

Warning to London 2012: Decide now or pay later

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Olympic Games organisers are being warned to make key decisions now about the long-term use of the 2012 stadium - or face costs that will spiral out of control.

Professor of Engineering Project Management at the University of Leeds, Denise Bower, has found a link between the way decisions are made about the design and building of iconic structures and the likelihood that these are built within the agreed expenditure and timescale. Her study showed that where several parties come together to form a client group there can be clashes between what each member expects from the project.

Professor Bower says: "Unlike the building of simpler public structures such as a school or hospital there are often incompatible expectations for an iconic building that can lead to spiralling costs," says Professor Bower. "For example, a football club will want to create a striking image to raise their profile whereas the local council may want a project that will aid regeneration in the area.

"The challenge for the Olympic delivery team and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is to marry the aspirations of all those involved in this project and complete the job within the estimated timescale and cost. But our research shows that if decisions are not made and stuck to along the way this becomes almost impossible. Given the current economic climate this need for concrete decisions is even greater."

The researchers also discovered that even when firm decisions have been

taken there is often a failure for clients and contractors to communicate - a problem that can lead to further escalation of cost. This failure arises partly because the clients involved may have had no previous experience of construction projects.

The study initially compared the processes and costs involved in the development of Arsenal's Emirates stadium and the new Wembley site. With these projects, the Emirates completed on time and within budget, whereas the Wembley project went over-budget and exceeded the expected timescale for completion.

Other sports stadia, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly buildings were also included to gain further insight into how such large-scale projects are managed.

Co-researcher and engineering PhD student, Bernard Aritua, says, "Iconic structures are seen as a legacy, so the approach to building them is unique. In cases where public funding is involved the client often fails to communicate fully the real aims of the project for fear of a public backlash. Consequently they leave themselves open to constant changes to both the concept and the design, with each change potentially leading to an escalation in cost."

Source: University of Leeds

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