



The London 2012 cultural programme: A consideration of Olympic impacts and legacies for small creative organisations in east London



Ilaria Pappalepore ^{a, *}, Michael B. Duignan ^b

^a University of Westminster, 35 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5LS, UK

^b Anglia Ruskin University, East Road, Cambridge CB1 1PT, UK

HIGHLIGHTS

- The concept of event legacy for local creative organisations is unpacked.
- A gap between expected and actual impacts in the context of London 2012 is identified.
- Problems include inadequate local consultation and barriers to leveraging opportunities.
- Opportunities to showcase creative areas in East London to event tourists were missed.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impacts of the London 2012 Olympic Games and their related cultural programme on local small creative organisations in East London. It contributes to unpacking the elusive concept of legacy through an in-depth analysis of creative organisations' stories and experiences, combined with an analysis of policy documents and interviews with key informants, over a four-year period (2010–2014). A range of potential impacts of mega-events for creative organisations are identified and systematically discussed. The results highlight a gap between Olympic rhetoric and local reality. Problems include inadequate local consultation, barriers to accessing opportunities and inability to leverage effectively. The study also explores the role of cultural tourism in delivering an Olympic legacy for the local creative industry. It finds that opportunities to showcase deprived – but creative – areas in East London, and foster the development of creative forms of tourism, were missed.

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1. Introduction

Thanks to their global presence, ability to mobilise considerable public funding and immovable pressured deadlines for completion, mega-events are widely regarded as a powerful way to catalyse development policies (Burbank, Andranovich, & Heyying, 2002). Sought-after impacts include employment opportunities, local business development and the creation of infrastructure that can support longer-term development for host regions (e.g. Chalip & Leyns, 2002). However, as mega-event agendas have become increasingly ambitious in scope the complexity and costs of delivering such projects have grown exponentially. This requires policy-makers to pursue a range of positive urban impacts and legacies

under close public scrutiny. Given the potential gaps between Olympic rhetoric and reality, it is unsurprising that critics refer to such interventions as placebos (Rojek, 2014) which divert attention and resources away from fundamental social problems.

In the case of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (hereafter London 2012), regenerating the deprived East End, enhancing the lives of its local people and attracting people to the area were presented as key objectives (DCMS, 2008; House of Lords, 2013). However, research demonstrates that event-led regeneration projects can lead to marginalising local host communities (e.g. Vigor, Mean, & Tims, 2004). Raco and Tunney (2010) claim that such projects often view local areas as 'blank slates' (2010: 2087) available for wholesale redevelopment. Local small business communities in unappealing, low-cost neighbourhoods are discarded as firms in inevitable economic decline, and seen as uncompetitive and old-fashioned (Imrie & Thomas, 1995). The extent to which local business communities can effectively adapt, thrive and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: i.Pappalepore@westminster.ac.uk (I. Pappalepore), michael.duignan@anglia.ac.uk (M.B. Duignan).

survive across the disrupted environments such events create is questionable. It is therefore of great importance to assess the local impacts bestowed upon these stakeholders. The present research aims to investigate these issues by exploring the impacts of London 2012 and its related cultural programme on local small creative organisations in East London. These organisations are often the most vulnerable in times of change but contribute significantly to creative innovation and cultural diversity (Jacobs, 1969).

In the development of this study, it was not assumed that such impacts could – or should be expected to – occur. However, we believe that small creative and cultural organisations face great challenges and opportunities during sport and cultural mega-events, and a gap in existing research should be addressed. Furthermore, this research is particularly relevant in the case of London 2012 because: (1) East London hosts a high density of micro and small creative organisations; (2) the creative and cultural sectors were expected to be key beneficiaries of the Olympic Games (DCMS, 2007a; 2008; 2014); (3) the four-year cultural programme and the London 2012 festival were key elements of London 2012; (4) London hoped to showcase the city as a ‘creative and welcoming city’ (Mayor of London, 2007: 5); and (5) given the wider, strategic importance of the creative sector for promoting national, city-wide and local economic vitality (Work Foundation, 2010; House of Lords, 2013; DCMS, 2014).

In spite of its central role in mega-event policy and academic literature, the concept of ‘legacy’ still remains largely unexplored and fraught with ambiguity. According to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), legacy refers to impacts which are both positive and long term (IOC, 2013). Similarly, Gold and Gold (2008) note that the concept is usually associated with the intergenerational benefits of mega-events, which will allegedly repay the costs borne by present citizens by benefitting future generations. A small number of authors (for example Preuss, 2007) have attempted to dissect the term, however to date a widely accepted conceptualisation of legacy is still missing. One of the aims of the present paper is therefore to contribute to the understanding of this elusive concept by focusing on a specific type of stakeholder, namely small creative and cultural organisations.

2. A legacy for local creative organisations?

Local business opportunities and developing local talent are often identified as positive wider legacies of major cultural and sporting events (Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2007; Smith, 2012). Therefore, it is perhaps surprising that local governments rarely monitor the impacts of such events on local creative and cultural organisations (Richards & Palmer, 2010). Recently, however, increased recognition of the creative industry’s importance in local economies and a wider ‘creative turn’ in the social sciences and policy-making (Richards, 2011) have triggered growing attention from academic researchers towards the legacies of major events for this sector. A review of existing research on this topic, which formed the basis for our analysis, is summarised in Table 1.

Research in this area has identified a number of potential positive impacts of major cultural events on creative organisations, including improved visibility, development of new ideas and increased collaborations (see Table 1). However, the global ambitions of major events mean that related festivals and cultural programmes tend to prioritise spectacular, flagship cultural products over locally rooted ones (García, 2004). Whilst this may help local cultural organisations to gain international exposure and draw media attention, local people may feel the event programme bypasses the kind of culture they appreciate (O’Callaghan & Linehan, 2007). Another potential positive impact of major events for creative organisations is the opportunity to benefit from additional

grants linked to specific projects (Low & Hall, 2011). However, in the case of mega-events, funding is often diverted from the arts to pay for mega-event infrastructure. In the case of London 2012, for example, the main distributor of public grants for the arts in England (Arts Council England) was obliged to contribute a total of £112.5 million to the Olympic Distribution Fund (ACE, 2012)¹

In spite of small businesses’ importance in these events’ success (Osmond, 2002), little evidence exists that small businesses have ever significantly influenced the objectives of mega-events (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003). Before these events, the support of small businesses and other local communities is pursued to seek legitimisation of policy objectives (Foley, McGillivray, & McPherson, 2012). However, such stakeholders are often unable to obtain action in response to their concerns, in accordance with the ‘principle of who or what really counts’ (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997: 853). Local small creative organisations have ‘legitimacy of claim’ in the context of a mega-event because their interests are at risk; however, they are unlikely to have the power to carry out their will in the face of resistance (Weber, 1947). As a result, they lack the authority (defined as a combination of legitimacy and power) and salience (legitimacy, power and urgency) to bring about the outcomes they desire, such as being directly involved in the official cultural programme or benefitting from tourist footfall.

As a result, the inclusion of arts communities is frequently encouraged at the bidding stage, before quickly turning into marginalization as the project becomes real (Gilmore, 2014). Consequently, in order to be sustainable, major events should redistribute benefits to stakeholders and simultaneously meet the needs of the host community through inclusive, bottom-up leveraging strategies (Ziakas, 2014). Leveraging, or the planned creation of positive legacies for host communities (as opposed to mere post-event evaluation of impacts), should be viewed as a tool with which to ‘enable positive social change, rectify power imbalances and decrease inequalities’ (Ziakas, 2014: 9).

However, many small businesses fail to benefit from major events precisely because they lack the skills or resources to leverage effectively (Chalip & Leyns, 2002). In this sense, creative organisations have an advantage: being able to use their creativity to maximise limited resources and appeal to potential customers (Fillis, 2009). Low and Hall (2011) argue that cultural organisations are active agents – rather than passive recipients – of mega-event impacts. O’Brien (2006) describes a successful government attempt to help local businesses benefit from a mega-event (the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games) through early development of a pioneer networking-based event-leveraging programme. Sadly, the intense time pressures experienced by delivery authorities ahead of mega-events often leave little scope for such projects, and provide justification for over-riding local concerns and avoiding stakeholder consultation (Hiller, 2002). Therefore, they may fail to recognise the types of close-knit networks, socio-economic and qualitative interdependencies local traders rely on for competitiveness and survival (Raco & Tunney, 2010).

3. Tourism, major events and the creative industry

In cultural events, the local community, tourists and creative organisations collaboratively create participants’ experiences. Cultural events have therefore increasingly drawn researchers’

¹ In return, the lottery distributors who contributed to the Olympic Distribution Fund will receive a share of the capital receipts from the sale of the Olympic Village. According to the Arts Council, their share is expected to be circa £20.9 m (personal communication).

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