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# Leader & Comment

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## Leader The Olympic Park art proposal proves how little we know about public space, says *Kieran Long*

The competition to build a monument in the Olympic Park in East London is another example of how identity and public life are misunderstood by those creating public spaces today. People involved in the Olympics will tell you that the most significant legacy of the event will be the creation of the largest new public park in Europe (size is important to the Olympics). But the announcement of the shortlist to build a stupidly large sculpture there reveals how little they understand of the creation of meaningful monuments.

Contemporary public space is characterised by DDA compliancy, environmental cosmetics and, when none of that serves to create a place that anyone identifies with, we build a huge piece of public art in the hope that it will endow the neutral ground with

meaning. There are lots of excuses for this, but my argument is that in masterplanning, landscaping and commissioning terms we have little or no depth of thinking, and almost no idea of what a meaningful public space is in our contemporary world.

But there are lots of people who do. I have two books on my desk that have theorised public space and monuments in a sophisticated and subtle way. *Intimate Metropolis* (Routledge, 2008) tries to understand public space in the context of globalisation and the web, taking as read that the boundaries between public and private are now blurred, and looking at how this trend has been expressed by architects, sculptors, technologists, cartographers and photographers.

More recently, enterprising group This

Is Not A Gateway (Deepa Naik and Trenton Oldfield) released *Critical Cities* (Myrdle Court Press, 2009), which includes compelling essays about public space in relation to park benches, local cafés and Bollywood cinemas, all of which contain more meaning and beauty than any new Gormley is likely to give us.

When Boris Johnson's spokesman boneheadedly says, as he did this week, that the mayor wants 'stunning, ambitious, world-class art' in the Olympic Park, the authors of these books must knit their brows. When are we going to start using the intellectual and artistic power of people who are involved in the contemporary debate about what public space should be, rather than resorting to the same old clichés, and an approved supplier list of superstar artists? [kieran.long@emap.com](mailto:kieran.long@emap.com)