

## Designs of Olympic Proportions

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**I was recently given a tour of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games Park in Stratford, a few days before its first members of the public walked through its gates.**

At the time, I wondered what visitors would make of London's Olympic architectural project and how they would interpret their grand designs. Would the enormity of the space seem a necessary regeneration proposition for an area that was otherwise neglected and even toxic? Alternatively, would the level of financial burden borne by the project appear excessive for what many will perceive as just a month long festival of sport? Indeed, can this shop window for the nation even expect to be a showcase for cutting edge technology in such frugal times?

The opening of the stadium is always a pivotal period for an Olympic host city and, while not yet at completion, London organizers will be mindful of the all important hard opening date, which takes place in 2011 for test events. The construction of Olympic venues is often controversial. For the Athens



London 2012 Park, Olympic Stadium

2004 Olympics, far too many construction workers died in the process, drawing attention to concerns about health and safety measures that might have been neglected due to the pressure to meet the unyielding target of the Opening Ceremony. In addition, the symbolic capital of individual Olympic Games becomes inextricable from the architectural features of an Olympic park, thus transforming the meanings they exude. In Beijing's Olympics in 2008, high profile advisers such as the artist Ai Wei Wei and Steven Spielberg each resigned their positions due to the political controversies that surrounded Beijing's Olympics. Indeed, we might analogize these circumstances to the way that musical composition takes on meanings depending on the context in which it is experienced.

In many respects, the London venues reflect our times. One might even say that the 2012 Games mark a watershed in Olympic history, where the endless creation of mega-events has come to an end. As part of this journey, Beijing 2008 represents the culmination of all grand designs, where architectural briefs appeared to have no financial limits and, arguably, no public accountability. For now, it's apparent that no country can or should aspire to exceed what China did in 2008. But where does that leave us? What should Olympic or mega-event architecture expect to do in the next part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

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### **It is apparent that London is building iconic structures within Olympic park**

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Despite the hard economic times, it is apparent that London is building iconic structures within the Olympic park, even though the actual amount of money that is going into the process may be more modest than in previous Games. It is also apparent that what marks out Olympic architectural projects is the assumed expectations that they will become iconic. Indeed, looking around the park, it is apparent that the new residential and office structures outside of the Olympic park are all oriented towards it, when previously they

might have looked towards the city of London. Of course, one can also take for granted the fact that an Olympic park will become a new tourist destination for a city, which is perhaps what makes Olympic architectural programmes such competitive briefs. Cities around the world continue to live of the legacy of their Olympic venues, including Barcelona 1992, Sydney 2000, even as far back as Seoul in 1998 or Mexico in 1968. One might ask how do these expectations affect the design process.

The Games have always been a showcase for technological innovation and excellence, though the mechanisms through which this is achieved vary. A common approach is to utilize the content of an Opening Ceremony to construct messages of technological innovation. For example, in Los Angeles 1984, the use of a jet pack within the Opening Ceremonies was central to what those Games stood for. In Torino 2006, the use of an actual Ferrari within the Opening Ceremony, spinning around the stadium, focused attention on Italy's design and engineering expertise. For China in 2008, the sheer volume and precision of performers within the stadium symbolised the dedication of the Chinese people to staging the Games. The national Olympic stadium, named the 'Bird's Nest', along with its 'Bubble' aquatic centre, became exemplars of excellence and achievement for the nation.



Beijing 2008 Olympic Games  
Aquatic 'Bubble' Centre

When experiencing an Olympic park, one is also quickly drawn to the centrality of the non-sporting activity that will need to occur around the venues during Games time. Thus, amidst the vast stadia there is always space for many other structures, from enormous media centres to imposing sponsors' venues, which entertain people in between competitions.

There are some unequivocal messages that the London 2012 organizers want to convey about the Olympic Park design principles, which cohere with the International Olympic Committee's priorities. Thus, it is essential that an Olympic host promotes sustainability through its architecture and London's initial target for cleaning up the park site was to recycle at least 90% into the new facilities. We are told this target has been exceeded and, moreover, sophisticated soil cleaning machinery is re-positioning the UK as a leader in the field of sustainable urban regeneration.

Furthermore, 2,000 new trees and half a million plants will transform a formerly toxic site into a major new green space for Londoners.

Clear thought has gone into the post-Games legacy plans, responsible architecture being the buzzword to underpin the spectacle that emerges from the site. As such, the aquatic centre and the Olympic stadium will have distinct Games and legacy period characteristics, a dramatic reduction in seating, which the architecture allows, being one of the main features. This has saved Britain millions of pounds while also assisted in avoiding the problem of white elephants that previous Games cities have had to deal with – Montreal finally managed to pay off its stadium from 1976 in 2004 yet some still continue to liken its architectural design as something of a toilet bowl, down which the city flushed its money.

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What perhaps marks out the Olympic park from recent other Games environments is the terrain, which, rather like the undulating shape of the exquisite swimming centre design, allows

visitors to experience different altitudes within the park, allowing views of the park that are normally offered only to the broadcasters in the park's media tower.



London 2012 Olympic Park

Yet, with 23 new bridges in London's park, it is more a matrix of mixed spaces than a spaghetti junction, where public art and poetry engravings will vie for the attention of passersby, along with the sponsors' messages. If this integration of sport and art is achieved, it will go further than previous Games to make Olympic park a culturally vibrant experience, rather than one that is often principally about bringing sports fans into contact with the major sponsors through their venues, a trend that has sadly eluded all Olympic Games sites since the mid-1980s.

My Olympic research has taken me to five Olympic cities during Games time, all of which were within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From visiting the London site, it is apparent that the 2012 Games heralds a new decade in Olympic

history, though this is not an evaluative statement. One might reasonably feel a loss for the mega-structures of previous Olympic sites. Yet, today, showmanship must be played by different rules. London's site feels more sincere, more homely even - a mini-Manhattan perhaps - and by doing so, we might recover what the Games were about in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, before the Olympic Movement became governed by transnational corporate sponsors. 2012 might even take us back to 1948, when London last held the Olympics, though we'd have to keep an eye on the enormous commercial outlet that lines the park - which will be the largest in Europe. Nevertheless, irrespective of what London does, Olympic architecture needs something else in this decade, something more financially measured and environmentally aware, though no less ambitious.

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All Olympic cities like to say they are the world's 'first' in some way and London 2012 is no exception. London is the first city

to host the Summer Games three times. It is the first Olympic city to have a devolved programme, bringing in the Nations and Regions, which will construct a nationwide Olympic experience, rather than just a city Games. Yet, it is also the first host city to

undertake an Olympic Games in the middle of a massive global recession. Yet, the Olympic architectural proposition is almost unique, one might perceive it as a blank canvass on which architects may design an ideal mini-city, a utopia even.

