

Edited transcript of interview with Jonathan Nolan, Program Manager, Image, SOCOG (Sydney Organising Committee of the Olympic Games), re the look and image of the Sydney 2000 Games.

Interviewed by Anne Maria Van De Ven and Peter Cox,
Curators, Powerhouse Museum, on 8 November 2000.

Could you start by telling us a bit about your background and leading up to how you got involved in the Olympics?

I am originally from Dublin. I moved from Dublin in 1985 to London. I worked in London for 12 years in the design industry there and in retail design and graphic design. Trained originally in architecture in Dublin and never worked as an architect, thank God. Came here on a holiday in 1993 when Australia won the bid in September, the 29th. I was here when they won the bid. I went back to London; didn't want to go back, and decided I was going to come back and live here. And I came back to live in Sydney. I didn't come back for the Olympic Games, but that was something

that I had always been obsessed with. So I came back and lo and behold I got this job as an Image Program Manager for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. So I have always been obsessed with the Olympic Games themselves and am a mad sports person, so it is the ideal job. So that's how I got involved.

My involvement has been as Program Manager for Image, in charge of all the design elements for the Games, be they graphic, industrial, 3D, temporary architectural installations, and involved in the fine art designer posters. Anything to do with any graphic representation of the Games. Image is in charge of making sure that the vision for the

Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games is carried through in any area of design and that includes sponsors, licensees and any concessionaries. So if Mr Hamburger is selling hamburgers, we make sure that he looks ... has a consistent identity for the Games that we are all happy with. He can't roll up in his Easter Show garb and just look like he is part of the Olympics. It has to be distinctly Olympic.

And did you have a vision for the way you perceived the Games to look at all, when you first came into the position?

I think I had a vision of what Australia was. I think Australia bowled me over when I first came here and it was full of amazing and bizarre images. I remember being at Coogee Beach and seeing people marching up and down in a surf carnival, big fat blokes and these young kids, all lifesavers. And we all had to stand up on the beach, because the Governor-General was there and they played the national anthem – in our cossies. And it was like, hang on a second, this is just

so bizarre and the Scottish piping band marched up and down the beach. But no-one else thought it was weird. I think that was the perspective that I think was able to say, 'Well, hang on a second, you all think this is normal, but it's not, it's weird'.

When I watched the Games in Atlanta, they were trying to make the Games sort of slightly Greek, trying to make the Games reverential. It was a hundred years of history of the Olympic games, the centenary Games. And Atlanta doesn't have any huge history of Olympism. America doesn't have that sort of history. And they don't even have that mad obsession with sport, which Australia has. So that is all they could draw upon. In the deep south, what do you draw upon for the Olympics? It is quite difficult. They actually create a Greek identity in a way, be it contemporary. But here there is an obsession with sport, there was the outdoor lifestyle, there was that sort of larrikin 'let's take the piss out of the Games' sort of attitude. That is evident in *The Games*

television programs. We weren't going to take it seriously, because it was taken too seriously in Atlanta, and that takes the spirit out of it all. You have to make it fun, and that is what Australia is going to do. So that was the starting point, trying make everything much more relaxed, much more outgoing, much more involving in that sort attitude, that larrikinism and that sort of silliness. We revere our sports heroes, but we still like to make fun of them. Those people are lifesavers on the beach but they look silly, it's that sort of edge that I really liked.

So that was the starting point. It sort of developed in a different way. When you look at the graphics, we talk about our fluid graphic being the meeting of the Olympic spirit and the spirit of Sydney. So essentially you take that reverential symbol and make it all wibbly wobbly and a bit silly. Make it Australian, like drowning it in the water of Sydney Harbour, we say. It's the meeting of one and the other. You don't take it

seriously. We take the sport very seriously, but we don't take ourselves seriously. So that was our slant on everything that we did and it's evident there in the graphics.

When you were pitching that say to the IOC, did use that sort of language, that we're not taking it seriously?

No, no you can't do that. I still think they don't understand a lot of the stuff that we did. You can't explain a lot of the stuff to a lot of people overseas, the closing ceremony, all those wacky things and people coming in on thongs and whatever. But it didn't matter, which is great because the Games are good and we understood it and we knew what we were doing. So when you are pitching it to other people, you talk in reverential terms, when in fact you're just making it quirky, making it silly. I mean our Mambo poster which is called *Smashed-in pig face* is a great demonstration of that. It has an Olympic message: 'They also win that fall behind' – so it's not the winning, it's the taking part,

but it's a picture of flying thongs across the sky, that only we would understand. Thongs and things with bright garish colours. No one in Lausanne would understand what we are going on about there.

And what were some of the other exciting projects that you were involved with?

The biggest thing in design is all of the graphics stuff for the Games. The original thing to do with that was the *Image guidelines manual*, which is huge. It is setting up the identity and the whole ambience for the whole Games and where they are going to go. The exciting thing was picking colours and we had to choose colours in 1996 and 1997 that what we thought were going to be relevant in 2000.

When you say we, who was that?

The designers (FHA), people in here and there are people who do colour forecasting around the world and make millions for it. I have given lectures to these people in 1998 to say come along and tell us what you think the colours are

going to be for 2000. We choose them. It's funny because in LA in 1992 the pastels and that whole Memphis thing was going on, and because people saw them there they thought, 'Oh that's fashionable'. Things take off that way. You're sort of dictating what the colours are going to be like.

So what were the colours?

Well, lime green. We have the three colours in our logo: Sydney blue, which is a deep blue; red and the yellow, which is quite a golden yellow, rich. None of the colours could ever be pastel, that's what we decided; they were going to be really bold. There is a lovely quote, which I will get for you from a book called *Mosaic*, about someone who came here. She felt she'd left the pastel colours behind her and she came to the world of shocking hues. That's the feeling that it has to be. And with the light here, particularly banners outside, we really wanted bright colours.

So they were the three colours, red, yellow and blue. And then we had our hot colours like rubine red,

lime green and the deep purple and vivid orange. The other colours we have white, obviously, which backdrops a lot of things, and silver. It was very important that we weren't going to use gold as part of our identity. We felt that it was not a new millennium metallic colour. Gold is very much a colour they used in Atlanta, trying to make things reverential and they used it with a deep green, they call a teal colour. Much more old fashioned, sort of gilding effect, whereas we are much more playful. Silver, with our whole idea of nautical architecture; whites, when you look at Darling Harbour, Phillip Cox's architecture, all of that. Much more silver nautical sort of feel. The colours in the look that we used together, we used a rubine red with lime and we used the orange with the cyan blue. We actually have four blues in total, but they were all very, very vivid cyan, indigo, Sydney blue and I can't remember the name of it, it's in the manual.

When it finally got to the ceremonies – we didn't have much

involvement there. The ceremonies were a complete mystery and were meant to be a mystery. I was delighted to see that whole larrikin thing come out in the ceremony. But just looking at the venues when they were dressed and looking at the colours in Sydney. When the Olympic Arts Festival banners went up and they were a violent orange and a chocolate purple, and they looked fabulous. And we had weeks of sunshine, that made me really happy. And you can do so much just with colour. I was just so happy for the weather to be good.

How did your work coalesce with the work of the people at the OCA involved with the look?

Well there was no involvement in look or design of the Olympic Games with the OCA at all, until the last year. I worked very closely with Susie Grierson, who's in charge of the look of the Games, which is basically the manufacture and installation of all the look. And when I started, on my first day in 1996, I was sitting beside Susie Grierson, who was also in charge of

the marketing department at that stage. So I was working very closely with her from day one. I was told by the marketing department, because she was moving over to Venues, where the whole look team was going. I sucked everything out of her brain, so that I knew everything that she knew. Which was like, 'Oh, OK, who is this person?'

She went over to Venues and it wasn't until 2000 that the look of the Games area was taken over by OCA. So I had no involvement with them and look until 2000. The reason, as far as I can understand, why it went there was just a budgetary thing to be where the money would be coming from.

Main job involvement to begin with was when we were trying push through, before the OCA took over the look of the Games program, trying to push through the large clubby structures. We had to convince them that they were a good thing to do, because the feeling that we got from the people who built the site was that they

didn't want it spoiled by these wacky things, violent colours things 'making it all silly, Jonathan'. In fact: 'It's pristine architecture, and isn't it beautiful?'. There has always been that difference, between architecture and actually putting on an event. A stadium is a stadium, I don't care where it is or how beautiful it is. It is not the stadium that you go to see, you go to see the event and we are the dressers for the event. So when you are watching an event you are watching the background of the set, you are not looking at the building that you are in, the theatre.

No you look at those when they are empty.

Exactly, I mean that is how architectural photography always photographs places, empty. I hate that, because you want to photograph things when they are busy and when they are working. You can make anything look wonderful when it's empty. We were embracing that whole mess of what the Games actually are, and let's take it a step further and

make it sillier and make it more over the top, more colourful. That's the only way you can deal with it.

Coming from Ireland, where you originally studied, is the culture quite different there?

I think there is an affinity between the Irish and the Australians because it just like 'Go for it!'. It's just an 'Oh it doesn't matter, just do it' attitude, 'It will be all right' sort of attitude. Do it and don't worry. I don't know what it is. I don't miss London, because it's not like that in London. There is that sort of attitude in everything here. Yeah, look, 'We'll go for a barbie, who cares if it rains?', and it's just a bit of laugh. It's an attitude and I think we need to carry that attitude into the visual. Not worry about corporate things. We need to get out of that staid atmosphere. Everyone does it. Museums do it, galleries do it. You don't have to be completely just thinking about business.

When you were talking about dressing the venues, you reminded me of something

about blue being suitable for television. How much did the needs of television inform your work?

Well everything we do on the fields of play is meticulously checked from all television angles, because we are dressing it for that audience of four to five billion, we are not dressing it for the people in the stadium. That's a secondary audience. It's a television audience that we concentrate on first of all. Blue is the best backdrop for moving objects, particularly people.

Is that something that you decide, is that your opinion?

Oh, definitely no. SOBO are Sydney Olympic Broadcasting Organisation. If they could have their way, everything would be blue, everything. They weren't very fond of pink and lime green when it is on the camera, but when you see it, it is high up in the stadium and it won't be there on the camera at the field of play at eye level. We tested all of those colours with them on camera in very different circumstances and they

very much directed as to which way it was going to go. That is why we had four blues, so we can make things work. If you look at Bondi Beach volleyball, with our shocking bright Sydney blue on the sand, it looks fabulous in that the bright light. And then with fencing, it's an indoor thing, it was much more reverential; we used a deeper blue, but the beach is still blue and whenever we did something with tone on tone we would get it checked with SOBO as well, to make sure with our cameras, we would adjust it, we'd tweak it. The cameras now can adjust things themselves. If they had their way, we would never speak to them, we would just leave everything in blue.

You seem very young to have been appointed on such a major project.

It surprised me too.

May I ask how old you were when you first were appointed?

Thirty-two. I have been here four years and I am thirty-six now. I think, if I can explain this, I think the good thing about marketing, I

understand marketing, and they were the people interviewing me. And the good thing was they seemed to be interested in my retail background, you know, wacky Christmas window displays and things like that. I knew about graphics and I was excited about being an Australian, but I think that if there was anything that got me the job – it was my second interview was with them.

It took about three hours and they didn't look as much at my portfolio, which I was really surprised at, or my previous work. It was just really a talk.... And then I had to call the agency to say how I thought I went. And she said to me, 'So how do you think you went?'. I said I thought I went OK, but I was disappointed they didn't look at my portfolio much or whatever, and she said, 'Well, I think you went very well because they have rung up and given you the job'.

I want to know what I did; there must have been some freaky thing in the air.