

# Why London's Millennium Dome has been a disaster

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London's "Millennium Dome," first proposed by John Major's Conservative government, was supposed to unite the nation on the eve of the new century.

Tory propaganda was that the Dome was part of the antidote to Britain's "damaged culture, with low self-esteem, shrinking pride and a diminishing position in the world". It would be a statement of "optimism for the future," they promised.

As with most of its policies since taking office in 1997, the Blair government adopted Conservative plans for the Dome and gave them its own twist. Prime Minister Tony Blair said the Dome would provide a "People's Show" that would celebrate a "new Britain". It would be the "greatest show on earth", he enthused, inspiring in people "memories so strong that it will give them that abiding sense of purpose and unity that stays with them through the rest of their lives".

But the Dome has been a disaster ever since it opened on New Year's Eve. Only half the projected 12 million people the Dome was meant to attract are now expected to visit. Some £538 million of national lottery money has been poured into the project and the Dome's private promoters and sponsors have fallen out with one another, threatening to sue for compensation. In opinion polls, the majority of people think the Dome a complete waste of time and money.

To try and establish why a symbol meant to celebrate Britain had met with so much apathy and overt hostility I decided to go and see the exhibition for myself.

Rather than the "Great Exhibition" of 1851, when Britain ruled the waves and the sun never set on its Empire, the Dome seems more like a sorry reprise of the 1951 Festival of Britain, a "tonic to the nation" that had just emerged from the horrors of World War II. While its architecture is almost a clone of the 1951 "Dome of Discovery," at least the earlier structure was not burdened with the need to provide advertising space for corporate sponsors.

As I walked out of North Greenwich Underground station I could see the thin yellow masts that hold up the Dome's roof in front of me. From outside the building resembles a large circus tent. The roof itself seems to hug the ground. It

was later pointed out to me that this is unusual, as most celebratory monuments soar confidently into the sky.

So it seemed from the start of my visit that the Dome could not be, as the brochure explained, a symbol of optimism and hope in a world of "anxiousness and disorientation".

After paying the extortionate £20 entrance fee (£57 for a family)—a not insignificant factor in the low attendance—I entered the Dome's main area. The brochure tells us the Dome is the world's largest enclosed space. It is the size of 10 cathedrals and some of the most talented architects, artists and designers have been involved.

I did indeed feel a sense of lightness and space and I appreciate the ingenuity that created this sensation using the minimum of materials. However, all that empty space seems to be reflected in the absence of any ideas and insight that could really address people's "anxiousness and disorientation".

Nowhere is this more obvious than at the theatrical show held in the Dome's central arena, and meant to address ecological issues. To fill the massive amphitheatre and prevent the actors being dwarfed, the producers have filled it with banners and acrobats that unfurl and descend from the roof. As the show progresses the stage moves up to meet them, its red supporting girders unfolding beneath it. Fireworks and music fill the air. The story tells how Ion, ruler of the greedy industrial world, tries to separate his sister Sophia (representing Earth) and her lover Skyboy. Eventually Ion is destroyed and Sophia and Skyboy fly away, "symbolising the union of two uncertain worlds and the strength of a future where division is ended". It is all incredibly banal and does not even hint at any genuine environmental concerns.

Around the central arena the Dome is divided into zones representing different themes. "The Living Island Zone" continues the theatrical show's environmental theme. It is based around a British beach scene and I was made to feel more like a naughty schoolchild there. All around are signs telling you to "pick up your litter", "use less water", "don't waste energy". They also inform the spectator that "our

behaviour is the cause of environmental problems” and we must take individual responsibility. “Living Island” is, in short, no more insightful or thought provoking than the adventures of Sophia and Skyboy.

The City of London Corporation’s “Money Zone” bewails a world of unpredictable wars, financial markets and natural disasters but offers no solution. Instead it asks the only question of import for Britain’s financial elite, “Who wants to be a millionaire?”, before answering, “We all do”.

One or more corporate giant sponsor nearly all the other zones. Adam Nicolson, a *Daily Telegraph* columnist, outlined his rose-tinted view of the reasoning behind this commercial sponsorship in his laudatory book, *Regeneration: The Story of the Dome*. “Business and government were all acting to the same agenda fuelled by their own researches into people’s priorities—social inclusiveness and education. Business was not the enemy of a healthy and inclusive society but was centrally interested in those goals themselves.... The modern cultural elite does not set itself at a distance either from business or from the socially and culturally deprived. It aims to bridge the gap.”

Recruitment and temp agency Manpower are responsible for the Work Zone. Sarah Henwood, Manpower’s marketing director, was more forthright about the interests her company was looking for. Its aim was “to get as much commercial and brand value as possible. I am there to get commercial advantage for our brand.... You don’t want to stick it in their gullets but you do want to stick it in their minds.”

It was Manpower’s “Work Zone” that most shocked my companion—now retired from a lifetime of work. The “Work Zone” and supermarket chain Tesco’s “Learning Zone” are a single entity, pleading with us to “Experience the excitement of work in the future”. My companion emerged neither excited nor looking forward to the prospects of old age. The Dome’s message was that unless people keep on “acquiring skills” and are prepared to “work flexibly”, they cannot hope to find work and keep it. Who knows, it goes on, if you’re lucky, maybe you too could be the boss one day. No wonder that Trades Union Congress leader John Monks has spoken of the union movement’s enthusiasm for these zones.

I found retail chain Marks and Spencer’s “Self Portrait Zone” the most interesting. The organisers asked people to send in photographs of themselves with a few words saying what it means to be British. There are thousands of these photographs, some making up a circular 78-metre collage by the artist David Mach that depicts a dreamlike landscape of Britain. Display boards portray the British as creative and honourable, a nation that unites in adversity, embraces other cultures and can laugh at itself.

Yet in the middle of this eulogy to Labour’s “new modern

patriotism” are six works by the satirist Gerald Scarfe. His deliberately grotesque sculptures seem to mock everything around them. Scarfe says he “was brought in to say, Yes we the British are great BUT...” Several of his original sculptures were rejected for being too controversial, but those remaining still take visitors aback. His *Lion and Unicorn* sculpture, showing an emaciated Tony Blair and a dowdy Queen Elizabeth II is a biting comment on New Labour’s “Cool Britannia” propaganda. Scarfe says *The Thug* represents “the violence underlying the thin veneer of civilisation” and *The Racist* “the element of racism in many of us”.

*The Burden* is his most striking piece. A ten metre-high sculpture, it shows “the man in the street who carries on his back the city fat cat, the sleaze-ridden politician, the aloof representative of the lost church and the imperfect figure of the law with its attendant misery, delay and cost”, says Scarfe. A display board behind it says, “The pay’s terrible, the hours are worse and the thanks are non-existent. It’s a complaint heard from workers all over Britain. And more often than not they have a point. So how come the system doesn’t just collapse?”

Scarfe’s installation says more that is true about Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century than all the overblown corporate nonsense surrounding it. By stating openly how many people feel about life in Britain today, it points to why the Dome has failed so miserably to capture the public imagination. The great majority of working people are deeply unhappy with what they see around them, politically and often socially marginalised. It is hardly surprising that they find nothing to identify with in a project that so fatuously sings the praises of a future dominated by big business.



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