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China's new Olympic stadium will add to memories of famous, infamous arenas

By DEBORAH ABRAMS KAPLAN

It's too early to know the legacy of Beijing's Summer Olympics, but so far the most prominent image coming to mind is the new Bird's Nest stadium.



The story of an Olympic stadium often mirrors the games, reflecting the political and social history. Beijing's stadium and those from Summer Olympics past are windows into their eras.

Also known as the National Stadium, the Bird's Nest's woven structure indeed looks like a giant steel version of a delicate avian den. The games will open and close here. In between, Olympic track and field athletes will run, throw and jump for medals inside it, cheered on by more than 90,000 spectators.

Much like the Beijing Olympics, the stadium tells two stories. No question, the host country is politically controversial as protesters decry China's financial support of the Sudanese government and its refusal to give independence to Tibet. Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, the architects of this Olympic symbol are Swiss: Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron.

Even in China the Olympics are controversial. Chinese artistic design consultant Ai Weiwei withdrew from the stadium project last year, telling Reuters news agency that he was disgusted that the stadium was a proud sign of China's development.

Munich



Like China, Germany had a political legacy to overcome when hosting the 1972 Olympics in Munich. The previous German Olympics, Berlin's 1936 games, were used by Hitler to spew propaganda before his aggressive march across Europe and the Holocaust. These subsequent games were to show the new Germany. The Munich Olympic motto was "the Happy Games."

Munich's gorgeous stadium was constructed with an open roof and a peaked transparent awning over the seats.

The games went along happily for the first week, the Olympic Stadium hosting the opening ceremony, track and field events and soccer games. That happiness ended with the Munich Massacre.

The Palestinian Black September group kidnapped and killed 11 Israeli athletes and coaches. A German police officer and five of the kidnappers were also killed. The games were halted for 34 hours. A memorial service in the stadium was attended by 83,000.

Some Munich Olympic spectators were removed from a soccer match after they held up a banner that said, "17 Dead, Already Forgotten?"

Munich's "Happy Games" are remembered first for the massacre and only after for spectacular athletic performances by swimmer Mark Spitz, winning a record seven gold medals, and gymnast Olga Korbut, with three gold medals.

The stadium still attracts 5 million paying guests a year for athletic and entertainment events and facilities.

Montreal



Four years later, the many failures of Montreal's 1976 Olympics were epitomized by its stadium and reinforced by the host country not earning any gold medals. Thanks to striking workers and technical flaws, the stadium and its adjoining tower weren't completed in time. The stadium still held Olympic events, but with no signature tower or roof, finished years later.

Although it was an elegant structure to view, the design flaws included a retractable roof that never properly retracted, and the world's tallest leaning tower (556 feet), too heavy for its concrete blueprints. With subsequent repairs and engineering expenses, the stadium cost more than double its initial \$770 million (Canadian) estimate. The city paid off the Olympic debt for the next 30 years.

But the stadium wasn't the only technical flaw. Another Montreal venue's three-digit scoreboard meant that Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci's perfect "10" showed as 1.00 instead of 10.00.

Los Angeles



The Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum was not initially built for the Olympics, but rather as a tribute to World War I veterans. The city hosted the 1932 Olympics, which had no other bidders because of the Great Depression.

These games had the first Olympic village and first victory podium. When it hosted again in 1984, the city again had no Olympic bid competitors, probably stemming from Montreal's huge cost overruns. Yet in the spirit of American commerce, the first two Olympics to make a profit were the 1932 and 1984 Los Angeles Games.

Although the coliseum was home to the former Los Angeles Raiders and Rams NFL teams and the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team, it's no longer modern enough to attract new league teams. And its historical landmark status makes renovating tricky.

Amsterdam



Amsterdam's Olympic Stadium, built for the 1928 Summer Games, is memorable as the site of the first Olympic flame. It burned in a bowl atop Marathon Tower, connected to the stadium. Just below the bowl, the tower held speakers that broadcast announcements to the 31,600 seats below, another first for the Olympics.

These games, were the first at which women competed for track and field Olympic medals, as well as in gymnastics. There was resistance to women competing, some fearing that the competition would make women too masculine or harm their child-bearing abilities. The women at these Olympics caused a stir, wearing running shorts rather than the prescribed long black stockings and knee-length bloomers. Female gymnasts couldn't show their knees either and had to bind their chests for modesty's sake. Unlike today's teenage Olympic competitors, the 1928 women's bronze medal winner was 46.

The stadium, designed by Jan Wils, is thought to be one of the best examples of the Amsterdam School style of architecture. The architect updated the structure

in 1937, more than doubling its seating size and adding a bike track. It hosted post-Olympic soccer games and other sporting events.

Amsterdam's stadium was almost the first Olympic stadium to be demolished. The city decided to convert the land for housing in 1987, but another agency put it on a historical monument list, saving it from destruction. The stadium underwent renovation back to its 1928 size and is still in use today. Visitors can tour the stadium's catacombs, which are part of the Olympic Experience, an interactive multimedia museum featuring Dutch athletes.

Beijing

As the Beijing Olympics begin, visitors and TV viewers might think about the dichotomies in China through the lens of the stadium. The chaotic exterior lines that make up its stunning mesh are geometrically planned.

Although the Chinese Communist Party says religion and party membership are incompatible, the Olympic complex still has undertones of spirituality. According to the stadium's design engineer company, Arup, the round stadium represents the heavens, while the National Aquatics Building next to it (also known as the Water Cube) represents Earth.

The openness of the stadium may not translate into the openness of the press, or even what visitors can see and say while in China. The Beijing Olympic organizers published a list of 57 things visitors couldn't do during the Olympics, including displaying political, religious or ethnic banners.

The Bird's Nest will be there as a cradle, holding the memories for years to come.