

Is the Olympic Movement ‘moving’? Challenging the Games through arts, culture and education

Dr Beatriz Garcia

This paper discusses the cultural policy implications of hosting an Olympic Games. It starts with a brief analysis of the history of Olympic cultural programming, placing particular emphasis on the role and legacy of staging Olympic arts festivals. It then builds on the experience of Barcelona 1992, Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 to assess London’s proposal for a four-year Cultural Olympiad.

The paper combines a reflection on the current debate about event-led cultural regeneration in the UK and Western Europe, with a critique of existing definitions and guidelines for cultural engagement within the Olympic Movement. It argues that the positioning of the Olympic Games as a city-based, nationally-framed and globally embracing cultural event presents important challenges for cultural-policy makers and has rarely resulted in sustainable cultural legacies. The ambition to use the Games’ cultural dimensions to engage, simultaneously, on local, national and global debates tends to lead to overly simplistic and often tokenistic cultural representation – this is often the case with Opening and Closing ceremonies.

London has an opportunity to question established practices and overcome the trend towards using cultural activity as a platform for global media-spectacle at the expense of meaningful local representation. The paper explores key lessons from past experience and identifies elements within London’s Olympic cultural plan that could lead to sustainable legacies if supported by an ambitious but consistent cultural policy appropriate to a world city in the 21st century.