Despite missed opportunities and warnings of impending doom, the Rio Olympics were a surprising success – a success just as surprising to Brazilians as to the rest of the world. Massive problems remain for the city and the country as a whole, Stephanie Nolen reports from Rio, but one of the real legacies of the Games is a sense of hope: hope that those same Olympic qualities and spirit can now be mustered to deal with enduring crises and inequities.

On the last night of the Rio Olympics, I received, on a colourful, kinetic closing ceremony – one that went on longer than your television coverage permitted. Organizers in the Maracana Stadium eventually turned up the lights in the hope of heading a deluded crew of samba dancers and athletes out the door. Then they turned off the music. But the samba crew had their own plans. I’m still not sure why, but they were standing along the highway train across the city, and on the trip, I chanced upon an older couple beside me, whose accents told me they were Capitenas, born and bred residents of Rio.

“That was lovely,” she said contentedly.

“We did fine,” he said.

The last of the glories has been swept up, the bandungas have come down remarkably quickly, the physical traumas that Rio has suffered have faded. And yet, a sense of Rio trying to take the measure of the Games.

There is a certain sense of unreality here – did that just happen? – and an overall consensus that, yes, we did fine. But many are also discussing whether Rio could have done better, and what else could.

There are real anxieties, particularly drug use, and a wave of random violence, but also satisfaction with some unexpected achievements, both tangible ones, and some abstract gains such as a renewed sense of possibility.

When I visited the last Olympic village – the Alleluia – a few weeks before the Olympics, there was an elementary school and a movie theater all packed with holes from recent exchanges of gunfire between gangs and police. Residents told me they were sure the “modernization” process had failed, this public safety and security would be pulled out altogether within days of the end of the Games.

I don’t think anything that ever will happen, but everyone who lives here is aware of a slide in an already precarious security situation – and however bad it is in middle-class neighborhoods like mine, it will be exponentially worse in places like this.

The federal government said on Tuesday that it intends to leave national guard and military troops stationed in Rio until after the Paralympics, which start on Sept. 7. But the state of Rio remains utterly broke: it has been running on an emergency bailout that allowed it to mount the Games. Before that, it was months behind in paying its cops. How what happens?

With the games concluded, there is also an awareness that
Rio no longer has that incessant, or the exuberance, as it is sometimes called here, to tackle its big problems, and some of the biggest did not get fixed. The polluted waterways are no cleaner; basic sanitation networks were barely extended. Public transportation to the poor areas did not get substantial improvement. "We didn’t embrace the chance to overcome the capital sin of Rio," says Marcus Zacchi, who works for the small, local, non-governmental organization Cara Limite, told me. Did I think they ignored the divided city before another you tried the idea of holding the Games or not, the commitment created a new window of possibility here. Rio has been steadily decaying since its role as the capital was taken away in 1960s, crime shot upwards from the late 1980s, and little public investment was seen here for decades. With the Games coming, the city has put a lot of planning, the federal government worked together, and the local government held in cash and support. The government has financed a range of public projects, and there was a boost of new IGa Fomento.  
"Rio didn’t have a project for many years. People were looking at it in a different way, something that’s changed the city, at a much smaller scale. Look at the Olympic footprint that created a sports complex in Barra, the Olympic Park. The same thing happened in the Olympic village and in the downtown area. It’s not just a matter of the Olympic Games, it’s about people and the economy."

The Olympics, though, seemed to change that. "For these few weeks, Rio had a chance to interact with the world, to showcase all things, and I think it’s left a new sense of confidence and self-esteem," the writer and filmmaker Joe Wright told me. Zechti said that the city has inestimably demonstrated it can handle a really big challenge, it needs to apply the same approach to its enduring problems. Ten days into the Games, I came across a neighbour on our street corner, lamenting, with exuberant hand gestures, to amid a group of people, how he had been to the complex, how the Olympic hiss for the first time, in my experience, strangers make friends. The result of the city kept being built now and then, much of the planning for the Games was done to cater to the plans of the influential real estate development industry and wealthy neighbour.  

Brazil is a continent in a country, irked by its language from its neighbours. A great many visitors come to Rio for Carnival every year, but that doesn’t seem to diminish the alarm or jubilation that the need to interact with a foreigner often seems to provide. you can spend a lot of time in Rio marooned on a sidewalk with your map if you don’t speak Portuguese. When Caracas felt it was unproven, it couldn’t get a bus schedule or a map, avoiding conditions of life as you would a physical manifestation of Brazil’s determined to-do-faces. The Olympics, though, seemed to change that: "For these few weeks, Rio had a chance to interact with the world, to showcase all things, and I think it’s left a new sense of confidence and self-esteem."

The writer and filmmaker Joe Wright, who directed the 2011 London Olympics commercial, told me. Mr. Pena hopes the new openness and the shift in attitude endures. "You know, it’s a myth about the coastal Brazilian: Brazil doesn’t show it, but we are super friendly, not blacks, gays and the poor," Mr. Pena said. He was struck by a particular Olympic moment, one that electrified fans in the first days of the Games — when the Uncle Tadashi Silva, who is gay, ended up at the centre of the city. The result? The family City of God was won a gold. When the site was won, the medal and took her girlfriend to the celebration and everyone applauded — it helps as an image of diversity, it gives me hope for more tolerance at a moment when divisions are growing because of the political crisis. This could be the beginning.