

The significance of the Olympics

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What does London 2012 signify?
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Scope

We are fast approaching the date for the release of the tickets for next summer's Olympic Games, to be held in London. The lead-in to date has been somewhat uninspiring – a series of updates on the building works, coupled with leaked reports about rising costs to the tax payer, and the debacle of the logo launch.

That heady day when the announcement was made seems a long time in the past, and the realities of what it means to host the games seems to have knocked the British public into a state of apathy. But the landscape of the city, and of the rest of the UK, is going to be altered for an extended period of months, as the government and authorities try to inject a sense of excitement and anticipation into the main sporting artery of the nation.

It is therefore worth reflecting on some of those key signs and images that are going to be all pervasive throughout the UK this time next year. Does the infamous logo still lack lustre, or with emotion reflected in tranquillity does it actually achieve its aims?

The biggest charge against the logo is that it fails to represent London meaningfully. Other logo attempts, for instance those with the Olympic rings flowing through the Thames, seemed to many to reflect the status and identity of the capital. But there is an argument that that is quite a hackneyed representation of a city seeking to redefine itself for the 21st century, and in doing so claim the UK's place at the table of relevant and contemporary nations. A vision of London with the Thames at its heart, while recognisable, falls back on a cliché and seems somehow to miss out on the exciting change that has come to the capital in the last 15 years of the fin de siècle.

So in what way does the logo represent London meaningfully? The particular arrangement of the shapes (20 on top of the 12) and the tilted numbering all connote an urban tag – the Olympics written onto the fabric of the city in that most urban of communication systems. This is reinforced by the use of the yellow framing around the letters, which seems to evoke depth and energy (a Ready Brek glow) of the Olympic experience and of the competitors. Such energy pulses through London – a vibrant city, alive with intellectual and physical energy.

Indeed, we are led from graffiti to a consideration of the material culture on which they appear – buildings. In this case, the particular angularity of the numbers evokes the conceptually post-structural buildings with which British architecture (in the shape of Zaha Hadid) is becoming associated. Hadid is of course the architect of the aquatic centre for the games, but her other designs connote sharp thought, activity, energy, action and the edginess of city life. The logo, which almost seems to be an aerial view of these buildings, is signalling its connection to the new landscape of the city in the 21st century – the post-structural building, and placing London at the heart of that innovation.

The addition of the dot at the centre of the logo is also a subtle but important signal of London's connection to global digital, financial, creative and political networks. It is easy to overlook this component of the logo, but given the ubiquity with which we use dots in email and in website addresses on a daily basis, they have become an important part of the way we communicate, and once again the logo signals the power and purpose of London as a global hub.

The logo livery also caused something of a stir. It avoided the red, white and blue we might have expected, and in doing so once again avoided accusations of the UK as a heritage culture, desperately trying to retain

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the male authoritarian imperialist power that Britain once stood for. The livery avoids the militaristic, legalistic and royalist tonality that so many of UK Plc's traditional logos signify (e.g. Britannia, three lions, heraldic crests, union jack).

power and sensitivity of pink"

Instead, the livery represents London (and by extension the UK) as a post-gendered society in which male and female alike are comfortable with the vibrancy, power and sensitivity of pink but which is underpinned by the bright sunshine yellow. London is signified as an optimistic city in which the patriotic jingoism and clichéd 'heritage industry' of the past is replaced by the urban edge and techno savvy of the present and future. Crucially, given the employment of umbrellas in the closing ceremony at Beijing to mark the handover to London, the logo is a statement that the London Olympics is going to be sunny, open, bright and welcoming – whatever the weather.

Vitaly, given the highly structured and controlled nature of the Beijing Olympics, from the well-drilled spectacle of the opening ceremony to the command politics of the entire nation, the London Olympic logo is a highly subtle declaration of intent of post-structural liberty, unbounded creative energy and freedom of expression. In the latter case, it is a marvellous example of how much of an open society London represents that when the logo was first released it received a hail of criticism in the press and open public discourse that would simply never be permitted in China.

Indeed, one of the most important aspects of this logo is the fact that it is signalling London's role as a leading member of the key cities club for the 21st century. It is crucial that London establishes its relevance and importance alongside other 21st century cities like Shanghai, Mumbai, Rio and the continuing importance of New York and Tokyo. It is therefore crucial that the logo signified not only London's difference but London's relevance – and in this way a logo was chosen that signified a 21st century urban sensibility.

In many ways, the London Olympics logo has benefited from the release of the logo for the Rio 2016 Olympics. It is clear that London's logo is sandwiched between two fairly similar designs. Both Beijing and Rio opt for flowing figurative imagery – the former celebrating sporting individualism, the second championing community connection and the power of the Olympics and Brazil to bring humanity together.

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Both of them seem to fall back on clichés about the Olympics themselves, however. Seen in this light, and with the benefit of time having passed, London's logo does connote the value and power of the city they are being held in. It is not a predictable comment on human endeavour and an anodyne statement about utopian Olympic values, but instead a visual metaphor for what a 21st city experience can be, and the sort of edgy urban techno creativity that is being sought by new-built cities like Dubai, Masdar, Songdo and others but which London naturally has in spades.

Seen in this light, the initially-derived logo acts as a clear statement of the different energy, imagination and optimistic creative experience that the London Olympics are going to be and how they might tell a very different story about what the Olympics could be in the 21st century. This is a logo for a new type of Olympics from a London clearly setting out its brand as a redefinition of the city experience for this still relatively young century.

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