

## The London 2012 Cultural Olympiad: A Model for a Nationwide Cultural Legacy<sup>1</sup>

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**The London 2012 Games mark precisely 100 years since the first official commitment to presenting cultural and artistic activity, alongside sport, as a core dimension of the Olympic hosting process. This centenary year provides a useful moment to reflect on what culture and the arts have brought to the Olympic Games and what has been London's distinct contribution in this area.**

From avant-garde film making to graphic design innovations, new approaches to public art and new ways of engaging with public spaces, past Olympic cultural programmes have made their mark within the practices of artistic communities in cities as diverse as Berlin, Tokyo, Mexico, Barcelona, Sydney or Torino. However, little is known of these positive experiences and their direct beneficiaries have tended to be a select few. This is because, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the

Olympic cultural programme has been viewed as an opportunity to showcase the artistic excellence of the local host – often using a very narrow (mainly Western elite) conception of the arts.

As the Games have evolved into a global media event attracting vast global audiences, this premise has become less and less relevant to the average Olympic audience. On this basis, the present article discusses how the London 2012 Games have advanced cultural programming for the Olympics, in order to make its four year Cultural Olympiad the most accessible, youth oriented, innovative and outreaching Olympic cultural programme in history.

From the bid stage onwards, London emphasised its cultural and creative assets building on its reputation as a creative city and a world-leading centre for the cultural and creative industries. Its bid for the 2012 Games detailed how London would utilize the Cultural Olympiad to reach out to the whole of the UK.

Presenting a national Olympic cultural programme is not a new ambition for a host nation. However, most Games editions have struggled to make their official cultural programme nationally relevant, and appreciated by cultural experts as well as the general public due to a lack of media appeal, conflicting sponsorship and branding regulations, and a difficulty in overcoming existing tensions between the sports and arts agendas of key stakeholders.

To address these challenges, the London Organising Committee for the Games (LOCOG) has supported a parallel delivery and promotional structure for culture: from the creation of 13 creative programmer posts based in every UK region and nation, to the establishment of an alternative brand identity for non-commercial Games related cultural activity, described in jargon as a distinct 'mark' called 'Inspired by 2012'

These innovations are at the heart of what is distinct about London's Cultural Olympiad and the approach may become a blueprint for future Games.



**London 2012 main Olympic pictogram and, to the right, cultural pictograms**



The use of a single (non-rings dependant) design for the main culture pictograms across Olympic and Paralympic activity has facilitated synergies, broadened inclusion and avoided commercial conflict with global sponsors

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### **A UK-wide cultural delivery structure**

Following a tradition started at the Barcelona 1992 Games, London 2012 has presented its Cultural Olympiad over four years, starting in 2008. The London 2012 Creative Programmers were appointed in 2008 and have been in post until 2012, offering a rare opportunity for the continuity of a cultural vision throughout the Olympiad.

Arts Council England, Creative Scotland, Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Arts Council of Wales have funded these positions, which have acted as a parallel coordination structure, liaising with - but not dependent on LOCOG. This has provided a much needed degree of flexibility for locally-sensitive cultural programming, which previous Games editions have always found difficult to manage within a centralised and Games-time oriented OCOG structure.

To encourage new Games related cultural programming, optimise inclusivity and promote ownership, London stakeholders also created a parallel funding structure. The Legacy Trust UK was launched in 2008 and has become one of the three principal Cultural Olympiad funders, committing £40m towards four national programmes and 12 regional programmes. This funding imposes a distinct angle to the work presented, as funded activity is expected to have a post-Games sustainability strategy. This is the first time that such an emphasis is placed on the sustainability of the Games cultural programme, an approach that is consistent with the decision to appoint a Legacy Steering Committee for the Olympiad, as well as fund a Cultural Olympiad Legacy evaluation programme.

The commitment to a nation-wide delivery structure has resulted in a range of key achievements. Firstly, the creation of a network of dedicated cultural operators with a common timeline and underlying objectives has strengthened inter-regional relationships across the country and encouraged new ways of working. Furthermore, it has established a locally trusted contact point or mediator for Games related cultural activity, so that every region has had the same degree of opportunity to

produce the Games, particularly in the years prior to 2012.



'Unlimited' showcases the work of world class disabled artists across the Olympic and Paralympic Games

Secondly, the existence of a creative network, dedicated funding structure and distinct visual mark, has made it easier to market the distinct themes and ambitions emerging out of the London 2012 Games vision into every corner of the UK: from an emphasis on programming for youth as creators as well as audiences (for instance, [Stories of the World](#) or [Tate Movie](#)); to highlighting excellence within disability arts and making it more visible to mainstream audiences, as part of strong Olympic and Paralympic activity synergies ([Unlimited](#)); new ways of exploring cross-overs between art, sport and health ([Big Dance](#), [Speed of Light](#)); as well as encouraging innovative approaches to explore the Olympic Movement ideals, in ways that feel relevant to today's

UK audiences (for instance, the promotion of Olympic Truce principles in Northern Ireland via a major pop concert under the banner of the UK-led and UN-backed 'Peace One Day' initiative).

Ultimately, the creation of a sustained national network has also provided a more effective framework to channel regional activity into the London 2012 Games core narrative. Notably, it has enhanced opportunities to showcase non-London based activity on a global stage during the Olympic year and for this activity to become part of the 2012 Games long term iconic imagery, as exemplified below. It has also facilitated more sensitive synergies with other established Olympic programmes such as the Torch Relay and the Livesites, which, under the banner of the London 2012 Festival, highlight and showcase a greater range of Cultural Olympiad activity than has been the case in previous Games editions.

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### **Games time culture: the London 2012 Festival**

While the work of the Creative Programmers and the Legacy Trust UK has been essential to ensure UK-wide involvement and expand opportunities for diverse and community-led contributions, in order for the Cultural Olympiad to reach out to the world, it is equally important to maximise media visibility and demonstrate excellence and scale comparable to the sporting competitions in the host city during Games time. This has been the core motivation behind the London 2012 Festival, presented as the culmination of the Cultural Olympiad running from 21<sup>st</sup> June to 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2012.

In contrast to the wide scope of activity presented up to the end of 2011, which includes proposals led by grassroots communities, independent artists and cultural organisations under the coordination of 13 different programmers, the 2012 Festival has been curated by a sole artistic director, Ruth Mackenzie. Thus, the Festival brings a single vision, focused on the notion of world-class excellence, and emphasizing scale, international significance and once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

The Festival dates overlap with the final leg of the Torch Relay, the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games. Significantly,



the Festival was launched across the UK, with high profile activities simultaneously happening in London, the North of England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. However, the heart of the programme is focused on London and the Games time period.



*Big Dance* has been taking over cities across the UK since the start of the Cultural Olympiad and is attracting record participant numbers participants during the Festival

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To ensure maximum visibility for Olympic fans, special film commissions will be showcased via the popular LiveSite screens across the city (and the country). The Director has noted that her ambition is to encourage a different way to experience London so, beyond the celebration of British cultural icons, from Shakespeare to Hitchcock, the programme includes a range of surprising activity in unexpected places to showcase a 'hidden London'. Beyond traditional artforms, the UK's world reputed creative industries have also played centre stage, with special commissions

ranging from the worlds of fashion and design to comedy and, expectedly, popular music, most of which has been presented for free in open city spaces.

### **The Cultural Legacy of London 2012**

The London 2012 Cultural Olympiad aimed to advance the Olympic cultural agenda and prove that it is possible to expand the Games experience nationwide and coordinate activity with diverse stakeholders, from grassroots to world-class organisations.

It also committed to making activity sustainable and leave long lasting legacies by establishing the Legacy Trust as a main funding body, conducting detailed evaluation into the main lessons learnt and assisting knowledge transfer within the UK as well as future Olympic hosts. By the summer of 2012, most of these promises have been met and could become a blueprint for future cultural programming.

Notably, the creation of a nationwide network of programmers, with appointed individuals retaining their posts from 2008 onwards is a Games first that has enabled new kinds of collaboration within respective regions and given these regions a clearer voice within the mainstream narrative of 2012.

Another major achievement has been the strong integration of Olympic and Paralympic messages, which is particularly notable within the cultural programme. London's ingenious conception of a single design for both the Olympic and Paralympic Games logo, with an emphasis on the number '2012' has been paramount to achieving this integration and has made the synergy uniquely manifest with the creation of the 'Inspired by 2012' mark and London 2012 Festival pictogram, which are shared across both Games.

This is an initiative that may be encouraged in future Games, so that cultural activity is associated with the iconography of respective Games editions as a unified Olympic and Paralympic entity, thus not relying on the rings for recognition and, in turn, not challenging the distinct commercial entitlements of global corporate sponsors.

Conversations have already started with representatives from Rio 2016, which are the first Games to respond to a bidding proposition where culture is not treated as a separate chapter, but an integral part of the Olympic experience. Their ability to build on London's achievements and learn from their challenges will depend on the extent of documentation over the 2012 experience.

The commitment towards extensive and varied research, observation programmes and evaluations over its immediate impact and legacy offers a strong indication that this will be possible and is an excellent reference for future Cultural Olympiad hosts so that this important dimension of the Games experience gains the visibility and recognition it deserves.