

## **Delivering a Cultural Olympiad: Vancouver 2010 meets London 2012**

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**The Cultural Olympiad is perhaps the least visible of the Olympic pillars, the other two being sport and environment.**

Yet, culture remains a fundamental part of an Olympic Games vision with all host cities obliged to deliver a cultural programme alongside the sporting activity. The challenge for all hosts is to make the Cultural Olympiad an integral part of the Games and, thus, realize de Coubertin's vision of the Olympics as the marriage between sport and art. This premise was the starting point for our research during the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games and our focus when observing and engaging in its cultural activity.

The initial challenge for Vancouver 2010 was to obtain the rights to use the Olympic rings in all Cultural Olympiad branding. Programme director Robert Kerr, explained "it was essential that we linked the Cultural Olympiad to the rings to make clear its association with the Games. Our position on this was nonnegotiable."



The ArcelorMittal Orbit, from APOR

As a result, we observed a clearly branded, colour coordinated and fully integrated cultural brand that was used across all Cultural Olympiad activity Canada-wide. There was also one single entry point to the cultural programme: a web site.

These circumstances presented an immediate contrast to London 2012, which has developed a multi layered and diverse approach to programming culture. This includes putting culture at the heart of London's plans for its Olympic Park, most recently demonstrated by the approval of the UK's largest public art work - an Olympic Park viewing tower, designed by artist Anish Kapoor and structural engineer Cecil Balmond called the *ArcelorMittal Orbit* (pictured above).

The Cultural Olympiad itself consists of ten, UK-wide Major Projects and projects associated with national sponsors (for example, an Open Weekend), which benefit from visible associations with the Olympic rings. It also involves the creation of a new brand, the Inspire Mark (see below), which utilizes the 2012 logo but without the Olympic rings, to brand local and regional projects.



Image of 'Inspired by 2012' logo

Compared with Vancouver 2010, London's approach is more complex and a result of LOCOG's aspiration for the UK Cultural Olympiad to be the largest in the history of the Games. Inclusive involvement on such a scale within the brand environment and context of Olympic and Paralympic Games presents a very real challenge.

London 2012 currently enjoys a multiplicity of brands for culture and multiple entry points via regional directorates (for example, Team South West), programmes sponsored by and associated with the Legacy Trust (for example, WE PLAY) and project specific web sites. Amongst the proliferation of brands and messages that is the

Games, this could frustrate the delivery of a fully integrated and visible Cultural Olympiad.

Vancouver's Cultural Olympiad Director Robert Kerr emphasized that, as a result of having the rings as part of the Cultural Olympiad logo, people understood the programme's association with the Games. This recognition was achieved by Spring 2008, with "two years to go" to the Winter Games, suggesting London may have some catching up to do to achieve the same brand association.

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However, of more significance is the fact that the privilege to use the Olympic rings for the cultural programme - won by Vancouver - has not been automatically transferred to London 2012, suggesting a lack of continuity and transfer of learning between Cultural Olympiads, which the IOC should formally address. Such occurrences create a situation where organizing a Cultural Olympiad, unlike the Olympic sports, is reinvented for every Games, constantly revisiting negotiations to attain an association with the core Olympic brand.

At the time of writing, change is on the horizon at London 2012. Director of the Cultural Olympiad, Ruth Mackenzie, appointed in February 2010 has identified some key priorities which include the need to decide and make clear the shape of the Cultural Olympiad programme in the year 2012 and the need to resolve the obstacles around branding.

The fourth year and final months of the Cultural Olympiad will consolidate into a 12-week finale for the Cultural Olympiad. This UK wide Festival will have its own brand, which will relate to the generic look and feel of the London 2012 Games. This is a welcome move forward, enabling the presentation of one programme under one brand with one web site and inclusion of key organizations and types of creative practice currently excluded due to brand restrictions around commercial association.

## Programme

Vancouver 2010's Cultural Olympiad provides an exemplary model for future host cities to follow in terms of curatorial vision, delivery mechanisms and production standards. In dialogue with Robert Kerr it became obvious very quickly that Vancouver 2010 had a very different delivery model to London 2012, which, may prove to be overly distributed and ambitious.

The curatorial vision for the Cultural Olympiad was focused around two components (art and popular culture) and three themes (Innovation, Excellence and Diversity). Kerr explained they took this simple approach to make it as open as possible for organizations and artists to respond to the Games, reflect the key tenets and enable the best work to reach public attention. They wanted to keep routes to engagement simple and saw no need to limit the range of work that could be included in the programme through adding too many curatorial restrictions.



*Mondo Spider, part of CODE,*  
Photo by Andy Miah

This light touch approach is in stark contrast to London 2012's inclusion criteria which requires that a project meets all of the three core values of London 2012 which are welcoming the world, involving and inspiring young people and generating a legacy and, at least three of its eight project themes which are to bring together culture and sport, encourage audiences towards active participation, animate and humanizes public spaces, use

culture and sport to raise issues of environmental sustainability, health and wellbeing, honour and shares the values of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, ignite cutting edge collaborations and innovation between communities and the cultural sector and enhance the learning, skills and personal development of young people by linking with our education programme. A project must also demonstrate 'how they are inspired by London 2012' .

Robert Kerr indicated that Vancouver 2010 made a commitment to focus on Canadian artists and partnered with the community right from the start, operating as co-producers and co-commissioners with a centrally resourced VANOC programme budget through which to develop partnerships and leverage resources from cultural organizations and local and regional authorities.

Vancouver 2010's cultural journey began with a multi party commissioning programme in 2007, followed by the first of the three annual festivals in 2008 and a national touring programme in 2009 to engage communities across Canada with the Games. This strategy has paid dividends through the partnerships created with the cultural sector, as evidenced by the range of Canada wide partners and Canadian artists taking part in their Cultural Olympiad

programme. Robert Kerr explained,

90% of my work in the first 18 months was spent on community engagement, reaching out to communities and addressing the initial sceptism around the Games. As a result, the value of the Cultural Olympiad has now been widely recognized. The question now is what comes next?

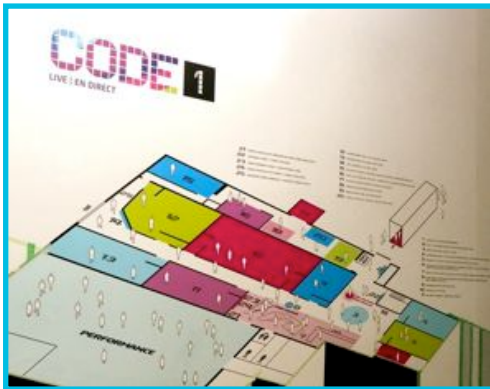
For Vancouver, the impact of the Provincial government cuts to arts funding is a key factor and whilst Kerr informed us that these cuts did not affect the willingness of arts groups to participate in the Cultural Olympiad, it is now up to the community, including artists, arts organizations, public sector funders and private sector funders to determine how to capitalize on the extraordinary experience of the Cultural Olympiad.

Clearly the challenges are around enthusing communities, sustaining work that has been developed and being clear about the message being delivered. Robert challenges us: 'Will the world think London and the UK is as multi-cultural as we think it is?'

## Event Experience

The Vancouver 2010 cultural offer showcased a range of work spanning the entertainment and experimental divide from Hal

Willners' Neil Young Project (with rock gods Lou Reed and Elvis Costello sharing centre stage) and Robert Lepage's The Blue Dragon (a digital media feast, like live film on stage) to CODE, the Cultural Olympiad Digital Edition.



CODE1, Cultural Olympiad Digital Edition, wall photo by Jennifer Jones

Perhaps the jewel in the crown of the cultural programme was CODE, which presented some of the world's best visual and digital artists in unexpected places across the city. Some personal highlights were Neo-Grafik, using architectural surfaces around the city as canvases for interactive urban drawings; Akousmaflore, a garden of hearing, hanging and touch-sensitive plants; Reactable, an intriguing musical instrument built around a large touch sensitive tabletop and Room To Make Your Peace, an interactive contraption firing white, paper aeroplane 'wishes' up a shoot and into a net, connecting audiences with the oft-neglected Olympic Truce programme. One visit to each venue was simply not

enough to truly appreciate the delights that were CODE.

One might not expect to see cutting edge digital work as part of an Olympic and Paralympic Games, but Vancouver 2010 delivered such work and, by comparison to Transmediale 2010 - one of the world's major festivals of new media, it was in another league in terms of context, content, quality and accessibility. CODE was an extremely well curated and broad programme of digital arts; its presentation giving much thought to access and attracting new audiences, who are regularly excluded at new media festivals. Vancouver 2010 was where new media art went mainstream while maintaining both its contemporary aesthetic and creative integrity.



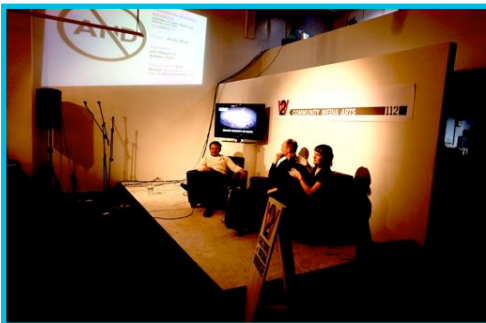
The Reactable, Photo by Andy Miah

Also worth highlighting was the Bell Orchestra night-time performance as part of CODE LIVE featuring some of the hottest talent in electronic entertainment, attracting die hard electro and digital media fans as well as new audiences to very well produced and high quality events.

When asked about notions of compromise, Malcolm Levy, Curator of CODE said:

My curatorial vision was never really challenged. It could have been but the team ended up curating something far more challenging in this context than people might have imagined. That is what has impacted the arts community here in a positive way. Our partnerships and the way we have worked have been completely far reaching.

While in Vancouver, we also took part in AND+W2, perhaps the first ever cultural co-funded production between an Olympic Winter and Summer Games (Vancouver 2010 and London 2012). The project comprised a series of critical debates and film showings thematically structured around the UK's Abandon Normal Devices (AND) Festival, which is a London 2012 'inspired by' programme designed to engage people in dialogues around new norms in relation to sport, new media and alternative economies for culture, science, the body and the state.



Abandon Normal Devices Salon at W2 in Vancouver, ©ANDFestival

AND's relationship with W2 – a media centre in the Vancouver down town east side – emerged through relationships built by Debbi Lander and Professor Andy Miah at Vancouver's Northern Voice conference a year before the Games in 2009 and a subsequent visit to England's Northwest by W2's Executive Director Irwin Oostindie in November 2009. These visits were crucial to establishing the collaboration, which only emphasizes the importance of enabling cultural programmer's to liaise with future and past Olympic cities, in order to build partnerships that can translate into a transfer of knowledge.

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### **An essential task for any Olympic host city is achieving an integrated 'look of the city'.**

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The AND+W2 programme also involved collaboration between disability arts agencies in Canada and the UK, which was one of the very few projects involving disabled artists or disability arts evident in the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad programme. Unlike London 2012's *Unlimited* - a dedicated and integrated disability arts programme - Vancouver appeared to have opted for a minimal programme associated only with the Paralympics.

### **Branding and Identity**

An essential task for any Olympic host city is achieving an integrated 'look of the city'. Due to the amount of activity taking place during Games time, Olympic tourists (sport or art) need clear signposts indicating what is around them.

In the centre of Vancouver, the majority of outdoor sites carried clear Cultural Olympiad branding, including the celebration sites, where the CODE short film programmes were taking place, Granville Street and the Live Site locations. However, in Vancouver's downtown east side, a previously neglected part of town being steadily "gentrified", the branding was less apparent, despite the fact that it was hosting two show stopping Cultural Olympiad projects.

The first was the excellent *NeoGrafiK*, a site specific graffiti and projection work, which did not have any visible brand association to the Cultural Olympiad at the site. The second was the super hot *Fire with Fire* video installation (pictured below) playing nightly on the W2 façade on Hastings Street, courtesy of Quebec video artist Isabelle Hayeur.

While this work was accompanied by a street-side poster board, it was easily missed, though it invoked powerful associations with the Olympic cauldron.



*Fire with Fire* by Isabelle Hayeur,  
Photo by Kris Krug

In response to this observation Robert Kerr said:

In fact we were very interested in attaching Cultural Olympiad to branding *Fire with Fire* in a much more significant manner. However, we came up against challenges with the artist around integrating projected branding and challenges with W2 around fixed exterior branding.

The absence of any Cultural Olympiad branding was a loss for their visibility in an area of the city undergoing regeneration.

Also clear from the start of the Vancouver Games was that its Cultural Olympiad was not the only show in town during the Games. Beyond activity and events generated as part of their ongoing annual programme by the city's big cultural institutions, like the excellent *Da Vinci* exhibition at the Vancouver Art

Gallery, there were a plethora of alternative “looks” and slogans (from “We were made for this” and “You gotta be here” to the rallying and pervasive “Go Canada Go”) challenging, albeit inadvertently, core Olympic branding.

Chief among these - making a major impact on visitors’ perceptions of Vancouver and Canadian Culture (judging from the queues) - were the regional Pavilions. Each highly visible, individually branded Pavilion hosted its own programme promoting cultures from Alberta to the Aboriginals. Unlike the Cultural Olympiad’s focus on conveying a contemporary and popular cultural image of Canada, their core objective was to promote the heritage of Canada to prospective tourists.

Kerr informed us that their curatorial team worked very closely with the producers of the Aboriginal Pavilion, as the Cultural Olympiad co-presented the nightly performing arts segment from 9:30 – midnight. They could not list specific artists because the booking timeline didn’t match the Cultural Olympiad publishing timeline, however the programme guide did include a daily reference to the Aboriginal Pavilion and Celebration Sites as well as general overviews of each site and URLs for detailed program information.



Aboriginal Pavilion, Vancouver 2010,  
Photo by Andy Miah

It seems strategically valuable for future hosts to include these Pavilion programmes as part of the Cultural Olympiad (including some insistence on signing up to a coherent visual look and brand that ties the Pavilions into “a one Olympics” feel while allowing for expressions of regional distinctiveness) and for the Olympiad to collaborate with the tourism and heritage sectors to communicate one message around cultural identity and create a more substantial branding association.

When it comes to brochures and the Cultural Olympiad programme, it is worth remembering that the Olympic Games is not the same as other events, like the Edinburgh International Festival or its Fringe – although it is worth remembering that in 2012 these festivals will be taking place at the same time as the London 2012 Olympic Games. Thus, the core audience is not necessarily in the city, primarily to see culture or to take risks on what they see. For this reason, Olympic tourists need clear direction towards



events that may appeal to them or, at least, a way of allowing them to identify content likely to be of interest. This might be achieved by something as simple as separate colour coding for visual arts, dance, theatre or music events. Regardless of the approach taken, it seems unreasonable to expect Olympic live audiences, beyond those who are most committed to the arts and culture, to plough through pages of dense descriptive text in date sequential order. As one Chicago-based journalist succinctly put it “they won’t be bothered. They’ll simply take a place in the line to see one of the Pavilions. You kinda know what you’re getting there.” (personal conversation).

The London 2012 Cultural Olympiad will be the primary platform during Games time to make connections between contemporary and historical culture and between arts and tourism, engaging wider audiences and promoting cultural diversity. Embracing diversity is the only strategy worth devising for an Olympic Games, as the majority of organizations and institutions, whether officially or unofficially, will find a way of engaging, either through celebration or critique.

### **Place Branding**

During the Vancouver 2010 Games, the International Sport Business Symposium at the University of British Columbia

(UBC) received a keynote from former IOC Vice President Richard Pound. During his talk, Pound made an astute observation that, when it comes to place marketing and re-branding the image of cities via the games, this would not happen in London because of its clearly established and visually strong image. Instead, he predicted, it would be in the regions of the UK that this re-branding would take place.

This sentiment resonated with the presentation on Place Building by Professor Holger Preuss of the University of Mainz, who could offer no reason for why London’s image might be changed by the Games (as it was for Barcelona or Vancouver). Julie Ovenell Carter of Canadian Tourism expressed a similar view, emphasizing that, for the average American or Australian citizen, a journey of four or even five hours to go and see good cultural content was nothing compared to what many of them did to visit family and friends every weekend.

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### **tourists taking part in the London 2012 Games may think nothing of travelling to the UK’s regions**

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The realization that tourists taking part in the London 2012 Games may think nothing of travelling to the UK’s regions, as part of their Olympic or Paralympic experience is crucial. Yet, to fully capitalize on it will

require a mindset where arts and tourism, contemporary and historical culture throughout the regions and nations are unified and encouraged to collaborate on the years leading up to the Games.

## Celebration and Critique

Vancouver 2010 was one of the biggest Winter Games celebrations in history. It delivered many expressions of social concern, such as anger towards broken promises made to improve housing provision and thus failing to meet the needs of a growing homeless population. Vancouver's Games were also shrouded in concerns over draconian bylaws introduced to meet IOC regulations, such as the near postponement of the Women's Memorial march, a 20-year tradition to honour the missing and murdered women in Canada.

Stories of these concerns were not told by the global media, though they were being syndicated widely via social media and the active engagement of bloggers and citizen journalists with Vancouver 2010, described as the first "Twitter Olympics". As guests of W2, which set up the first social media centre during an Olympic Games and, therefore, provided a hub of infrastructure and resources for the peoples' record to be generated as twitter feeds, facebook postings, videoblogs

and web casts, we were privileged to witness and be a part of this revolution, which received widespread media coverage for its work.

By following a range of Twitter hashtags, a whole new narrative about the Olympic Games opens up, revealing numerous such untold stories. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that social media is only covering dissenting Olympic stories. Indeed, we saw many that were positive - such as the benefits that the homeless population of Vancouver were receiving from collecting empty cans for trade and profit.



Audience at Fresh Media Olympics, W2, Photo by Andy Miah

One of W2's key events during the Olympic fortnight was the Fresh Media Olympics Conference for bloggers and citizen journalists which attracted accredited Olympic media, the DTES Mayor and homeless residents in the neighbourhood. This programme was part of a daily programme of volunteer led broadcast events and party celebrations making cultural statements in response to the Games, including an

unforgettable Bike's In party, showcasing the underground sub culture of biker porn with its programme of shorts illustrating a perfect or perverted (depending on your point of view!) marriage between art and sport.

At the Fresh Media Olympics conference, Professor Andy Miah outlined some sizeable statistics with regard to potential social media participation for London 2012. Keen to protect the billions of dollars generated by Olympic Games broadcasting rights contracts, the IOC is currently pursuing the monetization of social media, so as to mitigate against financial vulnerability in a time of media transition.

However, it is abundantly clear that the rapid growth of this phenomena and the unregulated platform of the Internet is putting social media way beyond the IOC's reach. It is hard to envisage that any organization could dictate the terms by which social media audiences will engage and so must, instead, find a way to accommodate and work with the independent media.

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Given the UK's role in hosting the next Olympics, there is an opportunity to embrace the social networking function within the Cultural Olympiad and to

harness it to evaluate whether the Games is fulfilling the broad remit of the wider Olympic Movement as a mechanism for social change around sport and cultural participation. London 2012 can close the gap between the Olympic Games and the Olympic Movement for the IOC through creative and strategic use of social media.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on the various delivery structures for culture in the Olympic city: the Cultural Olympiad, the Pavilions and many unbranded independent and community sector responses to the Games, we found ourselves questioning the role and function of an official Cultural Olympiad.

Could it be enough for a Cultural Olympiad to simply provide an open platform and brand, which invites everyone and anyone to create and promote Games time inspired programmes and events? How far could the inclusion agenda be pushed without defaulting on the need to protect the integrity of the Olympic message?

With values such as tolerance, friendship and fairplay leading the Olympic mission, one might suggest that it could, indeed, be stretched very far and embrace both celebration and critique of the Games culture. Is there any real need for a centralized programming and curatorial structure and, if there is, might it

not benefit from having a very tight, even singular focus on excellence or participation or legacy?

The Legacy Trust UK's deployment of funds to the nations and regions of the UK is one model for future Cultural Olympiad delivery. Designed with legacy in mind and led by regional partnerships, these programmes are being delivered across the whole of the Olympiad period in each part of the UK including London. Many include major celebrations for the 2012 year itself.

Making London 2012 a nationwide Games experience requires clear commitments to foreground regional cultural programmes during the Olympic and Paralympic Games time periods, while also working to ensure that what takes place in these locations during Games time is exciting enough to create distinct celebrations that will

draw the attention of national and international media and visitors.

London 2012 might well achieve this for London's Games, with its 12-week Games time Festival, staged across the UK, not just in London. Its proposed wide-ranging programme from pop to film, from fashion to theatre, from opera to digital innovation is a once in a lifetime opportunity to globally showcase arts and culture distinctive to regions and nations and not just London or the UK.

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