

## The Post-Exotic Olympics

Why Barcelona's no model for London

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"For thousands and thousands of people in the world it will probably be the first time they hear or see our country the capital of which is Barcelona"<sup>1</sup>

Joan Guitart i Agell, Conseller de Cultura, Generalitat de Catalunya 1991

"The Barcelona Games were in a class of their own...Our task now is to take the best of Barcelona and build upon it"<sup>2</sup>

Sebastian Coe, Chairman, London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG), 2006

When the Olympic flame is passed to London at the end of the Beijing games, it will represent more than just the end of another Olympics. It will close a 20-year period of "exotic" host cities. Prior to the games, many of us knew little about these cities - they hosted the Olympics to announce themselves to the world. Our memories and perceptions of these cities are shaped by how they staged their Olympics; the blazing Olympic rings on the Sydney harbor bridge, Muhammad Ali lighting the flame in Atlanta, the Parthenon glowing over Athens. The most successful exotic cities combined the effective staging of the games, with televised images of the city's culture to present a two week civic-commercial for mass-global consumption. But as we move on to the second decade of the new century, this exotic-model has begun to break down. Widening access to the production and consumption of media, increasing concerns around security and the sheer scale of the Olympic games point to a new model of Olympic host city. The end of the exotic city changes the reasons for a city to host the games, and changes how cities should approach staging the games: If the games are to be a success, *how* and *why* London stages the games will need to be different from previous cities. As the concerns over the cost of the games escalate, competently answering these questions is essential to the London games future legitimacy.

Barcelona, more than any other city, wrote the rule book for exotic Olympic cities. The games were a trigger for the physical transformation of the city providing the impetus for \$8bn<sup>3</sup> of investment in infrastructure and housing. But what was unique and pioneering about Barcelona, was the effective communication of its transformation through the games. Prior to the games, it was widely perceived to be struggling to come to terms with industrial decline. After the games, the world hailed Barcelona's cultural traditions celebrated in their "global coming out party"<sup>4</sup>. Barcelona became a Mecca for mini-breakers, climbed the charts for business location and entered the bottom rung of global cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Closing Lecture: Joan Guitart i Agell, Conseller de Cultura, Generalitat de Catalunya in Olympic Games: Media and Cultural Exchanges: The Experience of the last four Summer Games, 1992, Barcelona, Centre d'Estudis Olímpics I de l'Esport, University of Barcelona, p213

<sup>2</sup> DCMS (2006) Barcelona's Regeneration a Beacon for London and Britain, Jowell and Coe [http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference\\_library/Press\\_notices/archive\\_2006/DCMS145\\_06.htm](http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Press_notices/archive_2006/DCMS145_06.htm) last checked 02/03/07

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian Barcelona and Sydney: the hosts who got the most Sunday December 8<sup>th</sup> 2002 <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/olympics2012/story/0,,873185,00.html> last checked 02/03/07

<sup>4</sup> Moragas, de M; Rivenburgh, N; Garcia, N: Television and the Construction of Identity, The Centre d'Estudis Olímpics (CEO-UAB) p3

How did Barcelona achieve this?

*Firstly, international affairs created a receptive audience for Barcelona.*

In the run up to the games Pasqual Maragall, Lord Mayor of Barcelona and president of Barcelona Organising Committee of the Olympic Games 1992 (COOB'92) hailed "the universal Games, with no exclusion"<sup>5</sup>. Somewhat fortuitously the years of Barcelona's Olympiad had seen the end of apartheid and the Cold War. For the first time in the modern era no nation boycotted the games. Crucially the focus of the games was not on the projection of national arguments onto the sporting field, but the relationship between Barcelona itself and the wider world. The games occurred at a period of comparative international peace. The world was so ready to hear about Barcelona, that the detonation of two ETA bombs on the outskirts of the city in the week prior to the games, aroused few security worries<sup>6</sup>.

*Secondly, the organisers were able stage-manage the communication of Barcelona..*

By 1992 the global audience for the games had reached 4 billion people who experienced them almost exclusively through broadcast and print journalism. This was the hey day of "one to many" communication - what was communicated on television or through journalists was how people discovered the Olympic host city. COOB'92 were acutely aware of this, providing the first special facilities for unaccredited media representatives. Furthermore, it was its spell-binding communication of visual iconography and cultural activity that defined Barcelona's Olympics. As Pasqual Maragall, Mayor of the City and Director of the Organising Committee commented prior to the games, "The 100m sprint is the same in Seoul as in Barcelona...the big difference we can offer in comparison...is our opening ceremony"<sup>7</sup>. So significant was the opening ceremony that Miquel Botalla, one of the games organisers, later commented that "when it was completed, many of us within the organisation believed half the work was done"<sup>8</sup>.

The architecture of Gaudi, the singing of Carreras, the art of Tapies and Miro; the archer lighting the flame with a burning arrow during the opening ceremony and the Olympic flag being drawn over the world's competitors in the stadium; and the well choreographed shots of the divers over the city at the Montjuic pool projected a harmony of Catalan, Spanish, Mediterranean culture that came to define Barcelona as a city.

*Thirdly and finally, Barcelona was comparatively unknown.*

It's easy to forget now, but during the 1980s Barcelona was not a major tourist destination - Catalan identity had still not emerged from the cloak of Franco's Spain. Those communicating Barcelona had comparatively few preconceptions of the city to counter.

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<sup>5</sup> Olympic Games: Media and Cultural Exchanges: The Experience of the Last four Summer Games, 1992, Barcelona, Centre d'Estudis Olímpics I de l'Esport, University of Barcelona. P16

<sup>6</sup> The Legacy of Munich 1972: Terrorism, Security and the Olympic Games. Robert C. Cottrell, California State University, USA. Pp313  
The Legacy of the Olympic Games 1984-2000, International Symposium, IOC, 2003  
Lausanne 2002

<sup>7</sup> Payne, M, Olympic Turn Around, 2005, London p170

<sup>8</sup> Botella, M (1995) The keys to Success of the Barcelona Games, The Centre d'Estudis Olímpics (CEO-UAB) p19

This effectively created the formula for exotic Olympic cities; a receptive global audience, rigid control of the media and a comparatively unknown city. The key legacy of the Barcelona model was to show that urban change, culture and communication were inseparable; launching the term “cultural regeneration” into the popular lexicon. The integration of the games with the city’s wider trajectory of development, boosted tourism to the city, made it a fashionable place to live and attracted business. The lesson from Barcelona was clear - if you get the culture of the games wrong, the games go wrong. Failed exotic-cities such as Atlanta, never quite learnt this lesson<sup>9</sup>.

Hundreds of cities around the world sought to emulate the lessons of Barcelona, courting major events, mega-architects in the quest for place definition and distinctiveness. Bilbao built a Guggenheim in derelict docks, Dubai erected Burj Al Arab Hotel on a man-made island and Portsmouth opened the Spinnaker Tower. The winning of World Cups, Commonwealth Games, Capitals of Culture, Expos and Trade Fairs were celebrated as opportunities to reinvent cities.

Barcelona is still the definitive reference point for host cities who hope to make the most of the games. In Autumn 2006 the leaders of LOCOG’s Olympic team visited Barcelona. Seb Choe, Chair of LOCOG hailed the games as being in “a class of their own” while Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport expressed a desire to repeat its “tremendous achievements”<sup>10</sup>.

But the question, for London, is not whether it should repeat Barcelona’s tremendous achievements, but how it should go about doing it.

Put simply, Barcelona provided an opportunity for two things. Urban development and a cultural celebration that changed global perceptions of the city. In London, the wheels of the former are already in motion, but the plans for the later, are still in the process of being formulated. The brand for the London Games, the format for the Cultural Programme, the Education Programme and the allocation of an Olympic Trust (Legacy Trust UK) are still as yet undecided. If London is looking for a way of achieving this, the model provided by Barcelona may not be directly transferable to London.

The exotic model doesn’t appear to fit London’s frame.

*Firstly, London is not an unknown city.*

The size and cost of staging the Olympics have grown so significantly, that there are only a few cities big enough and sophisticated enough to take them on. Between 1980 and 2000 the games gained 7 new sports and 80 new events<sup>11</sup>. The experience of Athens, who barely completed their infrastructure in time, showed how great a burden the games have become for smaller cities. Big cities like London, are also well-known cities. They have associations with figureheads, symbols and buildings

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<sup>9</sup> The Atlanta Games in 1996 have few admirers. The organizing committee’s priority was firmly placed on “balancing the books” by selling as much advertising and vending space in their city as possible, building low cost venues and investing minimally in culture and public space. In the absence of anything else, this became the message that Atlanta told to the world - that the games were there to be sold. This reflected on Atlanta as a city and reinforced negative perceptions of the US.

<sup>10</sup> DCMS (2006) Barcelona’s Regeneration a Beacon for London and Britain, Jowell and Coe [http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference\\_library/Press\\_notices/archive\\_2006/DCMS145\\_06.htm](http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Press_notices/archive_2006/DCMS145_06.htm) last checked 02/03/07

<sup>11</sup> Cashmen, R Impact of the Games on Olympic Host Cities, The Centre d’Estudis Olímpics (CEO-UAB), p8

throughout the world. Its cultural diversity and size mean that people living outside the UK are probably more likely to know someone living in London than almost any other city of the world. Those communicating London to the world will not be painting its image onto a blank canvass.

*Secondly, the culture of London may not enjoy a receptive global audience.*

The backdrop of comparative global harmony that surrounded the Barcelona games, is unlikely to be repeated in London. So great were security concerns in Athens (admittedly exacerbated by their management of the games) that many news agencies dispatched their war correspondents to the opening ceremony. Concerns about whether London can guarantee the safety of the games are likely to reduce room for the communication of London's culture during its Olympiad. The clashing of the games with Ramadan is also potentially inflammatory. The lesson from Athens appears to be that it isn't winning the bid for the games that grants a city a global platform, it is only when it has effectively proved that it can stage a games, that it will secure the credibility required to "display" its culture. Athens would appear not to have made the most of having staged "dream games"<sup>12</sup>.

*Thirdly, the communication of London to the world will be a collective activity.*

Since the turn of the millennium we have seen a democratization of the media. So embedded in the popular consciousness is this transition that Time Magazine's 2006 person of the year was awarded to "you". Youtube is rapidly on the way to becoming the world's biggest TV station, Wikipedia its most comprehensive encyclopedia, flickr its biggest photo archive while online diaries mushroom exponentially. None of these forms of media can be controlled by press release or camera angle. If these don't provide an alternative to mainstream media, they already provide a significant supplement. It is not unreasonable to assume that the communication of London during the Olympic games in 6 years time will be a collective, dispersed activity.

So, in short, the audience for London and the post-exotic city will be harder to reach and what will be communicated will be harder to control. Furthermore, London's already established status as a global city, calls into question not just *how* London will stage the games, but what staging the games in London is *actually for*. The implications of these two factors are that the London Olympics and the post-exotic Olympics is a model that demands the positive, active involvement of large groups of people. There are three crucial reasons for this.

*Necessity*

Controlling the commercial-use of the Olympic brand is clearly of crucial importance to the financial viability of the Olympic movement, but control of the *London or UK* brand is no longer something that can be exclusively staged by an organizing committee or by institutions. That is not a statement of hope, it is a statement of reality. People increasingly look to media not as a source of authority, but as a place where they can participate in collective deliberation. The communication of the games will be a mass activity - if it isn't already, by 2012 London will be a collaborative brand. Finding different ways for people to participate and have a relationship to the games, is likely to mean that this army of communicators, relay a more positive experience of the games and London.

*Legitimacy*

The rows in London about the escalating cost of staging the games, who was responsible for the

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<sup>12</sup> Jaques Rogge, President of the IOC, declared the Athens Games the "unforgettable..dream games" during his speech at the Closing Ceremony.

sums and how they were done will not be settled when a fall guy is named. The games face a crisis of legitimacy, not of cost. People will not accept the costs until they can see the value, and how the games relate to them. The reasons for staging past Olympics have always amounted to “physical transformation + x”. The x for the exotic cities, was about those cities “coming out” on a global stage. Before the exotic cities the “x” was a way of healing states tarnished by world war (London 46, Tokyo 60, Munich 72), generating worldwide attention for the achievements of countries (Finland 52, Australia 56, Mexico 68 and Canada 76) or simple geo-political power play (Moscow 80, Los Angeles 84)<sup>13</sup>. In the absence of a narrative to explain what London’s x-factor is, there is an urgent need to make sure that the games relate to people on their own terms, rather than just as a TV spectacle.

### *Integrity*

There are indications that participation in the games is taken seriously by the LOCOG. The organizers of the games have called for participation in the games and people have responded by saying they want to. 100,000 people have expressed an interest in volunteering. Across the country community groups, charities and city councils are at the ready. This energy and enthusiasm could rapidly turn into disillusionment tomorrow without routes for this energy to be channeled.

So, if the model for the post-exotic city is to shift from the epic cultural statements of Barcelona and base its Olympics around the power and participation of people, what should the principles for Olympic Programming be?

### **Opening up the Olympic brand**

LOCOG’s commands to non-profit organisations, firstly to “think of creative ways to capture the philosophy and values of the Games but without creating an association with them<sup>14</sup>”, secondly not to “put on events or produce publications which focus on the Games without speaking to LOCOG first<sup>15</sup>” and finally to “get involved in Official London 2012 programmes, *once these are established*<sup>16</sup>” are completely incompatible with the spirit of ownership needed for people to participate in the games. If community organisations, local authorities and sports clubs cannot relate to the games on their own terms, they are unlikely to want to participate in them.

In January, The Culture, Media and Sport select committee concluded that “an ability to associate with the 2012 Games on a non-commercial basis is essential if community involvement and legacy is to be realized to its full potential. We recommend to the International Olympic committee that it should work with LOCOG to identify ways of permitting this”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A New Phase in the competition for the Olympic Gold: The London and New York bids for the 2012 Games, Noam Shoval 2002

<sup>14</sup> LOCOG London 2012 Brand Protection What you need to know – information for non-commercial organisations, p16

<sup>15</sup> LOCOG London 2012 Brand Protection What you need to know – information for non-commercial organisations, p20

<sup>16</sup> LOCOG London 2012 Brand Protection What you need to know – information for non-commercial organisations, p20

<sup>17</sup> House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: funding and legacy, Second report of Session 2006-07 Volume 1 Report, together with formal minutes Ordered by The House of Commons to be printed 17<sup>th</sup> January 2007. p44

This is compounded by the fact that crucial ways for people to participate in the games, such as the Cultural Olympiad, are invisible to people and organisations keen to participate in the games, the committees also concluded that:

”The cultural Olympiad has received comparatively little attention so far. We recommend that the Government should do more to publicise and co-ordinate it, drawing together ideas, sharing good practice, and increasing awareness of some of the more practical and imaginative suggestions which are being made.”<sup>18</sup>

Such tight control of the brand for non-commercial use could erode the existing values of the Olympic rings so prized by commercial sponsors. It will almost certainly alienate further public support for the games. Finally, given that rising costs could mean that public contributions outweigh those of commercial sponsors, this starts to appear profoundly undemocratic. If people are paying for the games they should be able to associate with them.

At Demos we have developed a model for distributing the value of the Olympics back to community organisations called the *Street Games*. This would enable community organisations to run competitions on their own terms during the cultural Olympiad, for their own reasons but is predicated on less central planning and control<sup>19</sup>.

Enabling associations with the brand for non-commercial reasons, is a pre-requisite of different forms of participation in the games. Indeed, as Michael Payne, the IOC’s first Marketing Director and architect of the existing Olympic Brand wrote in his book “The Olympic Turnaround”;

“The Olympic brand is one of the most powerful brands in the world. To remain so, its future stewards will have to be vigilant in defending its honour, and yet also have the courage to grasp new opportunities as they present themselves. It is only by constantly reinventing itself – and by striving for greater glory that the Olympic Movement can remain relevant and vital in a changing world<sup>20</sup>.”

### **A Broader Understanding of Participation**

The Select Committee report mentioned above also concluded that, despite clear aspirations to increase sporting participation, “no host country has yet been able to demonstrate a direct benefit from the Olympic Games in the form of a lasting increase in participation<sup>21</sup>”. If we the sole indicator of success for participation is more people playing more sport, then we may have set ourselves up for failure already.

We need to find as many different ways as possible to participate and learn through sport. For example, young people in schools could document athletes training for the Olympics in their own area in different ways, eg on film, in audio, in pictures. This information could be coordinated in a central digital resource and accessed by people around the world. During the Olympics this would be a

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<sup>18</sup> House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: funding and legacy, Second report of Session 2006-07 Volume 1 Report, together with formal minutes Ordered by The House of Commons to be printed 17<sup>th</sup> January 2007. p46

<sup>19</sup> More information about The Street Games can be found at <http://www.demos.co.uk/projects/demosandtheolympics/overview>

<sup>20</sup> Olympic Turn Around, Michael Payne, 2005, London, p286

<sup>21</sup> House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: funding and legacy, Second report of Session 2006-07 Volume 1 Report, together with formal minutes Ordered by The House of Commons to be printed 17<sup>th</sup> January 2007. p37.

place for people across the world to find out the background stories behind Olympians who will have shot to stardom during the games.

### **Institutional Story Telling**

If participation in the Olympics is going to increase, it will rely on education and cultural programmes that grant considerable flexibility to people, enabling them to take part in different activities. Organising Committees tend to be conscious of the need to present coherent Cultural Programmes of activity that tell a clear story about the Olympics and the host city and nation. But rather than seeing the only way of controlling the image of the games as centrally “ratifying” all activity connected to the games, Organising Committees will need to find ways of controlling their messages by summarizing and telling a story about activity that is already happening.

“In 2012 the eyes of the world will be on London” - it’s a well worn phrase. But in a world where our fortunes are increasingly intertwined with one another, the significance of such a moment cannot be lost. The current furore around the cost of the games, partly relates to the inability to articulate the value of this moment or the role that people can play in it. Olympics will always be about regeneration and the physical transformation of a place, their size demands that. But, during the exotic period, they have always been about more than that for cities. Seoul, Barcelona, Atlanta, Sydney, Athens and Beijing all aspired to mark indelible statements on the world’s consciousness by hosting the games. None were more successful than Barcelona. But in London now, there isn’t the need to puncture the global consciousness in the same way, but the sense of some kind of opportunity remains.

But maybe, if the goal of the exotic city was to show distinctiveness from the rest of the world, the goal of the post-exotic city, is to emphasise its real connections to the world. The 21st century will not just be lead by economically powerful cities, and distinctive places, but it will be lead by places that can inspire the confidence of people throughout the world. This is not just an approach necessitated by the dispersal of control of the media, but the right long-term approach for the post-exotic city’s development. It is the right approach for the most culturally diverse city to ever host the game. The prize of the city that can achieve this, is a greater one than merely tourists and new business. It is the cultural authority, to lead and inspire the world as it turns to face the immense challenges of the 21st Century. But the only model for such a city, is a collective one.