

XX Olympic Winter Games monument, Torino 2006 Proposal by Hans van Houwelingen

The Olympic ideal

"The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part. The essential in life is not conquering but fighting well". This has been fundamental to the Olympic credo since 1908 and is invariably quoted every time the Games are held. The bond between athletes symbolizes the solidarity of all people and of all nations worldwide – an ideal expressed in sport, comradeship and fair play.

Deciding what constitutes fair play and monitoring adherence to it is an important requirement, perhaps even the mainstay, of the Olympic ideal. The ideal itself is inviolable, but the way people go about striving for it is subject to dynamic change.

Olympic blood

The amateur status of all who took part in the Olympics used to be considered essential for fair play. Nowadays the emphasis has shifted to a requirement on all athletes to have the same biochemical constitution. Keeping pace with sport itself, dope testing has grown into a scientific and technological discipline that can never rest on its laurels. Testing programs are intended to eliminate unsportsmanlike practices and thus to underwrite the athletic performance. Yet despite all effort expended on testing, drug-taking scandals continue to mar the image of competitive sport.

My design for a monument for the XX Olympic Winter Games springs from the thought that athletes are required to give blood samples – not just to eliminate the rare cheats but to guarantee the integrity of all participants. Giving blood has become an explicit gesture of fraternity and sportsmanship.

For this monument, each of the 2,500 participants in the XX Winter Olympics will be asked to provide a blood sample. The samples will be preserved for eternity in a thirteen-meter long silver shrine, sited in the lake of Arata Isozaki's park, the Piazza d'Armi. Each sample will be preserved in a glass vial encased in a silver canister. The interior of the shrine is designed to house 2,500 of these canisters arranged in rows.

A silver monument – a modern reliquary

Erection of the monument will symbolize a sporting turning point for the city of Turin – the Winter Olympics of 2006. My design focuses on the Olympic credo from the viewpoint of the contemporary realities of sport.

With the passage of years, the monument will acquire a cultural function as well, that of a contemporary reliquary. The relics, the blood samples of the athletes of 2006, will survive into the future as tangible evidence of a piece of Olympic history.

In twenty or thirty years time, sports and science are likely to have undergone such huge developments that the Olympic blood samples of today will have an inspirational and perhaps even a scientific value. The monument will thus maintain a relevance while forever celebrating the achievements of the Olympic athletes of 2006. It is for this reason that the shrine must be made of pure silver. As an Olympic reliquary, its high material and immaterial values will continue to command attention in future years.

Rules and logistics

Medical, regulatory and logistic factors clearly make it impossible for an independent outsider to collect blood samples from athletes during the games. Blood is after all a controversial material and must be treated with respect.

The cautious attitude of the agencies responsible for blood sampling and analysis was evident when I approached them during preparation of my plan. With a view to establishing some idea of the feasibility of this monument, I held extensive conversations with the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in Montreal, the overarching organisation for the regulation of drug testing during the Olympic Games. Rune Andersen, WADA's Director for Standards and Harmonization, indicated the existence of possibilities for modifying the present regulations to allow for the collection of supplementary blood samples for an Olympic Monument. Mr. Andersen agreed in principle that, if the City of Turin were to request WADA for their involvement in this respect, WADA would be prepared to co-operate.

My enquiries from doctors at the Slotervaart Hospital, Amsterdam and at the Amsterdam Blood Bank established that small quantities of blood in dried form can be preserved almost indefinitely. The exact means of collecting and conserving the samples would of course have to be decided in consultation with the medical agencies involved.

Publicity

Good planning could make introduction of the XX Winter Olympic Games Monument into a successful publicity event. Assuming the media and public can be convinced during the runup to the Games that this monument is intended to transmit a message about the purity of Olympic sport and its athletes, there will be ample opportunities for generating additional publicity. The aim should be to create an atmosphere in which all who strive for sporting honour in the XX Winter Olympics will willingly co-operate in realization of the monument. All 2,500 athletes will be invited to donate a small, anonymous blood sample to symbolize the Olympic ideal, thereby fostering worldwide awareness of the idealistic aims of the 2006 Winter Games in Turin.

Location and form

A first-time visitor to Turin may be surprised at how richly the city is endowed with high-quality baroque architecture and sculpture. An Olympic monument which relied solely on its visual qualities for impact would pale into insignificance amid the host of splendidly sculpted monuments. Inspired by the muted but intense symbolism of the world's most famous relic, the Turin Shroud, I concluded that a conceptual approach and a concept-driven choice of materials would be essential for any work of art reflecting the significance of the XX Olympic Winter Games to the city of Turin.

Following Arata Isozaki's decision to match the height of the new ice hockey arena to that of the existing stadium, my design for the proposed monument takes a similar approach: a low, horizontal form, aligned towards the tower, above the water of the elongated pool. The tower, the only vertical element present, articulates the centre of a horizontal triangle with corners marked by the two Olympic facilities and the Olympic Monument.

The thirteen-meter long shrine will be inscribed all around with the names of the Olympic winter disciplines, the Olympic rings and the emblem of the XX Olympic Winter Games 2006. The shrine will be made of pure silver – an unusual material, of course, for a large outdoor sculpture. The intrinsic value of this monument should be sufficiently great to attract amazement and publicity in its own right. Desirably, the silver should be well maintained and cleaned annually; this will in itself add a new aesthetic layer to the monument, as it acquires an ever richer patina of human solicitude.

I hope my design will convince you of the necessity of giving a fresh impulse to the concept of an Olympic Monument, and of the worthwhile challenge this will entail.

Hans van Houwelingen