RE-THINKING HOSPITALITY

How London welcomed the world to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Dan Bulley and Debbie Lisle

Welcoming the world? Hospitality at the London Games

As the Olympic and Paralympic Games drew to a close in London in the summer of 2012, Lord Coe, the head of the London Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG), was asked to name his most memorable moment:

If I had to choose, I would probably say the British people, who day after day, filled our stadiums and turned them into theatres of sport. They also lined our streets to cheer on athletes and gave people from around the world the warmest of welcomes. That for me has been, in a way, the defining part during these games.

(Butt, 2012: 85; italics ours; see also VisitBritain, 2012: 22)

Coe’s response confirms one of the central principles embedded in London’s original bid for the Games submitted to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2004: that the inhabitants of London would welcome everyone from around the world into the city. The official and unofficial efforts to make visitors feel welcome were absolutely central to the success of the Games; indeed, London 2012 would not have achieved what it did without the expansive, inclusive and determined gestures of welcome that were issued from the moment London began bidding for the Games in 2003 until well after the closing ceremony of the Paralympic Games in 2012. This chapter reflects on questions of hospitality by focussing specifically on the way London crafted and implemented its welcome during the Games.

Certainly the task of ‘welcoming the world’ is complex and wide ranging and involves many overlapping authorities whose job it is to manage the hosting of such a mega-event. Central to this operation were LOCOG’s strategies to welcome the ‘Olympic Family’ (e.g., IOC members, athletes, National Olympic Committees), corporate sponsors and the international media to the major Games venues. These included specially trained volunteers (e.g., Language and Protocol Teams), ‘Olympic Family Lounges’ at major venues, a state-of-the-art International Broadcast Centre, the ‘Olympic Hospitality Centre’ at the main entrance to the Olympic Park and, for the first time, a dedicated ‘Prestige Pavilion’ adjacent to the main stadium catering
specifically to corporate sponsors and spectators with corporate hospitality packages (LOCOG, 2012). LOCOG’s gestures of welcome were, of course, matched by the city of London itself. Locals and visitors could enjoy the Games on the giant screen in the Team GB/British Telecom ‘Fan Zone’ in Hyde Park or enjoy one of the hundreds of ‘Olympic national hospitality houses’ dotted throughout the city and staged by each participating country (led, of course, by Britain’s effort at Lancaster House). While the official role of these hospitality houses was to “highlight home-grown industry and attract trade, investment and tourism” (McLoughlin, 2012), many of them – especially Ireland, Holland and Jamaica – became favoured party destinations for ex-pats, locals and visitors throughout the Games (McLoughlin, 2012; Davies & Addley, 2012; Londontown, 2012). Hospitality itself became a news story during the first week of the Games as visitors congregated at the major sports venues outside of the tourist attractions in central London and locals were frightened away by Transport for London’s dire warnings about travel chaos – all of which turned central London and the West End into a ‘ghost town’ (Pickford & Pickard, 2012; Chapman & Duncan, 2012). This unintended consequence was quickly corrected by government messages re-welcoming people into the city centre and reinforced in a subsequent campaign by the government and VisitBritain claiming that such arguments were “not borne out by the facts” (VisitBritain, 2012: 16; Hunt, 2012).

While we acknowledge the complex and multiple ways in which hospitality is enacted during all Olympic and Paralympic Games (and indeed, suggest there is more work to be done analysing the intersecting authorities of hospitality), we are particularly interested in exploring the production and regulation of those main figures doing the hosting (i.e., volunteers) and those receiving it (i.e., the spectators).

As we have argued elsewhere, London was awarded the Games in 2005 precisely because it convinced the IOC that it was a better host than the other competitors: London’s diversity, pluralism and cosmopolitan nature left it best placed to welcome everyone regardless of culture, ethnicity, nationality or religion (Bulley & Lisle, 2012: 186–187; see also Massey, 2006). However, what we discovered upon analysing the gestures of welcome articulated in the bid document was that such expansive and inclusive hospitality required careful management, governance and control. Digging into the bid’s detail, we discovered that its generosity concealed problematic hierarchies between, for example, the Olympic Family and local spectators, and between official volunteers and ‘back-of-house’ labourers. Despite the bid’s munificence, some people were more welcome to London than others, with the city’s universal hospitality becoming much more nuanced on closer inspection. This chapter explores what happened to the expansive, inclusive and universal welcome that was embedded in the bid document. Was it still central to the Games, or was it abandoned? Did it change direction or lose force? And finally, who was responsible for ensuring that the city’s expansive welcome was implemented?

Our research suggests that a central element of London’s hospitality had changed. The question of identifying a singular ‘host’ in any hospitable welcome is problematic (Rosello, 2001: 123–135), a situation we identified clearly in London’s bid (Bulley & Lisle, 2012: 188). However, as the Games approached, LOCOG – perhaps the best candidate for the amorphous position of ‘host’ – became increasingly focussed on a completely different message about ensuring a ‘legacy’, which resulted in the final Games motto ‘Inspire a Generation’. While the message of ‘welcoming the world’ that was so prominent in the bid (Bell, 2007: 32; Bulley & Lisle, 2012: 189–191) was not abandoned, we found it had been devolved, or outsourced, to
private corporate sponsors. These companies effectively assumed the task London set itself back in its 2004 response to the IOC bid-city questionnaire: “open[ing] our arms to welcome the world” (London 2012, 2004b: 4). The link between the Olympics and commercial sponsorship has been ably examined and critiqued by others (Barney, Wenn & Martyn, 2004; Gruneau & Neubauer, 2012; Tomlinson, 2005); we are most interested in how the urban hospitality required by mega-events has changed with this increased collaboration between public and private interests. For instance, this alliance produced obvious confusion over the message of hospitality right at the start of the 2012 Games when Lord Coe suggested that people wearing clothes branded with an Olympic sponsor’s rival might be turned away from Olympic venues in spite of their tickets. While LOCOG eventually clarified that this was not the case, Coe’s statement is important because it suggests that a hospitable welcome to the Games is somehow dependent on commercial loyalty and exclusivity (Malik, 2012).

This chapter proceeds by first examining the way in which this outsourcing of hospitality occurred through the everyday act of hosting. Those who became the ‘public face’ of the 2012 Games, who did the majority of the everyday, mundane hosting tasks, were the volunteers, or ‘Games Makers’. Volunteering has a long and important history at sporting mega-events, beginning on a significant scale at the 1948 London Olympics (London 2012, 2012c; Liew, 2010), but much research has focussed on the expectations and motivations of the volunteers (Doward and Ralston, 2005). We are more interested in how volunteers are produced and governed, and to this end we provide a critical analysis of the training programme and materials used by McDonald’s to produce service-oriented Games Makers. The second section shifts registers and methods, using ethnographic techniques to take the position of the ‘guest’ and describing and analysing how these corporate gestures of welcome were experienced by spectators at the main Games venues in August 2012. By tracing the movement of the spectator from St Pancras through to the Olympic Park, we reflect on how the majority of hosting, entertainment and spectacle was outsourced by LOCOG to private companies wishing to sell themselves, their values and their wares. We conclude with some observations on what these public/private arrangements mean for the way hospitality is now conducted at the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

**Constructing hosts: McDonald’s and the Games Makers**

One of the most high-profile public–private relationships during London 2012 was that between principle sponsor McDonald’s and LOCOG. This arrangement led to much criticism over links to the growing obesity epidemic (Blitz, 2012) and McDonald’s claims to exclusivity over the sale of French fries (Carman, 2012). However, outside of its more obvious role providing familiar and economical fast food to Games spectators, McDonald’s played a central role in shaping London’s welcome to the world. London 2012 was the first time a commercial organization was used to recruit and train the volunteers — now rebranded ‘Games Makers’ — who are now central to the running of mega-events (Fairley, Kellett and Green, 2007). In his letter to volunteers at the front of their training manual, Lord Coe writes, “As a Games Maker, you will be the host” (Coe, 2012). Our point is that LOCOG’s decision to put McDonald’s in charge of interviewing and training the 70,000 Games Makers is the clearest indication of how the role of host and its welcoming duties were outsourced. Designated an official ‘Presenting Partner’ of the London 2012 Games Maker Programme, McDonald’s was integral to shaping the way
volunteers welcomed and greeted visitors to London. As Phil Sherwood, Head of Volunteering for London 2012, explained:

There’s nothing quite like the experience of an Olympic Games, but McDonald’s has real expertise in serving three million customers with quick and friendly service every day. We’re lucky to have this experience and support on hand, because McDonald’s is helping us prepare the volunteers for their moment in the spotlight.

(McDonald’s, 2012c; see also London 2012, 2012a, 2012b)

McDonald’s offered its services and expertise in three areas. First, they provided their “state-of-the-art training facilities in London” (McDonald’s 2012a) to help educate the 25,000 individuals tasked with interviewing potential Games Makers (whittling down the 250,000 applicants to 70,000 volunteers); second, they trained 11,000 individuals with ‘Event Leadership Training’ (McDonald’s, 2012a); and third, they worked in partnership with LOCOG to design and prepare the ‘Games Maker’ training materials such as the workbook and training CD (McDonald’s, 2012a).

Examining the McDonald’s-provided training program and materials is fascinating for how it reveals an idealised view of hosting as a role to be performed following very strict rules. In this material, the original London 2012 bid’s priority of ‘welcoming the world’ makes a reappearance as the overarching raison d’être (London 2012, 2012d: 13). The “ambition is for our London 2012 workforce to host the world”, asking the Games Makers to inspire visitors by creating “an electrifying experience and a magical atmosphere” (London 2012, 2012c: 19). The need for training from experts in customer service to achieve this is stressed on the training CD, where it is observed that the UK was ranked 14th in the world for ‘customer service’ in 2010, while a “recent Worldhost survey revealed that 73% of people agree that Britain needs to improve its customer service before the Games” (London 2012, 2012f). This is an ironic reversal of the bid documents where the British were presented as naturally excellent hosts (London 2012, 2004a: 191). The solution to such dire hosting, then, is to hire McDonald’s – one of the ‘world leaders’ in customer service – to train British volunteers to be better hosts. Central to the training programme developed by McDonald’s is the oft-repeated acronym I DO ACT, which directs Games Makers to be Inspirational, Distinctive, Open, Alert, Consistent and part of a Team (2012c: 19; 2012d: 2012f).

What is particularly interesting about this McDonald’s-led ‘host making’ is the way it reproduced modes of segregation, asymmetry and hierarchy that were so central to the London 2012 bid document. In other words, despite the outsourcing of hospitality training to McDonald’s, hosts were trained to give some guests a warmer welcome than others (Bulley & Lisle, 2012: 192–193). For example, in a section of the training workbook provided to all volunteers regardless of their specific role, volunteers are asked to match the description of a ‘client group’ to their name (London 2012, 2012d: 5). Nine client groups are included, from the Olympic and Paralympic Family through technical officials and the press to the general public. The descriptions of these groups are numbered and placed on the page to form a hierarchy, with places one through three following a strict order of importance, from the Olympic and Paralympic Family at the top, followed by the athletes and team officials and then the marketing partners. If there were any doubt that this hierarchy reflects the different types of welcome that will be offered to different ‘client groups’, we only need look at the ‘functional areas’ (FA). FAs are essentially
32 overarching teams that arrange the distribution and focus of the volunteers, many of which have little to do with hospitality (e.g., the ‘Sustainability’ or ‘Anti-Doping’ FAs). Unsurprisingly, the privileged Olympic and Paralympic Family receive their own discrete FA with large numbers of volunteers designated to meet their needs and ensure “an enjoyable stay” (London 2012, 2012c: 12), while each national athletics and officials team also has an FA to welcome them (i.e., the ‘Team Welcoming Ceremonies’ FA) and look after the main hosting site – the Olympic Village (‘Village Management’ FA) (2012c: 11–13). The sheer number of Games Makers and volunteer hours devoted to welcoming privileged guests is in contrast to the single all-purpose ‘Event Services’ FA which trained Games Makers to act as “friendly and efficient hosts to spectators and other visitors” (2012c: 12).

Training Games Makers to recognise and practice a hierarchy of welcome is accompanied by a variety of different ways that acts of hosting are produced and regulated. Though their friendliness, cleanliness, politeness and all-around customer service may appear to be spontaneous, in fact McDonald’s’ training sought to manage and guide most aspects of a Games Maker’s life. For example, the ‘A day in the life’ section of the workbook appears to be a general description of what a typical day will involve but in fact forms a schedule containing important prescriptions for each of the 10 phases of a volunteer’s day, including ‘Preparing’ (making sure you “have only packed essential items”) through ‘Arriving’, ‘Delivering’ and ‘Resting’ (“Relax and enjoy your breaks – it will be important that you renew your energy for the remainder of your shift”) to ‘Returning’, where volunteers are instructed to “keep smiling and share your passion for the Games” (London 2012, 2012d: 36–38). Schedules such as this are not just benign forms of self-organization: they fulfil an important disciplinary function (see Foucault, 1991: 149–151) that helps craft the Games Maker into a particular type of subject: a perfect host. What the McDonald’s-led training programme reveals is the enormous amount of work it takes to reorient the bodies, behaviours and dispositions of Games Makers into service-oriented hosts.

Techniques such as a suggested schedule were supplemented by more nuanced forms of encouragement, incentivisation and moralising that enabled more subtle forms of regulation to proliferate. For example, the workbook nudges volunteers towards healthier forms of living before and during the Games by advising them to “wind down. Have a warm bath, read a book” the night before the Games, while “avoiding caffeine and alcohol” and keeping bedrooms “cool and well ventilated” (London 2012, 2012d: 20). While such stipulations are offered as benevolent forms of ‘advice’, they are also quite carefully constructed forms of regulation and surveillance in which companies like McDonald’s have a say in all areas of a volunteer’s life, such as what they eat and how they sleep. Far more ironically given the source of the advice, the workbook advises healthy eating, including “plenty” of fruits and vegetables and choosing “low-fat and low-salt options”; volunteers were told to ensure that their “health checks” were up to date and a “good supply of [their] regular medicines” had been stocked and, bizarrely, that Games Makers “spend time with happy, positive people”. During the Games, these efforts to construct and regulate the ideal host in advance were replaced by more appropriate advice on protection against the sun, staying hydrated, using one’s breaks, not skipping meals and maintaining circulation if standing for long periods. What becomes clear in these training manuals is that it is not just the obvious hosting activities, but the very biological life of the Games Maker, that becomes subject to McDonald’s training and guidance.

While scheduling and health advice are suggestive rather than strictly regulatory, one area where Games Makers are more directly disciplined is in their uniform and appearance. The uniform, consisting of every item of clothing, from socks to an umbrella, cap and water bottle,
are to be worn with “pride” and kept “clean, tidy and crease free” (London 2012, 2012f: 15). It is stressed that “adaptations to the uniform are not allowed” (2012d: 30–31) – not even the trainers’ laces can be changed, while if a change of socks is absolutely necessary they must be plain and “unbranded” (2012f: 7). In both the workbook and the Your Uniform Wear and Care Guide issued to volunteers there is a list of Dos and Don’ts, misnamed ‘Style tips’ (2012d: 31; 2012f: 10–11). Here, the hosts are told to smile while wearing their uniform, wear their hair “in a neat and tidy manner”, restrict their jewellery (to a watch, rings, earrings and “minimal neckwear”), not roll their trousers into shorts and not wear any other clothing items with their uniform. Caps must be used when out of doors and “should be worn with the logo at the front”. The issue being raised here is not that difference and personality are being completely outlawed by these stipulations (after all, “religious headwear” is allowed, as long as it is “black or white and plain in design” – London 2012, 2012f: 9). Rather, personal choice and expression are constrained and placed within restrictive limits.

The regulation of the Games Makers’ appearance and behaviour is perhaps most evident when they are advised against using jokes in their interactions: “Trying too hard to be funny will not create a positive impression” (2012d: 15). They are to be polite, friendly and welcoming, without revealing personal details. They are to interact directly with visitors and are told to achieve their “personal best” by “greet[ing] your spectator with eye contact and a smile” and wishing him or her “an enjoyable match/session/day or another genuine and appropriate remark” (2012a: 4).

While the effect of these regulations may be a depersonalisation and homogenisation of the host, there is an attempt to evade connotations of disciplining by stressing that you can “be yourself” as a Games Maker (2012b). However, it is unclear what “being yourself” consists of, when it would be appropriately displayed or what happens when personal expression contravenes the training programme. This confusion is demonstrated in the CD exercises discussing the ‘D’ (Distinctive) in the I DO ACT acronym for hosting activities. Being “distinctive” means providing “the personal touch – let yourself shine through” (2012c: 19), keeping your personality, and not “following robotic interactions” (2012d: 6). However, the example of distinctiveness offered on the CD is not particularly distinctive, noting that ‘Anna’ was able to intuit that a couple of spectators were French and therefore took the initiative of speaking to them in their own language (2012b). Indeed, Anna simply applied the communication guidelines explained within the workbook (2012d: 15) and emphasized the ‘O’ of the I DO ACT acronym – being open. This inability to demonstrate an occasion when hosting in a personalised, individual manner would be praiseworthy is important because it reveals that the McDonald’s-led training programme is not interested in individualism or personal expression: it is more interested in producing a blandly polite corporate mass of hosts who are always ‘on-message’.

We are not arguing that the McDonald’s-led training programme was a dominating or oppressive force; indeed, the Games Makers did a fantastic job and appeared to have enjoyed themselves. What we are saying is that just because a programme is successful or enjoyable doesn’t mean it is not also problematic, exclusionary or intensely political. For us, the training of volunteers operated through what Nikolas Rose (2000: 1399) would call an ‘ethopolitics’. This is where the volunteers’ behaviour, expectations and actions are managed and conducted not through coercion, but through influencing their “values, beliefs and sentiments”. In other words, the hosts of London 2012 were trained via their wilful and enthusiastic internalization of two sets of seemingly contradictory values: Olympic ideals of health, fitness and fair play, and McDonald’s corporate values of efficiency and customer service. There are two significant consequences of this internalization. First, volunteers are taught to be better and to go beyond their
‘personal best’ as hosts, but only in very generic, pre-designated and pre-approved ways. Second, it allows McDonald’s to shape the entire life of the Games Makers – not just their capacity to welcome guests in a service-oriented manner, but also what they eat, their health status, their sleeping arrangements and their dressing practices. The ability of McDonald’s to influence the behaviour of volunteers and infiltrate all aspects of their lives suggests an important change to familiar public/private arrangements that goes far beyond London 2012: it prompts us to think about how much of our lives should be ‘outsourced’ to commercial enterprises.

Feeling welcome: corporate hosting and the spectator experience

The involvement of McDonald’s in training Games Makers produced an important pre-emptive framework for corporate involvement in the hospitality offered during London 2012. Before any athletes had arrived, the very act of welcoming spectators from around the world had been outsourced to a corporate partner with ‘expertise’ in customer service. In this way, the act of hosting was pre-emptively framed through a service culture in which the bodies, behaviours and dispositions of volunteers were highly regulated and managed. Following on from this, we are interested in how spectators encountered different forms of welcome staged by commercial partners during the Games itself. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted during London 2012, we want to explore how one of the most heavily used physical routes into the Games – from St Pancras through the main Stratford Gate and into the Olympic Park – was shaped by constant messages of welcome that further emphasized corporate involvement in the act of hosting. In other words, we move from examining the corporate construction of hosts to examining how spectators experienced corporate gestures of hospitality during the Games.

As primary sites of entry and exit into national and urban space, train stations (like airports and passenger docks) stage and display an initial welcome to visitors. It is unsurprising, then, that such sites are overrun with signs and symbols of identity (‘This is who we are’), hospitality (‘You are welcome here’), logistics (‘Go this way’) and consumer fantasy (‘While you are waiting, buy this’) (Lisle, 2003; Warnaby, 2009; Zacharias, Zhang and Nakajima, 2011). During London 2012, this matrix of identity–hospitality–logistics–consumption was interwoven into the labour choreography and Olympic refit of St Pancras railway station – the main transit point for Games spectators who had to use public transport to get to the Olympic Park. Spectators were initially confronted with numerous volunteers and employees – from Network Rail ‘Travel Champions’ to the Games Maker ‘Travel Team’ – positioned at key interchange points throughout the station (e.g., stairs, escalators, doors). While spatial disorientation may have been exacerbated by the different uniforms, titles and instruments displayed by the volunteers, spectators were quickly assuaged and directed by the coordinated Olympic signage and single purpose of all volunteers: to corral, encourage and shepherd thousands of people either onto the Javelin trains or out towards the appropriate shopping experience, Underground train or exit.

Those multiple yet coordinated acts of welcome occurred beneath the backdrop of one of the largest advertising campaigns of the event: McDonald’s £10 million ‘We All Make the Games’ series (Leo Burnett, 2013). While the campaign included advertisements on television, in print and through a variety of social media outlets, one of the main strategies was to “dominate major transport hubs across London” with large billboard images and banners (McDonald’s, 2012b). Accordingly, at the main entrance to the Olympic Javelin trains hung an enormous McDonald’s banner stating ‘We All Make the Games’, larger in both size and font than the actual directions to the train situated underneath. While the position of this banner
is significant in terms of the overall commercialization of St Pancras, we are more interested in the way it further demonstrates the outsourcing of LOCOG’s initial message of ‘welcoming the world’ to Olympic sponsors such as McDonald’s. Constructed around a series of universal ‘fan types’ who would be watching the Games (e.g., ‘the flag waver’, ‘the air puncher’, ‘the quivering wreck’), the campaign was pitched as a “rallying cry for the nation” (Leo Burnett, 2013). More importantly, however, ‘We all make the Games’ was pitched at the diverse spectators arriving in London to watch the Games, and in that sense it explicitly piggybacked on LOCOG’s initial ‘welcome to the world’ message.

The large-scale McDonald’s adverts and billboards in St Pancras, and the McDonald’s-trained volunteers’ careful shepherding of spectators onto the Javelin trains, meant that spectators arrived at the Olympic Park having already experienced a highly managed form of hospitality infused with a corporate ethos. What became clear as spectators moved closer to the Olympic Park was how neatly this corporate ethos was woven into the logistics of getting spectators to the Games efficiently and safely. Once spectators disembarked from the Javelin train at the newly constructed Stratford station, however, the unidirectional trajectory assumed by logistics – get as many people from the centre of London to the Games venues quickly and safely – was diffused and recalibrated by the commercial forces dominating the entrance to the Olympic Park. Here, the corporate framing of logistics was most apparent in the material infrastructure of the site: there were only two pathways out of Stratford station – one took spectators directly into the newly built Westfield Shopping Mall; the other took spectators across a bridge lined by shops and restaurants. The architecture, design and spatial arrangement of the entrance to the Olympic Park made it physically impossible to avoid being welcomed by a corporate ethos:

This proximity of so much retail commerce to world-class athletic competition has some worried that the Olympics here will be remembered as a strange new hybrid of sports appreciation and consumerism gone wild. Or worse, the Mall Olympics. The mall and the event grounds are so close and seamlessly connected that they could easily be confused for a single development. It is a bit like a museum where you cannot see the art without a stroll through the gift shop.

(Seagal, 2012; see also Addley, 2011)

Our point is that the Westfield Mall entrance to the Olympic Park regulated the bodily movement, behaviour and orientation of spectators by fusing two key desires: the consumer’s need for novelty (delivered by the unique status of being an Olympic Games spectator) and familiarity (delivered by the routine and comforting experience of shopping).

The fact that the main entrance to the Olympic Park was effectively a shopping mall tells us something important about the corporate involvement in, and shaping of, London’s welcome to the world. Specifically, it reveals important constitutive limits to the inclusivity and universal reach of that welcome. Just as the best hosts were those most able to internalize the corporate values embedded in their McDonald’s training, so the spectators that were most welcome to London – the ‘ideal types’ prefigured by the organizers and sponsors – were subjects already embedded within a global consumer culture and possessed of sophisticated consumption skills. This collective saw no difficulty in stopping at the Westfield Mall on their way into the Olympics – in consuming a new iPod, a burrito wrap and a pair of shoes immediately prior to consuming the spectacle of sporting excellence. Moreover, retail companies were not shy
of piggybacking on the universal and international values so central to the Olympic Movement. As Figure 3.1 shows, the clothing company Tommy Hilfiger, one of the first retail outlets adjacent to the main pathway through the Westfield Mall, constructed a window display that embedded its corporate logo amidst international, global and British symbols with the phrase ‘Good Luck World!’.

What such piggybacking suggests is that the inclusive and universal offer of welcome made by the organizers (and subsequently sponsors) of London 2012 is both directed towards and enhanced by a global consumer culture that operates through a seemingly borderless world secured by neoliberalism. Our point is that it is a specific version of the ‘World’ that Tommy Hilfiger is speaking to: one best able to appreciate and acquire its products. This suggests that becoming a spectator at any Olympic Games is undeniably a leisure pastime enjoyed by the global elite – exactly like the high-end consumerism practiced at places such as the Westfield Mall. In the end, what the highly commercialized Stratford entrance to the Olympic Park tells us is that a particular type of spectator was welcome to the Games – one that possessed the socioeconomic status to engage in consumerism, the cultural capital to understand the ‘experience’ of Games attendance as a valuable commodity and the ability to indulge the feelings of excitement, pleasure and disappointment that come with all practices of consumption.

Once spectators navigated the consumer paradise of Westfield Mall and passed through the multilevel security checkpoints, they entered into the Olympic Park for their designated
event. Here, the explicit commercial framing of the Westfield/Stratford entrance to the Park became more diffuse and specialized. For every Olympic Games, the IOC gives its primary marketing partners designated space to ‘showcase’ their company, products and services. Given the size of London’s Olympic Park, a majority of these showcase opportunities were located ‘on-site’ and consisted of eight standalone pavilions: Coca-Cola, Acer, BMW, BP, EDF, Panasonic, Samsung and the National Lottery. The centrality of these sponsor pavilions within the Olympic Park altered the kind of welcome experienced by spectators, not least because they had now adopted the original ‘welcome to the world’ as LOCOG concentrated their message on ‘Inspire a Generation’. Of all the primary Olympic sponsors, Samsung was the most explicit in this endeavour: their Olympic campaign theme, *Everyone’s Olympic Games*, was emblazoned on the blue and white banners surrounding their ‘Samsung Mobile Live PIN’ pavilion adjacent to the velodrome. To disseminate their inclusive message more widely, Samsung hired London designer Kate Moross to develop a ‘Samsung Olympic Visual Identity System’ (SOVIS) – effectively a ‘friendly and inclusive’ composite logo to embody Samsung’s Olympic message and accompany their promotional and marketing material for the Games. Their inclusive gesture of welcome was central to Moross’ cartoon image of a Samsung tablet with arms outstretched, “giving visitors to the host city a friendly hello from both Samsung and the people of London” (Samsung, 2012). The question of what spectators actually did once they were welcomed into the Samsung pavilion was clear: they entered “a product space that highlights the benefits of mobile technology in everyday life” and enjoyed “exclusive access to the newest Samsung flagship devices, entertaining content and personalized product consultation” (London 2012, 2012e).

The pavilions were successful at diversifying the leisure activities available in the Olympic Park so that spectators could supplement their particular event with hours of entertainment – a form of public/corporate hosting clearly intended by the IOC (IOC, 2010: 125–128). What is interesting about the hospitality offered by the sponsor pavilions was its ability to convince visitors that they were doing something more – more worthy, more useful, more productive – than simply watching sport. Certainly some of the more product-oriented pavilions such as Samsung, BMW and Coca-Cola operated through quite explicit modes of consumer desire that welcomed visitors with the promise of exclusivity (i.e., ‘be some of the first members of the public to try out this new technology!’). But all the pavilions welcomed visitors with a more aspirational promise of learning: spectators would engage with a narrative about how each company helped stage a particular part of the Olympic Games (e.g., how BMW orchestrated the transport, how EDF provided the electricity, how BP provided the oil and gas). Overwhelmingly, all these invitations to ‘experience’ and ‘learn’ about each sponsor’s involvement were delivered through a discourse of sustainability that foregrounded each company’s commitment to reducing their carbon footprint. For companies like BP, this was especially important: their 360-degree panoramic show ‘Fuelling the Future’ had to dispel the negative images of the disastrous Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010 and present a more caring, concerned and environmentally friendly company. The discourse of sustainability is important here because it placed spectators on the same side as large global corporations like BP: both are equally concerned with issues of sustainability, and therefore both are members of the same global community working to reverse climate change, environmental damage and carbon emissions. The welcoming of spectators into such a concerned, ethical and reflexive global community was central to the design and construction of the BP pavilion: not only did it “inspire millions of people to think about the mobility choices they make every day” (London 2012, 2012e), but its
mirrored façade reflected back images of the crowd meandering in the most sustainable form of mobility – walking (Figure 3.2).

More generally, by reinforcing the ‘environmentally concerned’ credentials of spectators, the sponsor pavilions gave their regular acts of consumption within the Olympic Park an ethical gloss. Sponsors ‘took care of’ the environmental challenges posed by such a global event: they not only made it okay to drink Coke, eat at McDonald’s and buy a new mobile phone, they also infused such acts with virtue. In other words, accepting the welcome constructed by partner sponsors within the Olympic Park made acts of spectatorship and consumption both enjoyable and good. Our point here is that the ethopolitics at work in volunteer training involved pernicious and far-reaching practices of regulation, whereas the ethopolitics at work in the spectator experience involved a careful act of depoliticization. The hospitality on offer at the sponsor pavilions enabled spectators to enjoy a neoliberal form of virtue that effaced the consequences of their privileged global status and everyday consumer practices.

**Conclusion**

As Maurice Roche argues (2000), there has always been an important relationship between expos and Olympic Games. Indeed, the second, third and fourth Games, in Paris (1900), St Louis (1904) and London (1908), “were each held within, or with the support of, an international
Re-thinking hospitality

expo event” (2000: 87–88). Subsequently, the Games grew “to be able to stand on its own two feet,” and links to expos have been frequent but “looser” (2000: 90–91). What we have identified in this paper, however, is that specifically in relation to operations of hospitality, the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games have actually deepened this relationship. LOCOG’s outsourcing of London’s welcome to private companies, in terms of training the hosts and shaping the experience of Games spectators, has made the relationship between the Olympics and expos more complex and interpenetrated. On the one hand, it has infused both hosts (volunteers) and guests (spectators) with a complex ethos encompassing both Olympic values of fair play and sporting excellence and neoliberal corporate values of efficiency, consumerism and customer service. On the other hand, it has irrevocably changed the mega-event that these subjects are hosting or visiting. In an observation that clearly demands more research, we would suggest that London 2012 has given birth to the ‘mega-mega-event’. The practice and experience of hospitality at London 2012 thoroughly intertwined expo and Olympic events such that the two are now inseparable. While the full implications of such a ‘mega-mega-event’ require further investigation, we suggest that this development had a clear impact on the way hospitality operated at London 2012. The outsourcing of LOCOfG’s original ‘welcome to the world’ to commercial interests, the involvement of McDonald’s in training Games Makers and the corporate shaping of the spectator experience tell us something important about how cities use mega-events to sell themselves on the world stage. What remains to be seen is how far the ‘expo’ framing of the Olympics will go and how each host city will negotiate the competing interests of staging the Games, ensuring corporate support, selling the city to visitors and placating local interests who see both the city and the Games as their own.

Note

1 Following Brownell (2006), Carter (2002), MacAloon (1999: 12–14; 2006) and Roche (2000: 14–20), this ethnographic research was conducted on 3 August 2012 and 7 August 2012 and followed the same itinerary each day: St Pancras Station – Javelin train – Stratford Station – Westfield Shopping Centre – Stratford Gate – Olympic Park. Detailed on-site and retrospective field notes were accompanied by photographs.

References

Comité de candidature Londres 2012 (2004b) Responses to the Questionnaire for Cities Applying to Become Candidate Cities to Host the Games of the XXX Olympiad and the Paralympic Games in 2012. London: Comité de candidature Londres 2012.


McDonald’s (2012b) ‘McDonald’s Sprints Ahead with Landmark Campaign to Celebrate the Part We Will All Play in Making the Games’, June. Available at http://www.mcdonalds.co.uk/ukhome/Aboutus/Newsroom/news_pages/We_all_make_the_Games.html (accessed 14 January 2013).


