

Putting folk first: Sochi 2014 design values celebrate Russian crafts heritage

Beatriz Garcia

The Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games offer a refreshing change from what had become common in the visual design of most recent Olympic Games editions. It has avoided the simple 'primary colours' dominance of its visual identity programme, the so-called *Look of the Games* which, when applied without much imagination, can make the central areas of host cities and all Olympic venues look and feel vaguely the same, irrespective of whether you are in Australia, the US, Greece or China.

The Olympic 'non-place' phenomenon has coincided with the increasing professionalisation of the 'Look of the Games' programme which, after very promising beginnings in Mexico 1968, has become so concerned with its supposedly core role (helping spectators, athletes, officials and media find their way



*A Sochi 2014 volunteer poses with his uniform in front of one of the traditional patchwork pieces that inspired the Games look
(Credit : Beatriz Garcia)*

to Olympic venues) that it is losing its ability to say anything interesting about the actual Games host.

Mexico 1968 was groundbreaking in its approach to dressing the city, Games venues, volunteers, Games workforce and all Games-related materials by making this a key part of its Cultural Olympiad and using leading artists and graphic designers to create a Games imagery that was both

uniquely Mexican and in tune with the international cultural trends of the time. The Mexico 'Look' was a mixture of 1960s avant-garde Op-art and a reinterpretation of indigenous Huichol motifs which makes any image of these Games instantly recognisable, even 40 years after.



*The Look of the Games in Mexico 1968
(Composit by Beatriz Garcia from images available online)*

Munich 1972 also rose to the occasion and involved well respected graphic designer Otl Aicher to create the Games look

and feel, which was this time characterised by the use of a subtle colour palette representing the distinct tonalities of the Alps.



The Look of the Games in Munich 1972 (Composit by Beatriz Garcia)

In the decades that followed, however, the *Look of the Games*, while gaining in importance as a way of orienting the crowds, has progressively lost its connection

with the Games' cultural and arts programme and has rarely served as a platform for creative innovation or significant local representation.



From top, clockwise: The almost identical Look of the Games approach in Athens 2004, Sydney 2000 and Beijing 2008 (Credit: Beatriz Garcia)

Barcelona 1992, Torino 2006 and London 2012 offer some interesting exceptions in parts of their visual programme, from the 'picassian' mascot of Barcelona and related typographic fonts, created by well-known local graphic designer Mariscal; to

Torino's distinct 'Look of the City' (in addition to the Games' Look), which painted the main streets, squares and cultural venues red ('rosso'); and London's minimalist and youth-oriented fluorescent zig-zags criss-crossing its most recognisable sights.



The Look of the City in Torino 2006 (Credit: Beatriz Garcia)



The Look of the City in London 2012 (credit: Beatriz Garcia)

Sochi 2014 has delivered yet another take on the programme, and this is a welcome change. The Look is inspired by Russian folk crafts, and brings a mosaic of tapestries and patchwork designs to all Olympic venues, city streets, and volunteer and workforce uniforms. This is a Look that feels uniquely Russian and will always be associated with Sochi alone.

While it is not a platform for the latest Russian art trends, it is an intelligent celebration of traditional cultures and tries to bring in a bit of every region from this the largest country in the world. It performs effectively its function as an orientation device – there is no mistaking what is or is not an Olympic space during Games time – while at the same time telling a story about the place hosting the Games.



The Look of the Games in Sochi 2014 (Credit: Beatriz Garcia)

In the context of what has become the largest world event, watched by millions that have little time to interpret or decode signs and symbols, it is important to use whatever device is available to make a statement about who is hosting the Games and when this is taking place.

Sport may aspire to be universal and the basis of international sporting competitions may focus on what makes every participant and their practices equal. But the Games are also a festival, a gathering of peoples in a physical space at a particular point in time, and this needs to be reflected as well. Sport needs a cultural context and the Look of the Games programme has a fundamental role to play in infiltrating the sporting realms and suggesting a story or narrative that viewers and attendees can in turn be tempted to follow and explore in more depth.

It is about time the *Look of the Games* reconnects with its original roots as an expression of the Cultural Olympiad. There is still far to go to get to what Mexico achieved in 1968, but some of the recent exceptions – although still partial and limited in their accomplishments – show that it is possible to follow very different routes to create a Games visual identity that avoids the

standardised and meaningless ‘non-place’ feel we were at risk of being trapped into in the last two decades. Being at the Games should not feel like being at a gigantic airport-cum-shopping mall with world-class sport attached. It should be a perfect blend of cultural and sporting festival that offers each host the chance to send a defining image about itself and its aspirations.

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