



Amanda Levete

The Olympics will only truly succeed if the powers-that-be overcome their intellectual timidity and attack the problem with passion, imagination and a whole lot of money

Doing what it takes

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Look, the Olympics are going to cost what they cost. There comes a point when you have to recognise the inevitability, accept that mistakes have been made and make the best of it. Bidding for the Olympics is not unlike entering an architectural competition – it is a moment when architectural ambition is at its highest and passion, ideas and optimism should win the day. Doing it well, not cheaply, is what counts.

Then there's this absurd debate over VAT. If we hadn't won the Olympics, the revenue from the VAT wouldn't have been generated so what is the big deal about making the Olympics VAT-exempt? It's just a game the Treasury likes to play to make itself look tough and then generous at the last minute. Well this last minute stuff can't possibly benefit anyone. Quality takes time.

The Los Angeles Olympics were a commercial success but ridiculed for their cultural banality. Barcelona may still be paying for the Olympics but the quality of the architectural interventions brought a disused port back into the city. It may or may not be possible to have both, but which would you prefer, cultural recognition or money in the bank? Money in the bank will just get spent but cultural achievement and respect have a value that is lasting and incalculable.

But do not put aside sporting prowess because its legacy could reach communities outside London. I'm convinced the legacy of our class system is largely responsible for our poor sporting performance. Rather than putting the onus on parents to ferry their children around the country, spend money on a system whereby every child can take part in regular talent-spotting trials close to home, and then have that talent nurtured in environments with architectural value.

So the challenge for the Olympic Delivery Authority is to become a good client. This does not mean cutting the soul out of a building to save money but rather creating the conditions that will allow talent to be demonstrable. The two areas to focus on are the selection method for the architects and procurement. The misguided decision to procure the Olympics in design-and-build contracts is now inevitable (although, if someone had the spunk, not beyond a radical rethink). The ODA could mitigate any negative effects by ensuring the original architect is retained beyond stage C, novated to the contractor up to stage E and then retained by the ODA as its adviser through construction.

This assumes that the right architect has been selected in the first place. The tendency of publicly funded bodies is to seek the most risk-averse designer. Sports buildings are indeed a specialism but how many good sports buildings are there? Not many. So instead of making a velodrome shortlist of nine architects with velodrome experience and one internationally recognised firm, how about a shortlist of 10 internationally recognised architects, all of which are obliged to work with a velodrome expert?

I always thought the portfolio of the culture department was ridiculously wide, but for the first time in decades this marriage can work. We have an opportunity to create buildings with meaning and beauty.

Simon Jenkins argued brilliantly in The Sunday Times that holding the Games in a fortified camp in Stratford has little to do with London, but I doubt our government has the stamina to challenge the arrogant demands of the International Olympic Committee. So make the best of what we've got.

Now is a glorious moment for a city that is becoming the capital of the world. As Tony Travers of the London School of Economics puts it: "We're in the middle of a full-throttle, moneyed golden age." The government and the ODA have the money, the brains and the talent to deliver an Olympics with a difference – don't mess up.

Postscript :

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