



Part 3: Creating the visitor experience



Land Design Studio is presently involved in a variety of visitor centre projects, including the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, Petra Gateway in Jordan and The Mary Rose Visitor Centre in Portsmouth Harbour. **Peter Higgins**, Creative Director of Land, suggests that though very different in their subject matter, these three centres share certain definable criteria, which collectively form a valuable template for any potential visitor facility at Stratford.

What makes a good visitor centre? Certainly, getting the tone and scope of the narrative right is a key requirement. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has expressed a desire for the proposed visitor facility at the Giant's Causeway not only to describe the geological phenomena that created the stones, but also to enable visitors to understand the opportunities that exist in the region for both cultural and exploratory tourism. Whilst Petra also shares some important geological stories, the real narrative lies with the fascinating origin and development of the settlement, some 2,000 years ago, and the ingenuity of the Nabateans in making it a major international transportation conduit. The Mary Rose, of course, is about 'being there' with the famous iconic object and the associated artefacts evoking the moment when the vessel sank in front of Henry VIII in 1545, after 34 years' service.

Bearing these case studies in mind, we believe that the objectives for a visitor centre can be distilled as follows: to provide a sense of geographical place from micro to macro; to present complete historical narratives of people and contextual histories; and to celebrate an iconic event, in this case not our most famous Tudor warship but the incomparable Olympic Games.

Top: National Waterfront Museum, Swansea 'Landscape'



Urbis, Manchester

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Interpreting the Olympic area

Since Eiffel's revelation at the 1889 World Fair, cities have continued to create towers that provide fabulous views. The Empire State Building in New York, the CN Tower in Toronto, the Mori Tower in Tokyo and our own London Eye are all important tourist destinations in their own right.

The one thing that the planners of these wonderful structures regularly overlook, however, is the fantastic opportunity to extend the spectacle by offering visitors innovative interpretations of the location. In Stratford, the views of east London and the Thames Gateway hold many embedded narratives, such as settlement, geography, communications, industry, ecology, even extended tourist attractions. These could be integrated in imaginative ways.

By using the familiarity of mapping and satellite imaging alongside orientational views, visitors would be able to unpick and comprehend concepts of urban planning, that have had an impact on both contemporary and historic London, in particular the immediate environs of Stratford.

By starting with the view that provides the sense of place, the historic context of the people and communities could be read in relation to the extended vision for this area, in which the Olympics play a catalytic role.

A LOFTY AMBITION



Top: National Football Museum

Middle: Urbis

Bottom: Playzone



“Video diaries could track the progress of real people nation-wide, particularly the British sportsmen and women preparing for the Games.”

Bringing the experience to life

Of course, the *raison d'être* of the centre would be the Games. It would be inappropriate to merely provide plasma screens running prosaic images of familiar heroes and incidents. We would suggest much more imaginative ways of accessing the fascinating stories. For instance, we could create sensory interactive timelines that visitors could navigate in their own bespoke ways to investigate chronological detail.

These timelines could be built in a reportage style using layered text, moving image and even tangible objects. Interactivity could be activated through gesture or presence.

Video diaries could track the progress of real people nation-wide, particularly the British sportsmen and women preparing for the Games. Stories and updates could maintain topical interest.

Physical sensory interactives could provide a sense of fun that measures the sporting and physical attributes of the visitor.

Emerging technologies can now provide delivery mechanisms that move beyond domestic computing. Any 2012 visitor centre should exploit and showcase the best of British communication skills. Indeed, it could be the media installations and unique interactivity that encourage the all-important word of mouth recommendation and marketing potential that would be required to put such a centre on the map.

Whatever form the end content would take, one thing is for certain. The location, history and future of the Olympic site mean that its own story and the stories of those whose lives it will change forever are crying out to be told.

Peter Higgins, Land Design Studio