

# London 2012 – Culture and Museums

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## Introduction

Thank you for asking me to talk about museums and their role in the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Museums played a relatively minor role overall however the cultural programme was very important. I will talk briefly about the London 2012 Olympics in general and the overall approach and effect of the cultural programme. I will then say something about branding – an important element of the Olympics. I will then talk in a little more detail about the museum programme Stories of the World and what the legacy of this has been for the museum sector in the UK. Finally I will reflect on the challenges and opportunities of working as part of a cultural Olympics programme.

## London 2012 and the Cultural Olympiad

The London 2012 Olympics were considered a huge success. There was general agreement that they showed the UK and London at their best. We did very well in terms of the sport and winning medals but as importantly it was considered that we were welcoming and professional. Key to this was the Cultural Olympiad – the arts and cultural activities that accompanied the games. This also included the choice of venues – many sports were held in important historic sites that showed London and Britain at its best.

The most important parts of the cultural Olympiad were the opening and closing ceremonies. People were very worried about these because the Beijing ceremonies had been so huge and spectacular. Again in the end it turned out fine but it is worth remembering that before the Olympics many considered they would be an embarrassment and a huge waste of money.

Importantly for arts and culture the ceremonies and accompanying cultural programme demonstrated that the UK was capable of putting on world class arts and culture that could be a major selling point for the UK. We continue to use these examples in advocating for public investment in arts and culture today.

The London Olympic Games' Cultural Olympiad included 500 events nationwide throughout the UK, spread over four years and culminating in the *London 2012 Festival*. The cost of the events was over £97 million with funding provided by Arts Council England, Legacy Trust UK and the Olympics Lottery distributor. Much of the public money involved was actually from the national lottery and some of it was later “re-paid” to the lottery as land used for the Olympics was sold.

In many ways it is the cultural bit of the Olympics that make them distinct. Without the opening and closing ceremony, without the Olympic rings and the famous medals it just becomes a very big sporting event.

It is expected that any city staging an Olympics will have a cultural programme. It is a reminder that arts formed part of the original Greek Olympics and as late as the 1948 Olympics in London medals were still given to artists.

For London 2012 a cultural board was created of some of the UK's most senior artistic leaders. They were closely linked organisationally to the main game organisers, they were housed in the same building and were part of the same governance structure. A number of programmes were developed to capture different elements of the cultural world and the different funding agencies involved. In its early stages this felt very bureaucratic with lots of committees and everyone having their say. There was also a sense that there was an attempt to cover all elements of cultural life. Originally the Cultural Olympiad comprised ten headline projects and many smaller initiatives. These included: Artists Taking the Lead, Discovering Places, Film Nation: Shorts, New Music 20x12, Stories of the World (for museums), and the World Shakespeare Festival. Many of these involved public participation, for example Discovering Places encouraged people to explore their local environment and identify 2012 species, Film Nation was aimed at young people making short films, and Stories of the World involved young people working with museums across the UK. It was also seen as important that events took place across the whole nation.

The Beijing Olympics had not taken place at the time London was first awarded the 2012 games and turned out to be very particular to China. But there were many lessons to be learned from in particular Sydney and Barcelona who had held successful Olympics with strong cultural elements. Because of the strong cultural links between the UK and Australia it was to Sydney that we mainly looked for lessons and indeed several of those who had been involved in the Sydney cultural Olympics came to London to be involved in 2012.

An obvious early question was who was the cultural Olympiad for in terms of audiences? And what were considered its purpose and success criteria?

It was noted from other Olympics that during the period of the actual games many local people chose to leave a city – to avoid the disruption, and that normal tourist numbers tend to drop – again because people want to avoid the disruption; and that those who visit to see the sport

only come to see sport and are not interested in other activity. This led to a rather startling recommendation from Sydney – museums might actually want to consider closing to the public and using their building for other uses during the duration of the games. This did transpire in London in some cases. The Museum in Docklands, part of the Museum of London and located quite close to the Olympics site closed to the public and instead made money by becoming the headquarters of the German Olympics association – somewhere where they could carry out administrative duties and host parties!

Similarly, some advised that if special museum programmes were going to be put on they should be staged in the period before and after the games or even in 2013 not 2012. The logic was that no one would visit in 2012 but the Olympics would act as an advert for the city across the world and therefore visits would grow the following year.

In the end the cultural programme was designed to enhance the sporting events; act as an advert for the UK, to add to a sense of celebration and for the people of the UK and those attending the games, and included activity that run through all of 2012.

It is fair to say that in its planning the cultural Olympiad got too big and too unwieldy; too many events were planned and there was no single unifying topic.

Very late in the day with a sense of curatorial drift new leadership arrangements were put in place to deliver the cultural Olympiad in its final form. Although many of the projects that had been developed went ahead a far greater focus was given to a small number of high profile events which were branded as a “London 2012 festival”. This did include some of the original museum projects that made up Stories of the World but not all of them leading to some unhappiness. Equally some museum projects which had originally had nothing to do with the cultural Olympiad were given 2012 branding in order to add to the international profile of the festival.

The cultural elements of the Paralympics were seen as equally important both to emphasise the importance the UK gave to these games but also in recognition that opportunities for disabled people in arts and culture have some of the same barriers that are found in sport. One lasting legacy for the museums is the creation of a permanent museum and heritage resource at Stoke Mandeville hospital in England – the place where disabled sports seriously began.

## **Branding**

Absolutely essential to any programme of events or exhibitions associated with the Olympics is that they can indeed be visually associated with the games. This is more complex than it might sound.

The international Olympic Committee (IOC) guard incredibly fiercely their branding – in particular the 5 Olympic rings. It is quite normal for them to sue organisations that use them without permission and there is a complex and time-consuming hierarchy of sign-offs for their use. They also guard their official sponsors fiercely. This causes problems when an organisation becomes involved in the Olympics that has its own sponsor which might rival an Olympic sponsor.

This is where the organisers of London 2012 were very clever. They were the first to come up with a clever range of branding including a “sub brand” – agreed by the IOC that did not actually include the 5 rings or even necessarily the Olympics name but would be recognised as being linked to the games. Again it is interesting that the London 2012 branding was greeted with almost universal dislike when it was first announced but soon became accepted and liked by all involved. This gave an incredible freedom to use branding without needing to always check back with the IOC. There was even an “inspired by” 2012 brand that could be used for associated projects. The Cultural Olympiad was also given its own “London 2012 Festival” sub brand.

## **What London 2012 did with museums: Stories of the world**

The museum programme at the heart of the London 2012 cultural Olympiad was “Stories of the World”. It was developed as a concept by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and then delivered by the Arts Council England after it took over MLAs museum functions. I was responsible for overseeing much of the development and delivery of the programme.

The programme attempted to draw upon the strengths of UK regional museums and the core values of the 2012 London Olympics: the importance of young people, the diversity of UK museum collections and the diversity of the UK population, and welcoming the world to the UK.

The concept was relatively straightforward: museums were asked to pick an element of their collections or a strong theme that could be supported by collections and that came from somewhere else in the world or were influenced from somewhere else in the world and then put together an exhibition and associated programme of events that included curation by local British young people but also included involvement of people from the source communities of the collections. So for example if Chinese collections were being used it would be expected that partnerships were developed with China itself but also with Chinese communities living in the UK and with young people local to the museum.

The MLA put together an external committee of mainly non museum people to oversee the project and select the final projects. Dedicated MLA staff as well as its general museum teams supported the work. Successful museums were able to apply for existing MLA museum funding (The Renaissance programme) to fund the work.

The National Youth Agency – a government body specialising in consulting with young people helped ensure the voices of young people were included.

Liz Forgan who chaired the overseeing committee summarised the aims of the projects as:

“The project aims to have three lasting effects: the UK’s treasures will acquire a richer meaning for everyone who sees them in future; new thinking will be applied to traditional museum display; a young generation will connect in a new and deeper way with their own and their neighbours’ heritage.”

In the end 9 projects were selected and these were delivered by 61 museums that delivered 130 exhibitions of one kind or another. It is estimated that 22,000 young people became involved in some way.

To give three examples of projects: “Global threads” in Manchester and the Northwest that concentrated on fabrics and textiles; “World Stories in South East museums that concentrated on anthropology collections being curated by young people and “Precious Cargo” in Yorkshire that looked at long distance trade.

Another project “Truck Art” in Luton partnered with artists in Karachi to have a local truck decorated in the style of Pakistani taxi vans. This saw one of the more interesting challenges to corporate Olympics sponsorship and branding when there was an objection from BMW who were the official Olympics vehicle sponsor to having a vehicle from another manufacturer featured.

Another project was rejected by the Olympic committee as being too risky. Exeter museum wanted to do a project using museum objects to look at how sex has been regarded through time and in different parts of the world. Despite the liberalness of UK society this was deemed unsuitable to be associated with the Olympics, particularly as young people were involved.

The overall result was a series of exhibitions, some good, some less successful, but perhaps more importantly a vast amount of engagement with groups of young people.

As already noted by the time projects were delivered in 2012 the Cultural Olympiad had evolved into the London 2102 Festival, although all Stories of the World projects were branded as being linked to the Olympics only some were formally part of the festival and some new museum projects at big London institutions were included in the festival.

## Legacy

Much is made of the importance of legacy – a lasting improvement or beneficial change for Olympic expenditure both for sports but for the city in general.

There is no doubt that for arts and culture the London 2012 Olympics did provide a lasting legacy. It made the UK as a whole recognise – mainly through the opening and closing ceremonies just how good we could be at creating a creative spectacle, particularly when creative people were given enough money and allowed to get on with it uninterrupted by politicians.

Probably the two biggest lessons learnt were that if you want to do something really good you must be prepared to pay for it properly, and secondly if you want something really creative you must be brave enough to trust artists. These lessons were even more powerfully learned because they were very much not the case for the UK millennium celebrations that had taken place in 2000 based on the Millennium Dome where it is agreed money was wasted and used for the wrong things and the creativity was seriously compromised by political meddling.

For museums any legacy has been on a more modest scale however, there is no doubt that the Stories of the World experience has helped museum people feel far more confident in working with young people and people with diverse backgrounds.

It is now the case in UK museums that no one would undertake any project without thinking about how young people could be involved and have a voice. And similarly no museum would consider an exhibition or programme featuring work from another community without consulting that community and giving it a voice. At the moment this can be seen most visibly in plans for the new Museum of London where attempts are being made to ensure all London's many communities are fully involved and new collecting projects are underway to capture their experiences.

## Conclusions and lessons

My recommendations to anyone getting involved in a museum programme associated with an Olympics would be:

- Be aware of the complex bureaucracy involved, especially around branding.
- Think carefully about what makes your museums unique and how this can be linked to the ethos of your Olympic games
- Think carefully about who your audience is and what your motivations are – if it is simply about more people you may not succeed.
- This is a wonderful opportunity to showcase your culture to the world – enjoy it
- Keep bureaucracy light, allow museum creatives to be creative

- But do have a unifying theme
- Think carefully about what success will look like and how it will be measured – how will Japanese museums be different in 10 years' time as a result of your programme.

And most importantly enjoy your moment in the global spotlight!