

Ever decreasing circles?

The profile of culture at the Olympics

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The Olympic Games is clearly established as the largest sporting event in the world today. In addition to the 17 days of elite sport competition taking over our TV screens every two years, the Games also incorporate ambitious cultural and arts programming for as long as four years leading up to the Olympic fortnight. Such programmes bring an opportunity for host cities to embed their distinct local identity within the

national and international arena and to define the Olympic experience as much more than an opportunity to watch athletes compete. Moreover, Olympic cultural activity can be harnessed as a mechanism for developing collaboration among creative, educational and cultural providers, and as a catalyst for urban regeneration.

The first official Olympic cultural programme took place in 1912 in the form of an Olympic Arts Competition, where artists – like athletes – competed for gold, silver and bronze in five loosely defined fine-arts categories. However, continuous problems with the judging and comparison of artworks from an expanding international base of artists and disciplines led to these competitions being replaced by arts exhibitions and festivals from 1956 onwards. This change in status diminished the profile of the cultural aspect of the Olympics, and this poor profile persists to this day.

In 1992, Barcelona introduced the notion of the Cultural

Olympiad, taking place over the four years that separate two summer or winter Games. This initiative has become a feature of each subsequent summer Games. Sydney 2000 was particularly ambitious at the bid stage and presented its Cultural Olympiad as a mechanism to advance towards Aboriginal reconciliation, while Athens decided to create a separate entity, the Hellenic Culture Company, to manage and fund its Olympiad on a grand scale. Beijing and London have also promised four-year programmes, which will be used to make progressive statements about each country's contemporary role as a world city.



New moves from Turin 2006

Although smaller in scale, the Winter Games also offer good examples of cultural programming. Turin is the largest city to have ever hosted a Winter Games, and identified cultural activity as the most important legacy of this experience to help make the transition from an industrial to a service-based and creative economy.

Turin was particularly bold with its cultural statements in order to retain a media presence comparable to the mountains surrounding it, where most competition venues were located. The official cultural programme, 'ItalyArt', was used to present the city's sophisticated cultural system, including rich museums, contemporary art galleries and prestigious performing arts groups. However, the city's cultural vision also permeated other highly popular initiatives more closely linked to the street and, especially, the party atmosphere of the Games.

Of these, the most important was the Medals Plaza, first conceived for the Salt Lake Games in 2002 as a vehicle for bringing the Games to the heart of the city and the athletes closer to a larger and more diverse audience outside the mountain sports venues. In Turin, free tickets to the medal ceremonies were made available in advance to the locals through a ballot system, with an additional quota of last-minute tickets for anyone willing to queue on the day. The formal medal ceremonies were preceded and followed by music concerts – by artists on international fame including Jamiroquai and Whitney Houston – and every day of the Games concluded with a grand finale of fireworks. Beyond the entertainment value, Turin ensured a strong cultural presence by locating this event within its most spectacular piazza, surrounded by some of the best examples of baroque architecture and public art in the city. It was also a focal point for the world's media.

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The city also incorporated a sophisticated cultural message within its Olympic urban decoration programme, traditionally named 'the look of the Games'. For the first time, it was complemented by a 'look of the city', dedicated to promoting Turin's main credentials: from history to science, art, architecture and gastronomy. This campaign was used to make a clear statement about Turin's role as a world centre of design. Another interesting initiative linking culture with the international Olympic spirit was the 'Ethical village', which was dedicated to the promotion of humanitarian causes such as peace and social cooperation.



Turin also succeeded in bringing culture and commerce to the city's party atmosphere with 'la Notte Olimpica' – the Olympic Night – consisting of an all-night opening of clubs, restaurants, shops, galleries and museums each Saturday of the Olympic fortnight. Additionally, the city council encouraged direct participation and representation by calling upon citizens to send Olympic-related images, texts and videos for display on the council's website.

Visible culture?

Despite the diversity of Olympic cultural programming that has been delivered in recent years, it remains one of the least known aspects of the Games and, increasingly, one of the most vulnerable. The main problem remains the lack of media coverage, which also leads to difficulties attracting funding – particularly sponsorship – and an awkward position within the Games' management structure. The lack of media coverage is mostly a result of current Olympic broadcasting arrangements,

where accredited journalists are focused entirely on covering the sports, and rely on pre-recorded inserts to provide some local

background rather than engage with the real-time cultural atmosphere of the Games.

Furthermore, the difficulty in attracting cultural sponsorship is the result of strict Olympic regulations, where only one sponsor can be associated with each product category of the Games (McDonald's for food, and so on). Official sponsors are focused on the most media-friendly deals. In terms of management, the problem is a trend towards isolating the cultural programme, placing it in the hands of arts experts who have little involvement or links with the rest of the Olympic project. This tends to result in a lack of coordination and also misunderstanding about how culture could contribute towards other aspects of the Games. Some areas that may benefit from greater cultural input include venue design, food distribution, event promotions and the volunteering and community relations programmes.

There are also problems resulting from narrow or outdated conceptions about the role of culture within the Olympic environment. Traditionally, culture has been interpreted as 'arts and heritage', with a clear emphasis on elite or folkloric expressions. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to divorce these arts activities from the sports fields, as cultural

programmers tend to see any direct links as artificial or bland. Indeed, efforts to establish a connection have often led to superficial or forced relationships, such as attempts to showcase artworks produced by athletes, or forcing artists to present work solely inspired by sport.

These failings reveal a lack of dedication to offer a broader interpretation of culture, either as a platform to showcase local identities or to present the kinds of social concerns relevant to the staging of a global mega-event. Ultimately, Olympic organisers must find a way to link cultural value and artistic merit with entertainment and the sort of celebration that is unavoidably in demand during Games time.

London's Games

London has an opportunity to rethink what an Olympic cultural programme should entail and what it can do for the host city, not only in the four years leading up to the 17 days of competition, but as a core long-term legacy of the whole experience. To achieve this, the Organising Committee (LOCOG) and Delivery Authority (ODA) need to embed existing cultural regeneration debates into the Olympic strategy and consider how they can enable the city to best present itself.

The Games must be treated as a major cultural event, which can have as great an impact on local creative communities as on the sports world. The challenge is to persuade the sports visionaries and administrators that it is in their interest to embrace this interpretation of the Games, which, notably, reflects the core values of the Olympic Movement as conceived by its founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin at the turn of the twentieth century.

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Providing that this commitment is never to the detriment of the athletes, London could make a historic contribution to the Olympic Movement by overcoming the traditional dichotomy between event- and legacy-oriented strategies. Clearly, the East End of London will benefit from the 2012 hype in boosting the provision of new leisure spaces and world-class facilities, but what it really needs is a sustainable cultural strategy that can take it into the kind of creative economy that makes sense in the twenty-first century.

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