

*Bruno Maag on an Olympic opportunity, the bizarre magic of North Korea's Mass Games and Creative Social Barcelona plus, Pick of the Month*

## Olympics Should Revert to Type

The organisers of London's Olympics have the chance to create a memorable identity scheme, with type at its heart

Earlier this year, I appeared on Tyler Brülé's TV programme, *The Desk*, to discuss the merits of the five bid logos for the 2012 Olympics. We thoroughly disliked the work created for Moscow and Paris, had divided opinions about New York, liked Madrid's, but felt that London was bland. But despite the lacklustre logo, I am glad that London has won the bid because it gives the design community a great opportunity.

The London 2012 organisation committee has enough time to do the job properly. Not only is there the opportunity to create a classic logo like Tokyo, Munich and Mexico, but there is also time to consider the entire graphic scheme of which type, my passion, can play an important part. It has happened in the past: for the 1968 Olympics, Lance Wyman and his team created a typeface that was based on the ubiquitous Mexico 68 logo. Otl Aicher applied Univers throughout in Munich 72 and Athens 2004 used Gill Sans for which a Greek version was cut specifically. But what of the future?

In 2006 Torino will host the Winter games. From the few snippets that are available it appears that Gill Sans is used but, unfortunately, the logo design and the typeface do not

seem to have been considered at the same time. Not much seems to have been defined for the Beijing games either. All the current communications feature either Arial or Verdana which is disappointing as here, again, would be an opportunity to identify the event with the printed material.

The budget for the London 2012 games stands at around £2.5 billion. Judging from past experiences this is most likely to be exceeded. However, I for one would be happy to spend an extra few pounds on my council tax if I could be certain that the organising committee will spend a tiny fraction of this budget on a typeface commission. Considering that type is one of the most fundamental building blocks of visual communications, this needs to be addressed in the very near future.

There are many aspects of a coherent typographic strategy: languages, application, distribution and accessibility, many of them inherently interlocked. Let's just examine the issue of language. So far, no Olympic organising committee has ever considered that there are people who may not speak the native language where the games are held. London, with its diverse population, is ideally placed to address this point.

Brick Lane, for instance, has its street signage in both English and Hindi and there are areas in London where English is decidedly the second language. Ideally, a London Olympic font would comprise about 55,000 characters, reflecting all the major script systems of our planet. At present, only Arial Unicode satisfies this global requirement and only in one weight. And somehow I don't think it is an appropriate choice of type for an event this prestigious.

The Olympic designers, architects and engineers should consult typographers about every application of type at the Games. We're not just talking about leaflets: signage in the Olympic Village and beyond, all printed material, electronic displays in transport stations, stadiums, websites, the numbers on the backs of athletes, all will need careful consideration. And all of it should look as if it comes from the same mould to provide a clear visual unity.

Such a variety of applications will require a reasonably large font family. It won't be any good for the lead design agency simply to look through a few type catalogues and point their finger at a typeface, most likely some sans serif. The requirements need to be discussed and analysed. It may

well be that a mixture of type styles is necessary. Personally, I find that this infatuation with sans serifs is wrong anyway. At Dalton Maag, we have recently designed a slab serif for a street signage project. Not only is the design appropriate for the client, but it also provides optimum legibility. In signage the type needs to integrate with the architectural visual language, whilst on print it will have to sit comfortably next to the required logo, colours and images.

But good design, spacing and kerning is just one aspect of a successful typeface. Equally important is its appearance for on-screen media. Again, the lead design agency and the organising committee will have to take professional advice. The suppliers of the various electronic display boards to be built will have to be educated on the merits of type. If the message still doesn't get through, they may have to be reminded of the Disability Discrimination Act which stipulates that design now has to be accessible by everyone.

Perhaps if they cannot be persuaded of the aesthetic and logistical case, the organisers should realise that considering the typography from the beginning can

save them a lot of money. Remember the work done by Johnson Banks for the Yellow Pages, where an astute redesign of the typeface provided space savings that rescued entire forests? An Olympic font with which type can be set one point size smaller will mean that the format size of printed material can be smaller, which in turn means that less paper and ink is used, and therefore money and resources saved. London 2012 could be a leader in promoting accessible and sustainable design.

It would not be the first time that London has been visionary about the use of type. Frank Pick exhibited the required foresight when, in 1917, he commissioned Edward Johnston to design the type for London Transport. This typeface is still in use today and has proved its worth many times over. Good design is not only about looking good – it is also about being functional. I hope that the organising committee is visionary enough to understand the potential of type as well as Frank Pick could. Let's not waste this fantastic opportunity. ☑

*Bruno Maag is a partner at type designers Dalton Maag and chairman of the Typographic Circle*



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