

## The art of Olympic identity

**Paul Davis**, Creative Director of Agenda Design, casts his eye over the identities created for previous Olympic Games, and highlights the blend of attributes that the London 2012 identity will need to incorporate.

Many words have been written on the meaning of brands: what constitutes a good brand, what works, what lasts – and what is a brand anyway? The painstaking definition and breaking down of the nature and purpose of brand identity might seem like an exercise in indulgence and introspection. But when it comes to a brand like the Olympic Games, recognised across the world and barely changed since its original design in 1913, it seems less like indulgence and much more like an essential component in understanding the true power of brands.

So, what is a brand and why is it important to define both meaning and purpose? In the beginning it was about identification, ownership and origin – heraldry, cattle branding and hallmarks respectively. It could be argued that a good brand identity today, one that will stand the test of time and work hard for its owners, will be as simple and as pure as that. But the world is a faster, more complex place now. An identity must be able to reflect the changing pace and nature of its

environment and relate to the evolving needs and expectations of its audiences. An ideal brand, if there was one, would be able to adapt to the changing tides of time and place without ever compromising its core essence. It is also about how the brand operates – its job is to communicate as well as to define identity, so it must have the ability to do this in an engaging and relevant way.

### The birth of the Olympic identity

The modern Olympic Games began in 1896 in Athens, taking as their inspiration the Olympic Games of Antiquity that were held in Greece between 776BC and AD393. The original Olympic symbol was designed by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee, in 1913. He described it as 'a real international emblem', with the five rings representing the five parts of the world that were participating at that time, and the six colours (he included the white background) the colours of the nations represented.

Taking the three integral propositions of identity, ownership and origin, the Olympic Games symbol delivers brilliantly. It has lasted through turbulent and increasingly complex times, unchanged and still powerful. Since the first modern Games in 1896 right up to today, the Olympic Games have been a visual event at heart. The scale of the occasion and the ways



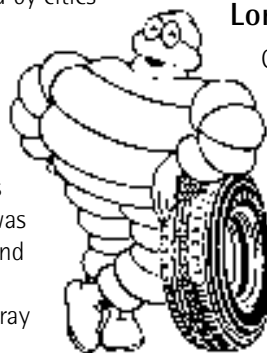
in which we experience it may have changed, but primarily we are watching people compete and excel, whether that is as a spectator on the ground or via a screen on the other side of the world. The five rings have been strong enough to withstand those changes but also dynamic enough to make the changes work for them – whatever technology or culture throws at them, they will not only survive, they will probably thrive.

After all, what other 'real international emblem' has the courage and strength to refresh its identity every four years?

### Classic brand identities

Since its creation in 1913, the Olympic rings identity has seen many variations, as the Games have been hosted by cities throughout the world. Some pointers to the successful evolution of visual identity have been provided by the world's biggest brands, which have shown how identity can evolve successfully over time.

In the same year that Baron de Coubertin was designing the five Olympic rings, R.J. Reynolds was sketching a camel called Joe. The same animal and its name appear on boxes of Camel cigarettes today, with only a brief but hugely successful foray into artistic interpretation in 1996 (above left).

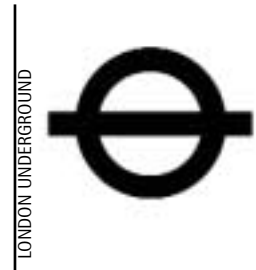
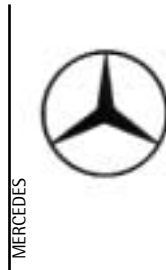


The original shell drawing for the Shell Petroleum Company, designed in 1900, was influenced by the owner's father's antique shop. It was officially redesigned in 1971 but its simplicity remains and it is one of the most widely recognised symbols in the world, despite having virtually nothing to do with the nature of the Shell business apart from the name.

A character logo, as used by Penguin Books and Michelin, can be put to work without losing its identity or message. The Penguin is instantly recognisable, even when he is dancing or falling asleep, while Michelin's Mr Bibendum manages the extraordinary feat of communicating rubber tyres and great food at the same time.

### Lords of the rings

Circles or rings have endured as symbols of strength and stability. Look at Audi's four linked circles or the Mercedes three-point star contained safely within its circle. Even the World Wide Fund for Nature's panda forms a round shape, and you can't argue with the form and function of the London Underground symbol, which has now been adopted as the logo of Transport for London.

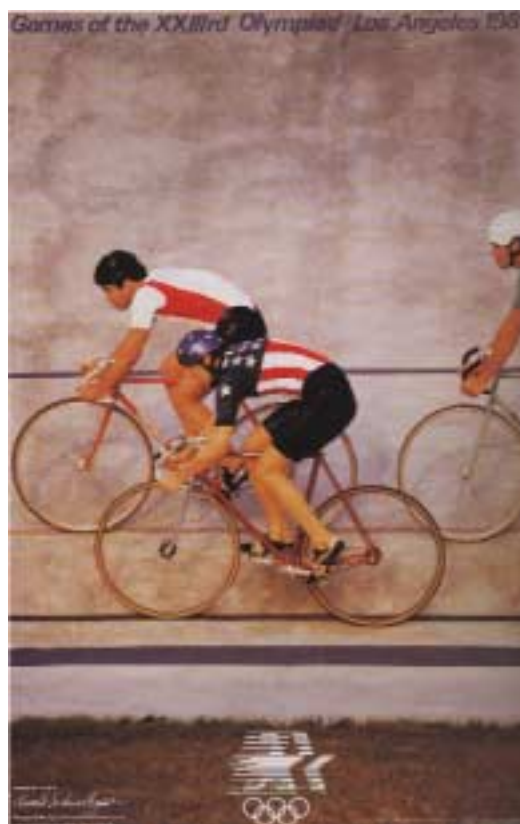


## New sporting identities

When we at Agenda Design were briefed to create a new identity for the Oval cricket ground it was about helping to build the Oval brand as a business and communicate its position as a leading sporting and entertainment venue. It is rare enough that the name of a brand offers the key, but even rarer that the shape of the product itself seconds it. By taking the name Oval and the oval shape, we were able to create a brand that was clear, direct and able to evolve.

The English Institute of Sport is where Britain trains its best athletes to be even better. Its purpose is to offer everything an athlete needs to compete on the world stage, from training to facilities. Our brief was to create an identity that would express this commitment to excellence and the excitement of reaching the ultimate athletic goal – winning. Like any good identity, it is more than just a logo, it has to act as the voice of the EIS and communicate in a way that is both relevant and engaging.

***“Circles or rings have endured as symbols of strength and stability.”***



Arnold Schwarzmann

## Five rings, many games

The five rings have proven to be a good starting point for almost all of the host cities when they deliver their own Games identities, some taking them literally, others taking a more lateral route. There is something inherently powerful about circles in design. They are both inclusive and exclusive – holding in and keeping out – but their roundness gives them approachability. Linked circles mean teamwork, and the power of unity and primary colours convey both excitement and simplicity.

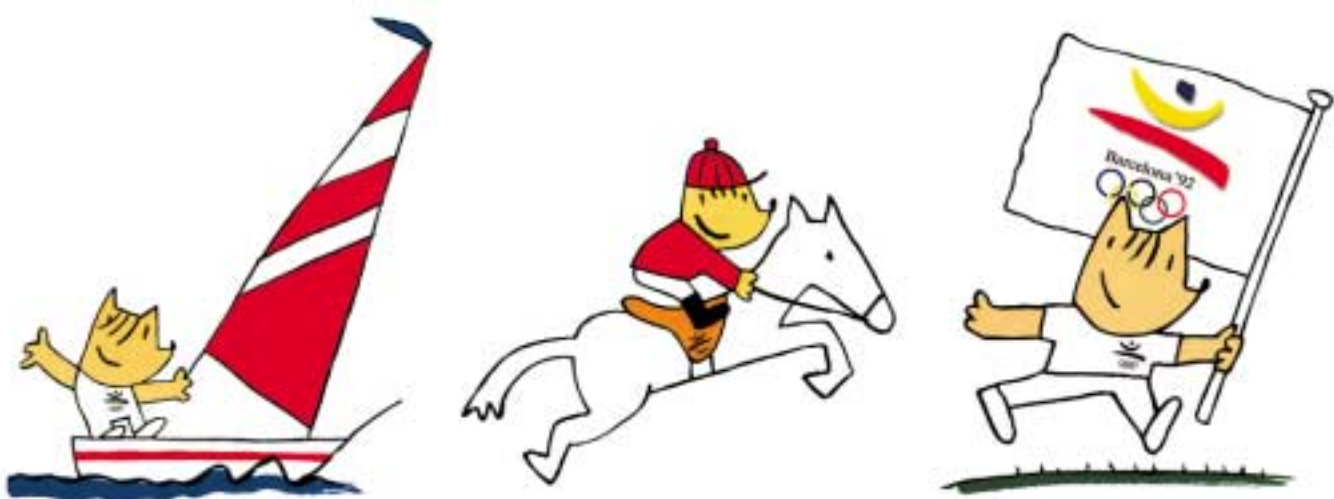
Juan Antonio Samaranch, former President of the IOC, stated that 'the IOC encourages the cities that host the Games to conceive a unique artistic design, which reflects both the local spirit and culture, and the Olympic ideals' (*The Olympic Image*, Quon Books, 1996). So any designer approaching the task of creating an identity for the Games must not only respect the Olympic symbol; they must also express the nature of the place that they will be held in, the culture of the people whose lives will be affected, and the time at which the Games will take place. The identity must live on beyond the Games themselves, delivering positive benefits to the city that has invested so much in the event.

Let's take a look at how well these requirements were met by the identities developed for three previous Olympic Games: Los Angeles 1984, Barcelona 1992 and Sydney 2000.

## Los Angeles 1984

For the Los Angeles Olympics of 1984, it was essential that the Games were presented as upbeat and positive, particularly as they were subject to a Soviet boycott that prevented 15 countries from participating. The designers compiled not just an identity but a total look, a tool kit of elements that could be applied right across the event and all of its components. There was a full visual language and a vibrant colour palette. The identity itself took the undeniably American symbolism of stars in red, white and blue and gave them Olympic movement. The five rings were in black, a bold move, but one that worked.

For an illustration of how the Olympic symbol inspired far more than an identity, look at the poster commissioned by the organising committee that focuses on cycling – the nod towards the rings isn't immediately obvious but is all the more enjoyable for that.



## Barcelona 1992

The identity created for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics looks as fresh and as exciting as it did 14 years ago. This is probably because it has real integrity. It takes its inspiration from the passion for art and design that the city is renowned for, and expresses them with vitality and purpose. The Spanish flag is broken down and becomes a leaping character, with the five rings sitting underneath, as strong as ever. Barcelona was also able to commission a series of wonderful graphic and photographic posters from its native artists.

The Barcelona Olympics will also be remembered for the success of their mascot, Cobi. Simple and lively, he was able to work hard for the Olympic brand through merchandising and licensing without losing his sense of purpose.

## Sydney 2000

It's quite a task to host the Olympic Games, but to host them in the Millennium year makes it all the more challenging. Sydney stepped up to the plate with exceptional style, delivering an identity that encapsulated the landscape, culture and architecture of Australia. The identity had to take into account place and time, and leave a legacy that would continue to live on in the city once the Games were over, and deliver benefits to all the event's stakeholders.

## London 2012: rising to the challenge

London 2012 is unprecedented – from the enormous scale of the urban regeneration project in east London to the expectations of an incredibly marketing-literate audience, the event carries great responsibility way beyond the Games themselves. In addition, there have never been so many ways for people to get involved in the Olympics, whether they like it or not. Media channels have increased and expanded, and questions are already being asked about whether the Games will really benefit the people of London who will be most affected. All eyes are on London and we really have to deliver.

The environment might well have changed, but London has risen to the challenge before. In 1908, London hosted the fourth Olympic Games, taking the event from a cash-strapped Rome at the last minute. Shepherd's Bush Stadium was built especially, housing a capacity crowd of 68,000. There was no great pageantry at the stadium itself but the posters focused on civic pride and just a touch of stiff upper lip. The medals and certificates were ornate, depicting Greek gods and goddesses.

We then had to wait until after the Second World War to host another Games. In 1948, the effects of the war were still being felt, and the atmosphere and the communication of the Games were appropriately austere. No new stadia, just a



*“In 1908, London hosted the fourth Olympic Games. In 2012, all eyes will be on London again, and we really have to deliver”*

modification of Wembley. The graphics combined the notion of the Olympic ideal and the London location by putting muscular discus throwers against a back drop of Big Ben, and there were laurel wreaths and Greek symbols aplenty. However, this was the first time that the Olympics were broadcast on television, thus increasing the viewing audience and taking the Games into a whole new world of communication.

London 2012 has already drawn controversy with its bid identity. The design community gave a very mixed response and a recent straw poll revealed that very few people could actually remember what the bid logo looked like (it was the River Thames, in case you also found it hard to recall).

Right now, we are six years away from London 2012, and any design will have to have life and relevance until at least five years after the Games – so that’s foresight and vision stretching over more than ten years. Once again, all eyes will be on the capital to see what it will deliver – not just the stadium but the character and behaviour of the Olympic brand.

**Paul Davis, Agenda Design**

While this article includes the logos of previous Olympic events, neither the author nor Locum Consulting claims any association with past or future Olympic events. Locum Consulting does not claim any association with the IOC, the British Olympic Association, London 2012 Limited, the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games or any other company or body involved with the organising and planning of the XXX Olympiad, and this publication is not intended to infer such an association.