, or mostly empty.</p> <p>So the idea-- Rio is really focusing on a few stadiums that are not going to be that way at all. In fact, they're calling them "nomadic stadiums." And the idea is, once you're done with the Games, you don't just take the stadium apart and then it's done. You take the stadium-- which is something that London really initiated in the last Olympics-- but in this case, with nomadic, you take it apart and then you build it somewhere else as something completely different.</p>

	<p>So, for instance, the handball arena is going to become four schools scattered around Rio. And the aquatic center that you mentioned will become two community pools outside of the main Olympic area.</p>
FLATOW	<p>So are they doing this in advance now? Or, you know, Tokyo is going to be the next Summer Olympics.</p>
LUBELL	<p>Right.</p>
FLATOW	<p>Is Tokyo thinking about this in advance of how they might use their buildings later?</p>
LUBELL	<p>Yeah. It's definitely-- they call it the "legacy mode," and it's something that every Olympic Games are thinking about. And I think it seems like there's now two major kind of strategies, I think, that are really making things a little bit more sustainable after the Games leave.</p> <p>One is what we're talking about here. You have these lightweight stadiums that can either be taken apart, or taken down from like 80,000 seats to 20,000 seats, because you're not going to need 80,000 seats. Or nomadic, so these really lightweight, prefabricated structures.</p> <p>And then you have what actually Los Angeles is proposing for the 2024 Games, which is basically the idea of not building anything at all-- using stadiums that exist already. Some people say, well, that's the greenest thing of all, is to not build anything at all. Repurpose.</p> <p>And I think Tokyo is looking at probably a combination of that. They headed the Games in the mid-century already, and they have a pretty extensive list of stadiums that are there already. So they're going to have a mixture there. But LA is really looking to almost build nothing.</p>
FLATOW	<p>Wow. So you just use the stuff you have. Couldn't you expand it? I mean, do they have an 80,000--</p>
LUBELL	<p>I mean, the Coliseum--</p>
FLATOW	<p>IRA FLATOW: Coliseum is big.</p>
LUBELL	<p>Yeah. It's hosted a couple of Olympics, but it needs to be retrofitted. First of all, it bakes in the sun, there's no shade, so they're already building shade</p>

	<p>structures there-- actually because the Rams will part-time be there until they get their own stadium, moving to LA.</p> <p>But yeah, they can retrofit and change stadiums around. But it's still more sustainable than building something from scratch.</p>
FLATOW	<p>Does the IOC-- the International Olympic Committee-- now require you, if you become a home city, that you come up with a plan for recycling your buildings?</p>
LUBELL	<p>Well, it's not-- in my research, I couldn't tell that it's absolutely required. But they've made it very clear in their documents to potential cities that it's something they're looking for. So basically, if you want, like if you're applying to become a host city now, and if you know if you want to get it, you're basically going to need to do one of these strategies to get the Games.</p> <p>I think the idea of now that these stadiums-- which again, an 80,000-seat, 50,000-seat arena just sitting there empty-- it's not going to help the community. But if you have these new schools that you're building out of it, obviously that's something that they're going to need. So it makes a lot of sense. I think it's a great idea.</p>
FLATOW	<p>Let's talk about how London or LA is compared to this. Let's talk about London. London really thought this through when they started.</p>
LUBELL	<p>Oh, London still is getting, for the most part, getting really good reviews for the way they handled the Games. And a lot of it was in response to previous Games which did not get quite as good reviews in the way they handled the legacy mode, as I'm saying. So quite a few of those stadiums in London were either able to be, as I said, taken down completely, or taken down from like 40,000 to 20,000.</p> <p>The one big exception, actually, is the big Olympic Stadium, because the Olympic Stadium was supposed to be-- I think it started at 80 and was supposed to go down to something like 20. But the economic downturn hit the entire world. And basically, they decided that once the Games, after they happened, they were actually now rented out to a soccer team and they never shrunk it. It's still the full size, and they get the money from hosting giant soccer games there.</p>

FLATOW	As someone who covers architecture, how would you rate the Rio architecture compared to other Olympic attempts?
LUBELL	<p>I think that some of it is really interesting. I love this nomadic idea. I think it's great. Some of those stadiums, they're not architecturally-- they're not things that-- Like the Bird's Nest in Beijing that firm Herzog & de Meuron did was spectacular architecturally, but now it's sitting empty, for the most part. There's a few things. So it's this hulking mass.</p> <p>Whereas these are not quite as impressive architecturally, but they're lightweight, they were prefabricated, they can be taken apart, they can be moved around, they're much more flexible. So sometimes an aesthetic "wow" in the long term is not a great idea. And Rio does have some pretty "wow" stadiums. A lot of them are actually from the World Cup that they had a couple years ago, which they got a lot of flak for, for building a lot of new stadiums. So they sort of learned their lesson.</p>
FLATOW	Sam Lubell, contributing writer for "Wired," and co-author of the forthcoming book, "Never Built New York." I can't wait. I love talking about New York City architecture.
LUBELL	I look forward to it. And thank you so much.
FLATOW	Thanks for taking time to be with us.