

PyeongChang 2018: Designing a Cold War Olympics in a Post-Ideological Age

Stephen J. Beckett¹

Although it might not excite as much passion as the sport and the spectacle, the design of the Olympics has come to be seen as a vital part of the success of any individual Games. The development of an identity program falls within the remit of the host city, and has become an important showcase of local design talent. The challenge for the design committee is to balance the global ideals of the Games with the local values of the host, whilst also establishing some historical continuity between previous Games and their present incarnation. The aim is to tie the destiny of the host to the purpose of the Games. When this purpose is clear, as it was in the decades after World War II, this task is a somewhat simpler proposition. But what is the purpose of the Olympic Games today?

Much of the meaning we associate with the modern games was accrued during the period of global reordering that followed the chaos of the second world war, when the games served as a tool of rehabilitation for cities on the wrong side of the conflict (e.g., Rome 1960, Tokyo, 1964, Munich 1972) and as a ‘coming out party’ for those debuting their economic and political maturity (Seoul 1988, Barcelona 1992). This clarity of purpose is evident in the identity program for each of the Games: the modest neo-classicism of the Rome games in 1960 (which was proof, if nothing else, that the Italians had fully gotten the fascistic vestiges of futurism out of their system) quickly progressed, via Tokyo and Mexico City, to Otl Aicher’s² iconic high modernist design program for the Munich games in 1972. It is in Aicher’s identity program that the spirit of the Games meets the ideals of early globalization most harmoniously, giving an urbane flavor to the global capitalist order by casting it in an updated form of the geometric minimalism made famous by the designers of the Bauhaus. The Games were thus clothed in the principles of modernism – universality and rationality unsullied by history and place – and so thoroughly that the tit-for-tat boycotts by superpowers in 1980 and ’84 seemed little more than childish bickering.

¹ Stephen J Beckett teaches design theory and history in the department of Visual Communication Design at Hongik University.

² For more information on Otl Aicher, See: History of Design, accessed via: <http://www.historygraphicdesign.com/the-age-of-information/the-international-typographic-style/172-otl-aicher>.

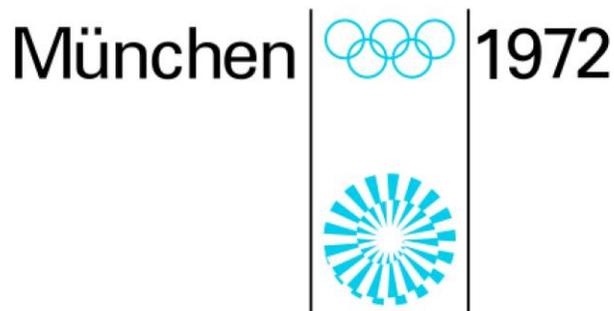


Figure 1. 1972 Munich Summer Olympics Logo.

It took the end of history to bring the period of focused and distinctive Olympic design to a close. Once the Soviet Union collapsed and the modernist Olympic spirit had nothing against which to weigh itself, the generating principle of its identity programs was lost. Postmodernism had little to offer an event so wedded to sincerity, and so Olympic design retreated into ‘local flavor’ (Sydney 2000, Beijing 2008) and ‘low effort’ (Athens 2004). It was not until 2012 that Olympic identity regathered its confidence with a memorable (if much derided) program for the London Games conceived very much in the ‘corporate rebrand’ idiom. The London program abandoned the stale idealism of the post-war Games for a full-blooded place branding effort, thus acknowledging the Games’ contemporary pretext: redeveloping swathes of city real estate and drawing inflows of global investment capital.

But how might an Olympic host frame its identity when historical conflict still very much determines its political reality? This was of course the challenge faced by the design committee of the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, a venue but an hour’s drive from the world’s last remaining cold war border. Any ambition to pitch South Korea as a hypermodern, globally connected economy was bound always to be hampered by association with the atavistic and belligerent curiosity to the north. How might some separation be achieved without alienating Pyongyang or betraying the apolitical facade of the Games? A brazenly post-ideological stance might have worked for Beijing in 2008, but it would ill fit South Korea’s much vaunted democratic progress. Similarly, a busy, vibrant, youthful look might be appropriate for London or Rio, but would strike a wholly false tone in the comparatively homogenous and socially conservative South Korea.

In the light of these circumstances, it should not be surprising that the identity program for PyeongChang represented something of a return to high modernist values. In its cautious geometric minimalism, it more closely resembles the design of the 1972 Munich Games than any more recent program. But there is nothing mannered about this approach – there is nothing ‘retro’ or ‘hipsterish’ about this reversion to the language of modernism. It is more what we might call ‘Aicher-by-way-of-Google’ – a sincere attempt to contemporize the minimalist aesthetics of the Munich program. Hence PyeongChang’s custom typeface is an unassuming modern sans serif. There is no Korea flag; no *taeguk* (a prominent feature of the 1988 Seoul identity program). In fact, there is no ‘local flavor’ at all, save for the prominent use of two Hangeul glyphs. These, however, are not rendered in a predictable ‘Oriental’ brush and ink style (*cf.* Beijing 2008 and 2022), but as strict geometric forms.



Figure 2. 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics Logo.

If it seemed somewhat anonymous upon its unveiling, it is because it was a program that was reluctant to commit to a predetermined set of meanings. Instead, it waited for the turn of events to confer meaning upon it. It was form awaiting its content. It was history that constrained Aicher to ahistoric forms in his design for the 1972 Olympics, for neither the hosts nor visitors were ready for any version of German identity that evoked tradition or past. The PyeongChang program was constrained for wholly different reasons, but was alike in that it turned away from the past that it might be consciously open to the future – compare once again the Seoul ‘88 Olympic program, which is more assertive of Korean identity and more monumental in its attitude, and therefore seems less ‘open to the future’ and more ‘tomorrow belongs to me.’

The risk of this approach is that relinquishing control of meaning is a gamble against circumstance. In 1972, it was tragic content that filled that form, with the meaning of the Munich Olympics forever tied in popular consciousness to the murder of Israeli athletes. In 2018, however, events were more fortuitous. The content that filled the form of the identity program was largely made up of images of inter-Korean cooperation, such as North and South Korean athletes entering the opening ceremony as a single group, and Moon Jae-in and Kim Yo-jong watching the opening ceremony together, dressed – coincidentally, but no less fortuitously – in the colors of the two PyeongChang Olympic mascots, Soohorang and Bandabi. The Games proved something of a turning point in diplomatic relations between the two nations that might otherwise have not been possible absent the exceptional sense of occasion that an international sporting event can confer. But these images could not have been predicted in advance. Indeed, in the months leading up to the Games, North Korea gave little notice of its intention to attend. Other national teams suggested that they might withdraw on the basis of fears for their safety on the basis of *worsening* inter-Korean relations.

So the warm glow of *détente* was only inscribed into the PyeongChang identity program retroactively. This meaning was not ‘designed in.’ But it was only because the program was somewhat empty of content prior to the event that it was receptive to the inscription of this meaning. Had the design committee adopted a more determined approach to an agreed set of meanings ahead of time, an opening for circumstance might never have existed. Caution and circumspection on the part of the design committee paid handsome dividends because it forewent the low-hanging fruit of place branding for a higher and nobler prize. In doing so, the Olympic Games temporarily regained its prior sense of purpose and possibility.

The design program alone was not solely responsible for this moment of clarity. At best, it was a catalyst for chains of events begun elsewhere. But its clean modernist identity program indicated an attitude of openness and idealism that allowed events to happen as they did. In years to come, the PyeongChang program will likely stand out as a one-time departure from a long slide into increasingly cynical city branding campaigns.