



25 JUL - 2 AUG

COPENHAGEN 2009

worldOutgames

Serious sports, serious culture, totally serious fun!

The event as an entrepreneurial and attitude-forming strategy

By Uffe Elbæk, CEO of World Outgames

Just under a month after the rainbow flags were taken down from Copenhagen City Hall, the University and the Cathedral, we can start finalizing the accounts for World Outgames 2009. What has Copenhagen got out of the notable financial and political investment that the event was, and still is? Yes - what does such an international sport, cultural and human rights event mean for the participants, the city and the local LGBT community (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender)?

Before I answer those questions, here are some key facts about World Outgames in Copenhagen (referred to as WO from now on):

Firstly, it was important for both the secretariat and the board not just to attach equal importance to the three program elements of sport, culture and human rights, but also to prioritize them as follows:

- Human Rights was the core and fundamental premise for the whole event. It could not have been otherwise, when a third of the world's countries still criminalize love between two people of the same sex, and when in seven of those countries homosexual love is tantamount to the death penalty.
- The cultural program was crucial as a dynamic bridge builder, both internally within the LGBT community and between the LGBT community and the rest of the city. Because it was crucial for the board, the secretariat and the politicians in City Hall that WO not be a closed festival for the few. But that instead, it be an open Festival for everyone.
- The sports program was prioritized as a unique social framework for thousands of LGBT sportspeople from abroad (who made up the largest part of the paying participants). But as well as being a social framework, the sports program was also a visible and therefore very important political point with regard to the homophobia which unfortunately – especially within men's team sports – still characterizes many sports environments. Both in and outside Denmark.

A “business as unusual” event

As well as the prioritization of the program as mentioned above, the project also stood for some clearly-worded values, meaning that we wanted WO to be characterized by aspects such as:

- sustainability (financial, social and environmental),
- cultural diversity (within the organization and with regard to the program),
- social innovation (new working relationships between the public, private and voluntary sectors),
- transparency (everyone should be able to look over our shoulders)
- generosity – everyone could be part of the event. And anyone who wanted to could have access to the knowledge that came out of the event.

Finally, there was a mutual understanding that WO should not just be an event for the participants to identify with, but also one for Copenhagen as a city to identify with. Because by being the host for WO, Copenhagen sent out a clear message, both to the local and international communities, that in Copenhagen we want to bang the drum for diversity, tolerance and personal freedom. In the LGBT community as well.



Purely because of its program prioritization, value base and the project's primary target group, WO was not therefore a "business as usual" event. On the contrary, it was very much a "business as unusual" event.

Which also meant that simply because of its purpose and identity, the event put itself in an especially hot (culturally) political seat. And of course – there was debate. Anything else would have been strange. But interestingly enough, it was not a debate among politicians inside City Hall. Because before, during and after the event, there was broad political support for WO in that building. From the far left to the far right.

No, the debate about the event was first set in motion rather dramatically by the local newspaper Nyhedsavisen. When the newspaper subsequently went bankrupt, the debate moved sporadically over to BT, another newspaper, because the journalist and editor who had written the articles and leaders in Nyhedsavisen got jobs there.

But apart from these very few (deliberately) negatively-angled stories in the two newspapers, the overall media coverage of and about WO has been generally exclusively positive.

Pockets of intolerance

It goes without saying that this was only with regard to professional journalistic coverage. Because if you look at the many private and professional blogs that have been on the Internet before and during WO, you can often be very shaken by the intolerance which still exists in certain parts of Danish society towards homosexuals. Not so much because of the content of the columns and blogs – even though these themselves can be noteworthy enough. But more because of the violent reactions they generated among lots of ordinary Danes. Reactions that clearly showed a picture of fear, hate and aversion towards homosexuals.

Just one single entry by the conservative-liberal blogger Michael Jalving headlined "Spare us from the Gay Olympics" resulted in 275 particularly emotive comments, most of which supported in very unambiguous terms Michael Jalving's distaste and lack of understanding of WO as an event and a political priority.

This intolerance unfortunately progressed from being democratically legitimate verbal expression on the Internet to actual physical violence as early as right after the official opening event at City Hall Square on the evening of Saturday, July 25th.

Three Outgames participants were kicked and attacked by two aggressive and homophobic young men (to quote the words of the police). Fortunately, both were arrested immediately after the attack. The same was the case when a man threw powerful fireworks onto the track at Østerbro Stadium during WO. He was also arrested and subsequently charged under aggravated hate crime laws.

As well as these episodes reported in public, the secretariat is also aware of a large number of situations where participants were verbally abused, had things thrown at them, as well as one other serious case where a young lesbian was attacked by a group of young male right-wing extremists. Unfortunately, this case was not reported to the police because the young woman did not want to do so alone as the witnesses who had seen the attack declined to give statements to the police.



These unfortunate situations prove unambiguously that events such as WO are unfortunately not just relevant in an international perspective, but also relevant to us in Denmark.

Success from the point of view of the program, the organization and the finances.

After 2 ½ years preparatory work, WO opened on July 25th with a large public event on City Hall Square in Copenhagen. It marked the start of the WO week. Nine days with the focus on LGBT sport, culture, art and human rights.

WO was in every way a significant event but also an event for ordinary people. Just a few key figures: 5,518 paying participants came from 91 countries. In addition, 7,500 LGBT tourists (secretariat's estimate) chose to come to Copenhagen purely because of WO.

During the course of the week, more than 2,000 different program activities spread across the three program pillars were held. Sport had the most (1,800 competitions in 34 disciplines), followed by culture with 303 separate items on its agenda – from exhibitions to choir concerts and the numerous cultural events on the six OutCities stages: Melbourne, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Tel Aviv, Antwerp and Aarhus. And finally, the international LGBT Human Rights Conference in the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's new Concert Hall and at the IT University. More than 24 keynote speeches and more than 110 workshops were held there.

In total, more than 200,000 local Copenhagensers and tourists took part in an enormous number of free events during WO. From the official opening in City Hall Square where more than 25,000 people took part, to the Run for Love race and the official closing ceremony held in conjunction with Copenhagen Pride.

It should also be noted that more than 300 journalists covered the event, of which around half came from foreign media. And as the backbone of the organization, we had 1,800 people who chose to use their summer holidays on voluntary work for WO. Without the volunteers, WO would never have been the success it was.

At the time of writing, we have generally only received positive feedback about the event. From ordinary Copenhagen people and public authorities (police, fire service and city institutions) to the participants themselves. For example, participants stayed an average of eight days in Copenhagen, rather than the five anticipated. So they must have liked what they saw.

In short, success from the point of view of the program, the organization and the finances. The latter being not least because budgets were kept to and because it can be seen that the grant of DKK 30m from the city gave a good return on investment. Participants spent between DKK 50m and 60m in the city on hotels, transport and general consumption (Wonderful Copenhagen's calculations).

But as well as the city being able to look back on a successful event, is it also possible to say something more in principle about what WO has meant for Copenhagen? Has the event, as well as being nine interesting and intense days, left more permanent marks on the city's social, political and cultural life? Has the city been touched – and therefore actually moved? These questions must be said to be just as relevant, and in any event just as interesting to ask, as the question about what the event has contributed on the plus side to the local economy.



Financial, social and cultural growth

When the secretariat was established at the beginning of 2007 to take on the task the City of Copenhagen had given us – namely to develop, plan and run WO – the management was also in agreement that “just” delivering a once-off event was not in itself a success criterion. Of course we also had to do just that. But we also decided to look at the job of holding WO as a potential entrepreneurial and attitude-forming strategy for the city.

In other words, that the city’s various different players should be able to use the event as a strategic springboard to move forward organizationally, politically, culturally and from a business point of view in their own development processes. So how could these players use WO as a testing ground for new ideas, new products, new partnerships and new communication strategies, etc.?

But just as important as it was for WO to be understood and thought of as an entrepreneurial strategy for the city (financial growth), it was just as important, as mentioned, that WO should be seen as a attitude-forming strategy for Copenhagen (social and cultural growth). This twin focus had a lot of influence on the way the event was organized, communicated and run. Or as we said it to each other in the secretariat: “World Outgames must be consciously used to upgrade Copenhagen: financially, socially and culturally”.

So was the strategy successful? It would appear so. Because if you take the following few selected “upgrade items”, you can see WO as a good example of how politics can use an event as an “upgrade engine” for the local community where that event is to be held. In this case, starting with the city’s LGBT community:

Upgrading the infrastructure.

Politically, hosting WO was used both as an argument and an indicator for renovating Østerbro Stadium and for building a new swimming arena at Bellahøj. Investments in facilities which will be of benefit to the local people for many years to come.

But there was also another – and perhaps just as important upgrade to the infrastructure – namely the experience of making more proactive use of public spaces for a large international event.

Not only were the official opening and closing ceremonies held at City Hall Square, but most of the free cultural programs were also held in public spaces, to the delight of local people and tourists alike. That applied to the whole OutCities route, which ran from Vor Frueplads by the Cathedral, to Gammeltorv and Nytorv squares and Søren Kirkegaards Plads, ending at Islands Brygge across the harbor. A number of the sports activities also tested out the potential of using public space. For example the Run for Love race, Open Air Milonga and synchronized swimming in the harbor.

Upgrading organizations.

The local LGBT community in Copenhagen was neither especially prominent nor especially well organized at the time that Copenhagen City Council decided to host WO 2009. The council was also conscious of the fact that WO could not be held without the support and contribution of that very same local LGBT community.



So it has been very important for the staff at the secretariat that an additional benefit of the city hosting WO should be that the local LGBT community be strengthened both culturally and organizationally as a result. Indeed this has happened – and to an extent we did not expect to see. Not just because thousands of LGBT people in Copenhagen were involved in holding the event. People are now more confident about their own strengths and purpose, which can be seen in new, promising projects already launched. Projects which are characterized by a new openness toward the already numerous existing players in the LGBT community. But also an openness and readiness to take on board new talent which has not yet proven itself on the stage.

But WO also meant that completely new working relationships were created. A good example was the anti-hate campaign which was developed in the run-up to and during the WO. A campaign conceived and implemented in close cooperation between the Copenhagen Police, the City of Copenhagen, the Danish Institute for Human Rights, the National Association of Gays and Lesbians and WO. This partnership is just one of the many new inter-organizational links which have come about between LGBT and mainstream organizations as a result of WO.

Upgrading businesses.

For the first time, a number of Danish companies have actively sought out the financial growth potential in the LGBT target group. A good example is Scandinavian Airlines, which as part of its sponsorship of WO was the first airline to set up a special website for LGBT customers wanting to fly to and from Scandinavia or Copenhagen. On the airline's LGBT website, customers could find all the general LGBT information about Scandinavia as a region and more specifically LGBT news from Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen.

But SAS was not alone. Because the tourist organizations Wonderful Copenhagen and Visit Denmark, as well as a number of local Copenhagen companies also used WO to build on an already existing partnership, the purpose of which was to attract even more international LGBT tourists to the city.

Upgrading knowledge.

Before WO, there were more assumptions than facts in debates about LGBT issues. Set against the countries Denmark normally compares itself to, we had no systematic knowledge and documentation about the lives of our LGBT citizens and how they actually lived and felt. No public authority in Denmark – locally or nationally – had any official or professionally-collated information about the current living conditions for LGBT people – either for the present day or historically. We did not know whether there were more or fewer hate crime attacks this year than last, whether LGBT citizens have more or less confidence in public institutions than their heterosexual counterparts, or whether there were more or fewer social problems in the LGBT group than among heterosexuals, etc.

The National Association of Gays and Lesbians has for many years sought a national survey of LGBT living conditions as seen in for example Norway, Sweden, Netherlands or the UK. Only with the arrival of WO was it possible with the support of the City of Copenhagen and the Tryg Foundation to undertake Denmark's first national living conditions survey.



The results from the survey were presented at the human rights conference during WO and are a contributing factor to both local and national politicians for the first time having a serious basis for decision-making about potential new legislation in the area.

In addition, Copenhagen Police have decided that in future all attacks on lesbians and gays and transgender people will be documented systematically. This is partly a consequence of the survey and partly because of the hate crimes during the actual WO week.

Upgrading language.

When the WO secretariat was first established, a number of articles in national newspapers appeared – and with good reason. Articles with headlines such as “The gays are coming” and “Gay Olympics”. Because at the time, homosexuals were regarded as only being gay men. In any event according to print and electronic media. Or in other words: lesbians were pretty much invisible and transgender people did not exist.

Now, 2 ½ years later, the language and terms used have become more nuanced and open. Lesbians have entered into character both culturally and as regards the media. As one newspaper wrote “lesbians are the new gays”. In the same way, the challenges faced by transgender people have gone much higher up the political agenda. This includes the notable fact that the Socialist People’s Party is the first party to select a transgender person as a candidate in the forthcoming local elections.

From homosexuals only meaning gay men, the term “LGBT” is now used assiduously by both journalists and politicians. Which shows that a mainstreaming of the term has occurred. This language nuance and precision have wide-ranging consequences. Because as we know, words create reality. Or in other words: what is invisible, does not exist. And anything that does not exist does not have any rights! So for WO, it has been a goal in itself to make lesbians and transgender people visible.

Upgrading culture.

For the first time ever in the history of Denmark, an established cultural history museum included LGBT (cultural) life in its program as part of WO.

It was at the Museum of Copenhagen, which produced the “Som jeg er/As I am” exhibition. An exhibition about more than 200 years of LGBT life in the Danish capital, and a chapter of the city’s history never previously covered or therefore presented to a wider audience. The project consisted partly of a special exhibition of newly-collected contemporary and historical material and partly of exhibits the museum already had in its collection.

An interesting challenge for the Museum of Copenhagen was that throughout history, LGBT issues and people have been either undesirable, rendered invisible or made illegal. Which again has meant that museums could not to any mentionable degree collect material which could document LGBT people and the community’s existence and development. Either in Copenhagen or anywhere else in the country.

The Museum therefore decided to do something about this as part of WO, and gave itself the goal of being the first cultural history museum in Denmark to be able to present a broad-based exhibition of LGBT cultural history. The “Som jeg er/As I am” exhibition has not just been a big success with the



public, it was also the reason why the Museum of Copenhagen has decided to collect and thus document the living conditions and lives of LGBT people more systematically in future.

But it was not just the Museum of Copenhagen which used WO as a reason to hone cultural attention and thus focus on the artistic production which has its roots and therefore its basis in the city's creative queer community. The Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center and a large number of the city's other galleries did the same. Teater Rio Rose, a theater group, also used WO as a reason to further develop an already existing play, "Battlefield", so that the play not only covered the dynamics of a heterosexual couple's relationship, but also included a gay and a lesbian relationship too.

Upgrading identity.

The sum of all the above-mentioned upgrades: infrastructure, organizational, business, knowledge, language and cultural upgrading are all part of the final upgrade: which is the upgrading of the city's overall cultural identity.

At least that is how the large amount of feedback the secretary received during the actual WO week and in the weeks after from the city's own citizens can be interpreted. Feedback such as "I am proud of Copenhagen again", "great that the city is supporting diversity", "people smiled more during Outgames", "why can't we have the OutCities cultural program again next year?" or "Can the Aarhus stage not stay a little longer - just a month more?" All these words were pieces in the puzzle which at the end of the day paints a picture of a more self-aware and culturally alive capital city.

The large amount of positive feedback from local Copenhagen people was like an echo of the "reviews" which the numerous foreign journalists, participants and artists gave Copenhagen during the WO week. They were unanimous in being impressed by the city's hospitality, openness and tolerance. Not least the way the city made its squares, streets, canals, harbor and beaches available for an event such as WO. In fact the way the whole city supported WO, from the Lord Mayor to ordinary people in the street, made a big impression on the numerous visitors from abroad. This very much strengthened the identity both within the city and outward to the surrounding world. The people of Copenhagen became happier and more proud of living here. And the many thousands of visitors from abroad could be convinced about the high quality of life Copenhagen actually has by being able to experience it at close quarters.



Closing remarks

It wasn't necessarily a given that WO would become the success it was both in terms of attitudes and the people. Because the project encompassed many visible and invisible stumbling blocks we could have fallen over.

Not just that the decision for Copenhagen to host WO was taken during an economic upswing, whereas the actual event had to be held in the middle of a massive economic downturn. It was also a project which was controversial purely because of its primary target group and overall purpose: namely to make the local and international LGBT community visible and to celebrate its vitality. And as if that was not enough of a challenge, the secretariat was from time to time also subject to internal power struggles and disagreements. In short, there were both external and internal lines of conflict.

But precisely because WO has been such an "uphill" project, everyone has in return agreed that the view was fantastic once we reached the top.

That the final result is as good as it actually is is due to the right mixture of professional pragmatism, together with the necessary grass roots idealism and a good-sized portion of political and cultural timing and luck.

But most important of all: WO was a real answer to a real issue in society. Namely the need and the necessity for us to do something about the massive attacks on fundamental human rights taking place around the world. Because as Amnesty International puts it: Love Rights Are Human Rights.

Many large international events are thought out, decided and organized from the top down. And perhaps because of that they often get very outward-facing, if not to say superficial, identities. It was not like that with WO. Fortunately. It was an event which was allowed to grow strongly from the bottom up. And so the event also got its identity from within. From the heart. That was both the strength and the challenge of the event.

But without this dynamic – bottom-up and inside-out – World Outgames would never have made it into port. But we did. Even doing so with great style and in good spirits. It made the participants happy. It made local Copenhagen people happy. It made us all happy. So congratulations Copenhagen. For everything that was achieved and for everything that we therefore came together to recognize.

Copenhagen, Denmark – August 21st, 2009.