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MUSEUMS

Is the British Museum heading east to London's Olympic park?

Smithsonian trustees due to meet today to decide whether to open satellite in Stratford

by MARTIN BAILEY | 11 April 2016



Stratford Waterfront development in the Olympic Park site. LLDC © Allies and Morrison Architects

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The Smithsonian Institution is facing a crucial decision on whether to proceed with its first location outside the US. The satellite, on the former Olympic site in East London, would present highlights from its 19 constituent museums in Washington, DC, and New York.

Even if the Smithsonian pulls out of the project, another museum is waiting in the wings. The British Museum is now considering taking up space at Olympicopolis. The £850m cultural hub will also include a branch of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), a new dance theatre for Sadler's Wells and a campus for the University of the Arts London.

The Smithsonian's trustees are due to meet today, 11 April, to discuss the future of their Olympicopolis project. There will be "an announcement, whichever way it goes", a spokeswoman for the Smithsonian says.

Although she declined to go into detail, the institution is believed to be concerned about the long-term commitment and financial implications of such an ambitious foreign venture. During a presidential election year, it is complicated for a federally funded body like the Smithsonian to make such a crucial decision.

Nevertheless, those involved with Olympicopolis in London are becoming frustrated that the Smithsonian has not yet made a firm commitment. The UK institutions secured leases for the site late last year, but the Smithsonian's wavering could cause delays in construction. A Smithsonian spokeswoman says that 16 months of discussion is "not that long" for a project of this magnitude.

When the Smithsonian first revealed its plans in July 2014, it said that it would proceed only if UK sources committed at least \$50m. That sum has been raised by private donors including Michael Hintze, a UK-based hedge funder, who promised \$10m. Lakshmi Mittal, whose steel company paid for Anish Kapoor's ArcelorMittal Orbit tower near the Olympic stadium, is also a likely contributor.

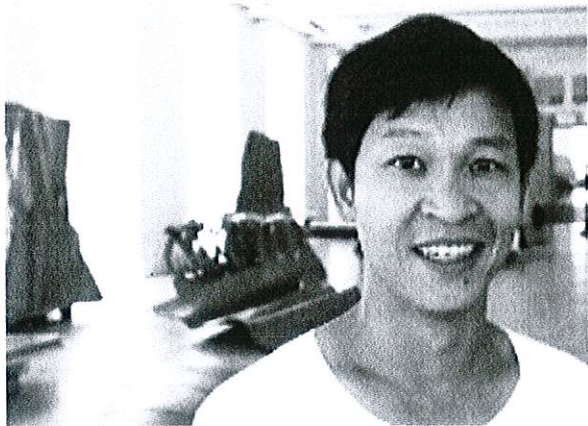
Boris Johnson, the mayor of London, is very keen on the Smithsonian's involvement, partly because he believes that loans from the institution's Air and Space Museum would prove popular. Johnson, however, will be stepping down as mayor in May.

Meanwhile, preliminary plans for Olympicopolis are complete. Two residential towers of 30 and 40 storeys will help subsidise the cultural projects. Construction is scheduled to start in 2018; the cultural complex is due to open in 2022.

The UK Treasury has committed £141m and the Greater London Authority is expected to

provide £198m. A newly established charity, Foundation for FutureLondon, needs to raise £180m for the project, of which at least £45m has been pledged for the Smithsonian.

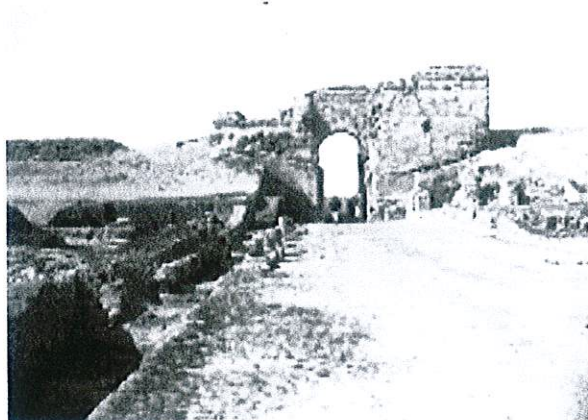
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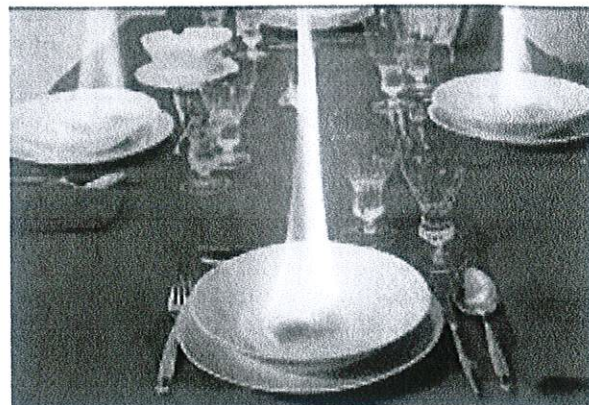
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