

# A LOFTY AMBITION

## Does London need a 2012 visitor centre now?

In this special feature we bring together four pieces examining whether a visitor centre for London 2012 could be developed before the Games, how it could look, what it could do, and the operational challenges it would need to meet.

**Jim Roberts**, an Associate Director at Locum Consulting, opens the feature by making the strategic case for a visitor centre, based on the success of other comparable developments in the UK and Europe, and the boundless appetite of the public for all things Olympic.

**David Marks**, of the field-leading architectural practice Marks Barfield Architects (MBA), points us to MBA's proposed Brighton i360 development and argues that a 2012 visitor centre would ideally give customers a similar aerial view over the Olympic site. **Peter Higgins**, Creative Director of the multi-award winning Land Design Studio, offers his views on the stories that could be told at the centre, and the experiences that could be delivered using a variety of cutting-edge interactive technologies. And **Michael Jolly**, former Chairman and Chief Executive of the Tussaud's Group, and now Chairman of Star Parks SA, looks at the main operational requirements of the potential centre.



## Part 1: Concept planning

Locum Consulting recently ran an international architecture competition for a new visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway on Northern Ireland's Antrim Coast. The competition attracted 825 expressions of interest, making it the most popular ever held in the UK. Here, **Jim Roberts**, the Associate Director who coordinated the competition, argues that there is more than enough evidence to suggest that a visitor centre at the Olympic Park in east London could be a great success.

So what can the last 11 months since London won the right to host the 2012 Games be remembered for? The fastest passing of an Olympic Bill? Disputes over land assembly and the subsequent reduction of the Olympic Park? Major land remediation works to the Olympic site? Disputes over elite athlete funding, followed up by a funding commitment worthy of a Prime Minister? False starts for 2012 tendering? Even the Olympic Minister's private affairs?

Whatever your own opinion, all of this has served to underline the British public's relentless appetite and passion for the Olympic Games. One might have expected this appetite to fade with time, but not in Britain - where there's an Olympics, there's an interest.

Given this insatiable appetite for everything Olympic, it staggers me that the seeds of a London 2012 visitor centre have not already been sown in East London. It's true that you can still download the 'walk the bid' tour guides from

Newham's website ([www.olympics.newham.gov.uk/tour.htm](http://www.olympics.newham.gov.uk/tour.htm)). And I've heard that you can pay a back hander to the janitor of a certain building in Stratford, to follow in the footsteps of the IOC assessors and gain an aerial view of the planned Olympic Park. But these are hardly world-class experiences, and there is no coordination to their planning and execution. Now, in 2006, do we not want to walk the Olympic plans rather than the Olympic bid?

### What have recent host cities done?

In Sydney, more than 7.5 million visits were made to Homebush Bay before the Olympic Games were staged in 2000, as the physical transformation of the area captured the public's imagination. Despite this, no visitor centre was built to facilitate their experiences and capture the commercial potential.

In Athens, efforts were focused heavily on the event itself - rightly so, given the pressures on construction. But again, no visitor centre was developed for pre-Games visitors.

And currently in Beijing, it appears that one needs special clearance, or at minimum a media pass, to visit anywhere remotely connected to the Games.

To date, all Olympic visitor centres created by host cities have been developed for post-Games audiences, aimed at celebrating the Games that happened. The commercial success of such ventures have been mixed and they have relied almost entirely on existing tourism activity to sustain them, rather than being significant attractors in their own right.



## Successful visitor centres

In recent years there have been some fantastic examples of visitor centre developments.

Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, once divided by the Berlin Wall, is now a thriving square again, home to Sony's European headquarters and many other new landmark buildings. During the reconstruction phase, it was the world's biggest building site, and a highly successful visitor centre was created to enable the public to witness the physical regeneration at close quarters. A design competition was held, as a result of which the architects Schneider und Schumacher were appointed to design a spectator facility, the 'Info Box' which stood on stilts 23 metres above the middle of Potsdamer Platz, giving amazing views of the building activity in progress. In its short life, the Info Box attracted more than eight million visits.

Closer to home, a viewing platform was created at the Eden Project in Cornwall prior to its opening. In less than 12 months, a staggering 250,000 people were tempted to peer into the vast quarry and observe the birth of some peculiar biomes.

In Cardiff Bay, a visitor centre (above) housing informative exhibitions, tourist information, and presentations about the ongoing development of the Bay area was opened in 1991, at a cost of just £500,000. Designed by architects Alsop & Lyall to resemble a futuristic telescope looking out over the new Bay area, the visitor centre is known locally as 'The Tube', and has demonstrated enduring appeal, still attracting over 200,000 visits per annum.

The London Eye, which continues to attract over 3.5 million visits per annum, provides a lookout over the ever-changing cityscape of London. The appeal for being taken up high, combined with excellent design and engineering, has been well packaged and marketed – although one can still pick holes in the experience and the commercial opportunities that have not been capitalised on.

Even the Spinnaker Tower in Portsmouth, which was not without its programme delays, cost overruns and faulty lifts, is reported to have exceeded its trading forecasts in its first five months of operation. The attraction of getting up high continues to fascinate.



London Eye

## More than a visitor centre or attraction

The Olympic construction site in east London will soon become Europe's largest, and with it will come unprecedented interest. As 2012 moves closer, the levels of interest and expectation surrounding the London Games themselves will likewise be huge.

We believe that it would be possible to create a destination that capitalises on this one-off interest, and delivers world-class experiences before 2012. Although the development could be seen as temporary, focused on the build-up to the London Games, its function would facilitate understanding about the future legacy plans for the Olympic Park. Indeed, it would play an ongoing role as part of the post-2012 legacy masterplan.

In fact, the title 'visitor centre' does not really do the concept justice. On the one hand, we see considerable development potential in harnessing the appeal of the Olympic Park's physical transformation and regeneration, and packaging it as an attraction. On the other, we see the development facilitating London 2012's need to effectively engage with multiple audiences and manage expectations. It could, for example, provide:

- a base for youth and education programmes
- a launch-pad to promote business opportunities
- a platform for eliciting and showcasing sponsors
- a demonstration of the legacy and longer term regeneration of east London and the wider Thames Gateway
- a portal for overseas markets
- a base for volunteering and skills training
- embryos of the media village and London Olympic Institute
- a hub for cultural events.

Fundamentally, this exciting and innovative destination could become somewhere for visitors to discover London 2012. In physical terms, it could be a tower or a ride, which would elevate visitors. It would contain interpretation and engaging exhibitions about the physical regeneration engendered by the London 2012 Games. It would almost certainly contain education suits, conference facilities, a retail outlet selling London 2012 merchandise, a themed café and perhaps a high quality destination restaurant. This would be the hub from where visitors could explore the Olympic Park in development, understand the engineering feats and development processes. Guided tours would radiate out from the visitor centre. An events programme celebrating major development and cultural milestones would add to the sense of place.

Spinnaker Tower, Portsmouth



### How could it be delivered?

To deliver everything described above in a single phase would take at least two years, carry significant risk and require considerable investment. But in the short term, there are relatively quick and effective ways to sow the seeds of such a destination and provide world-class experiences in the interim.

In our view, capital investment would be relatively straightforward to secure, whether as a justifiable expenditure from London 2012's purse or by attracting private sector investment in the commercial aspects of the destination.

We see this development as being highly organic. Each year, aspects of the visitor centre would change and react to the differing needs of London 2012. In a sense, it would physically reflect the changing landscape of the Olympic Park.

These days, major viewing towers can be purchased virtually off the shelf. I suspect that there are few architectural practices based in the UK that have not in the last 12 months designed a new way of elevating visitors. But perhaps better solutions would come through an international design competition seeking to deliver something totally bespoke.

The last ten years of lottery investment in the UK have reinforced the complexities of the visitor attractions market-place. You cannot simply 'build it' and expect people to come – although many people clearly thought you could. But given the level of public interest in the Olympics, and the rarity of the opportunity, there is no reason why a well-conceived, innovative 2012 visitor centre could not attract between five and ten million visits in the five years leading up to the Games, and become one of the most popular attractions in the UK.

London has the chance to do something that no Games before has achieved, by capitalising on pre-Games visitor audiences. Every day that passes is another missed opportunity. One thing is for certain. If London 2012 did decide to pursue such a development, it should not be promoted by Government: we all know what happens when politicians gain aspirations to develop and manage visitor attractions!

**Jim Roberts, Locum Consulting**



Info Box, Potsdamer Platz

