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On: 31 May 2013, At: 09:20

Publisher: Routledge

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## Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprt20>

### The London 2012 Olympic legacy and the wonder factor: implications for culture and the intrinsic versus instrumental debate

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Published online: 22 May 2013.

To cite this article: Tessa Gordziejko (2013): The London 2012 Olympic legacy and the wonder factor: implications for culture and the intrinsic versus instrumental debate, Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events, DOI:10.1080/19407963.2013.800375

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2013.800375>

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## CONTEMPORARY POLICY DEBATE

### **The London 2012 Olympic legacy and the wonder factor: implications for culture and the intrinsic versus instrumental debate**

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In 2005, London won the Olympic and Paralympic Games for the UK capital in 2012. The city's bid featured two leading promises: That London Olympics in 2012 would be an Olympics for the whole UK; and that it would represent a true realisation of the original vision of Pierre de Coubertin's vision for the modern Olympic movement, a 'marriage of art and sport'. London's Olympic ambitions had been justified at home by the legacy a London-hosted Games would leave, most intensely where the physical infrastructure of the park and facilities would regenerate a vast area of East London, but also across the whole UK in areas ranging from economic impact to skills and employability, from increased participation in sport at grass roots level to the creation of a volunteering culture. And every region of the UK stated its intention of using the Games to attract more visitors, shine the light on local communities and promote regional identity. Here I examine the twin challenges of ensuring a cultural presence during the Olympiad and leaving a legacy beyond 2012.

There were high expectations of the Cultural Olympiad in this aspirational kaleidoscope. In 2007, a network of 13 Creative Programmers were appointed in each of the English regions and UK nations, a move described retrospectively by Garcia (2012, p. 30) as providing 'a rare opportunity for a continuity of a cultural vision throughout the Olympiad ...' and 'a much needed degree of flexibility for locally sensitive cultural programming which previous games editions have always found difficult to manage'. The original job description for the Creative Programmers reflected the wide, and initially unfocused, brief. It included such phrases as:

London 2012's Cultural Olympiad represents a unique opportunity to make a real and lasting difference. This post will make a key contribution to the creation of an outstanding Cultural Olympiad spanning 2008–2012, across the whole of the United Kingdom.

The Creative Programmer will harness the enthusiasm and commitment of key regional agencies, producers and individuals by brokering partnerships and generating joint events, projects and activities which can become part of the Cultural Olympiad ... act as the catalyst and hub for the region's contribution to the Cultural Olympiad ... Create, validate and shape a package of high-quality, accessible and innovating regional activity ... which reflects the agreed values of the Cultural Olympiad and leaves a lasting legacy .... Inspire people and organisations to become involved<sup>1</sup>

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What was evident through the wording of the job descriptions was that: (a) there was already a strong yet unfocused expectation of legacy to be delivered through the Cultural Olympiad, (b) that the Creative Programmers would be operating in what McGuillivray and Macpherson (2012, p. 125) call the ‘complex and contested policy landscape’ which characterises Cultural Olympiads and (c) there was no budget allocated to any nation or region’s Cultural Olympiad programme at this stage. Each Creative Programmer was expected to ‘inspire’ the agencies, producers and individuals to spend their own money on activity which would become part of the Cultural Olympiad. In order to create a recognition and licensing mechanism, the London 2012 Organising Committee created ‘an alternative brand identity for non-commercial games related cultural activity ... called “Inspired by London 2012”’ (Garcia, 2012, p. 30).

However, the Inspire Mark alone did not provide a dynamic process for curating and coherently shaping excellence. It was only by a rigorous application of the principle that to deliver on the three core aims of each Inspire project (‘Welcome the World’, ‘Involve and Inspire Young People’, ‘Leave a lasting Legacy’, for which high artistic impact was an implicit requirement) that they would be realised. It was not until Ruth Mackenzie became Director of the Cultural Olympiad in 2010 that artistic excellence explicitly rose to the top of the programming considerations.

A few months after the Creative Programmers started work, an opportunity arose which was in some regions and nations, to transform their capacity to curate. Each region was invited to bid for significant funds from Legacy Trust UK, a trust set up with various sources of lottery money to fund projects across the UK which would create a legacy from London 2012. In many, but not all, of the regions and nations it was the Creative Programmers who led these bids for a major element of their Cultural Olympiad programme.

Yorkshire’s signature Cultural Olympiad programme, *imove*, was awarded £2.24 million for a region-wide cultural exploration and celebration of human movement. The programme established a commissioning and development model which would gather strong propositions from a wide range of the region’s artists. Instead of a lengthy application form, artists were asked to make a ‘pitch’ to the Producer group, followed by a creative conversation. The main criteria were that it should be a response to the *imove* legacy mission ‘to transform people’s relationships with their moving bodies’, and that it would engage audiences beyond traditional arts attenders. But there was also a third factor which the Producers had to gauge through this process, whether it stood a high chance of being wonderful. Would it, whatever its scale, deliver the Wonder Factor? Those with greatest potential were supported through a phase of development by an *imove* producer; if their potential crystallised during this stage, *imove* commissioned them for inclusion in the programme.

This resulted in a three-year programme which delivered 32 highly acclaimed arts projects in all parts of Yorkshire and the Humber, many of which had a sports theme or synthesis. It reached a live audience of over two million and an online audience of over four million between its launch in March 2010 and the end of the programme in September 2012, and was described in the University of Central Lancashire’s independent evaluation as:

...one of the few regional programmes which has successfully and productively addressed the relationship between art and sport’, also observing that ‘the *imove* contribution to originality and innovation was ... one of its defining features’ and that it had

been 'effective in enabling people in Yorkshire to feel part of national events. (Froggart, Manley, Roy, & Hacking, 2013, p. 99)

Legacy, unsurprisingly, remained high on the agenda throughout planning and delivery. The legacy outputs which stakeholders were looking for through the whole UK London 2012 project can be viewed on three levels:

- (i) IMPACT (things will never be the same again) – 'Like Never Before' was a byline for much of LOCOG's promotion. The Torch Relay and Opening Ceremony were both saluted as aspects of the Games critical to transforming the emotional journey of the British public
- (ii) BEHAVIOUR CHANGE (people and organisations do things differently which they will take forward in future) – for example, campaigns to grow a volunteering culture and grass roots sports and physical activity, and to change attitudes towards disability.
- (iii) INFRASTRUCTURE (tangible structures and outputs will remain and carry on afterwards) – the Olympic Park and London transport links created for the Games, but also projects and initiatives supported through Legacy Trust UK in its transitional programme such as imove (Yorkshire) and Accentuate (South-west) and newly established or upgraded festivals such as Abandon Normal Devices (North-west).

Of these elements, the first – the Wonder Factor – is hardest to quantify at the outset when advocating for investment. On one level, if the benefits of behaviour or a tangible structure can be detailed and forecast, the return on investment is apparently demonstrable. However, as Thornley (2012) points out, there was an inability at the early stages to define legacy; hence the 'opportunity for inflated claims' about projected impact to be made on little or no evidence. To advocate the value of something which will be breathtaking, enchanting, mesmeric, intriguing, entertaining, moving and energising is difficult, politically speaking, because it requires recognition of the intrinsic qualities and value of something yet to be experienced. It transpired however that, by putting in place the purpose and modes of creation which increased the likelihood of great art projects being developed, imove was able to achieve other legacy indicators – high levels of participation and reach and a sense of engagement with the national moment by regional audiences.

In the 1980s cultural activists developed a sophisticated expertise in advocating why the arts were good for society for many reasons beyond their intrinsic value. Myerscough (1988) established the wider descriptor of 'Cultural/ Creative Industries' to ascribe the impact of the arts on economic activity stemming from broadly creative practice. Earlier articles in this journal have elucidated this history, for example, Quinn (2010) introduces her article on festivals and cultural policy with examples of where festivals have been viewed instrumentally for urban tourism and economic regeneration purposes.

In some quarters this led to the assumption that if the arts were not socially useful in a way that could be measured and evidenced economically or in pursuit of some other social purpose, then they did not deserve public investment. Early in the twenty-first century, there has been a questioning of this mantra, developed through a range of studies and attempts to define and capture cultural value. These include two key publications by Holden (2004, 2006) published by Demos, which create a continuum of

thought by describing the three main aspects of cultural value: Intrinsic, Institutional and Instrumental. Holden develops this further in semi anthropological terms: historical, social, symbolic, aesthetic and spiritual and also draws parallels between the characteristics of cultural value and the value of environmental resources. Cultural characteristics, including experimentation, stimulus, shock, uncertainty and ambiguity, are ‘as vital signs of a healthy culture as of a living eco-system’ (Holden, 2004, p. 39).

In *Government and the Value of Culture*, Jowell (2004), then Secretary of State at the Department for Culture Media and Sport, recognised the political and public emphasis that has been put on the instrumental value of culture, which has driven cultural professionals and policy makers to attempt to establish causal links between culture and beneficial social or economic outcomes. She makes a strong case for embracing more confidently the intrinsic value of culture. Whilst this provided welcome leadership to a new way of approaching what culture actually does, Holden (2004) recognises that the measurements of intrinsic value remain primarily subjective – feeding emotional, spiritual and intellectual human needs. He goes on to outline the problems with most research methodologies into cultural value, identifying how research tends to take place at the production end rather than the consumption end of the cultural cycle, and that methodologies often conflict with the dynamism of cultural practice. It also identifies that research based on data gathering fails to capture the subjective response and does not involve creative practitioners in understanding for what purpose what they are being asked to provide evidence. Holden (2006, p. 49) concludes ‘Hearts need to be persuaded as well as minds’ and argues for new approaches to research which have clarity of purpose, which involve the learner (participant or practitioner), which robustly investigate the intrinsic and which take consumption – the public or participant’s responses or satisfaction – as key evidence.

To meet these challenges will require the development of research methodologies based on artist and participant led cultural practice, asking questions framed around creativity itself. Creative practitioners generally lack the language of social science and its methodologies and therefore are not actively setting agendas in influential research fields – new ways are needed of demonstrating cultural value by defining the nature and value of creativity as the fuel and irreducible essence of culture.

There are new approaches to research which may answer this call being pioneered by a range of academic disciplines and institutions, in partnership with industry-based cultural agencies and producers. For example, the Psycho-social Research Group is in partnership with the Open University organising a series of experimental workshops on ‘Cultural Haunting and Shared Unconscious’ which is described as:

both an experiential space of an individual and social kind, an artistic event and an academic intellectual engagement with a new methodological exploration... We intend to enact action research – as a creative experiment – to search for connections between the individual and the social, the internal (unconscious) and the external (conscious) drawing on narratives of dreams and engagement with art objects.<sup>2</sup>

The route to a new understanding of the power of culture on its own terms as an essential dimension of a healthy society, must be a journey equally shared by artists, academics and creative producers in order to carry the findings and benefits of such research into real arts practice.

The experience of the 2012 Olympics provided an essential lesson in Wonder. The delight with which all aspects of the Olympics and Paralympics were met, the powerful

narratives of the Games themselves, the big-hearted service of the Games Makers, the moving symbolism of the Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies, the impact of the Torch Relay and the creativity and scale of Cultural Olympiad projects, elicited on a national scale public responses which made the whole London 2012 project successful beyond our expectations and which most importantly provided us with new, qualitative ways to understand and interact with each other's humanity for a bounded period of time. Without the difficult-to-measure qualities of excellence, joy, elation, surprise, incandescence, emotion – which I have shorthanded in this essay as Wonder – there is nothing to feed other layers of legacy, and it may take a decade for us to understand the phenomena whereby it is realised. No trace of change will be left behind unless we create in the first instance something potent enough to stimulate that change.

### Notes

1. Extracts from Creative Programmer generic job descriptions 2007.
2. Event description <http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/events/cultural-haunting-and-the-shared-unconscious-an-experiment-with-dream-and-art-in-cosmopolitan->.

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