

Temporary Overlay at London 2012

Published on Friday, 01 February 2013 13:35



The outstanding success of London 2012 has escalated the discussion of 'overlay' and illustrated just what can be achieved with it, writes Jon Coxeter-Smith, director, Sagacity MCS Limited.

Our previous understanding of the meaning of the word doesn't go near to describing what happened at London 2012. We all knew that overlay was the stuff that would fall out if you turned a piece of event infrastructure - most typically a venue - upside-down and shook it and was the 'black art' that was practised by a mysterious itinerant band who only came out at night, or at least when the permanent construction was finished. What happened at London was an altogether more deliberate approach that began at the start and was integrated with the masterplanning, design and construction process to deliver a series of outcomes. So we need a new understanding to suit.

Let's think of the word instead as describing event architecture and relating to the temporary elements that are added to the more permanent to enable the operation of major sporting events or festivals. These temporary elements might be applied to an existing facility or to a newly built facility or in such a way as to create an entirely temporary facility that is dismantled and taken away after the event.

London 2012 has shown us plenty of examples so let's take a look at some of them and I'll try to draw out some of the main issues.

In the first place, the approach to overlay adopted by London 2012 allowed the organising committee to unify presentation and experience offered by a disparate infrastructure, some purpose built and some existing, excellently and economically. So the creation of new infrastructure without a longer term purpose than the Games was avoided. The infrastructure that was built for use at during the Games was also to serve the longer term objective of the social and economic regeneration of a significant area of East London.

Suppliers worked with London 2012 and its overlay designers to ensure that all temporary interventions could be achieved in lightweight form, thereby following a creed of minimising materials used and therefore the environmental footprint. There was in fact a lot more effort expended here in not only dematerialisation but in selecting and sourcing the 'right' materials to support London 2012's environmental goals.

London 2012 took further the use of temporary venues further than ever before and the credo for the

organisers 'if it has no long term use then it is temporary' is well known. But the issue of temporary venues is worth a few minutes. London 2012's approach focused on the legacy use of venues and their lifetime cost. It clearly makes sense but only because London 2012 was able to take a joined up approach to the whole cost. Rules of thumb previously said that the overlay budget is carried by the organising committee and capital infrastructure costs by ANO. In the past this fracture has led organisers to base their strategies on the use of new or existing venues and thereby minimising the pressure on their own budgets. London 2012 has shown that the most efficient strategies can emerge where stakeholders are allowed to take a joined up, holistic approach to these issues.

In order to maximise efficiency and sustainability the brief for temporary venues should focus on the Reduce>Reuse zones of the cycle. A strategy of dematerialisation and careful sourcing will minimise environmental footprint, as explained above. The subsequent reuse of components will be maximised through the selection of stock elements from suppliers' inventory. These can be returned to stock and reused several times; the number of re-uses varying according to the durability of the component.

There has been much discussion about re-locatable venues for major events. Clearly this is a great legacy story for organisers but there are issues that have not yet been cracked. In the first place re-locatable venues must be built to last; so they are built to the same standards as fixed permanent buildings with all the cost that attaches to that. Over and above this they have to be built to be easily dismantled, transported and re-erected. These additional requirements can add very considerably to the cost. For example the Chicago 2016 Olympic Bid explored the cost of buying and reusing the temporary, upper tier of the London Olympic Stadium. Viability of this approach was undermined by transportation costs.

But some of the best news coming out of London 2012 for future major event organisers' legacy and sustainability planning must be in showcasing the event architecture approach to temporary overlay. Examples like the Copper Box and Velodrome/Velo Park provide powerful illustrations of what can be achieved through integrating event architecture from the very start rather than treating overlay as something to be thought about and executed at the eleventh hour and in the dead of night. The infrastructure and venues for major events can be sustainable in the long term and created with legacy at the front of mind.

The way forward for event organisers of the future has been clearly signposted; their challenge is to develop this approach and the process of event architecture to produce even more compelling results in the future.