

Urban Traces

Brussels, Brueghel, Bosch – and the seven deadly sins of mega-event planning

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Brussels may seem an unlikely place to come to for researching the planning and impacts of large events such as the Olympic Games and the Football World Cup. The last time Brussels hosted a mega-event was more than half a century ago: the World's Fair in 1958, with the Atomium as a visible reminder.

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But Brussels had something else that inspired me. It had been one of the centres of Brabant, the place of work of two great painters whose images had given form to my research: Brueghel and Bosch. It was a visit to the Royal Museum that got me started on the initial idea. Bosch's "The seven deadly sins", painted around 1500 and now in

the Prado in Madrid, shows the seven great vices in a circle: *superbia*, *avaritia*, *luxuria*, *invidia*, *gula*, *ira* and *acedia*. Brueghel (whose name, by the end of my stay at VUB, I had barely learned to pronounce in a way that my Flemish colleagues would recognise it) had painted a tableau for each of the sins, depicting them in gruelling detail.



Hieronymus Bosch
"The seven deadly sins"

But while Brueghel and Bosch had nothing but human salvation in mind, my goal was more mundane: urban salvation. The establishment of a catechism for cities eager to host mega-events, but unaware of the capital vices that lie on the rocky road. Inspired by the Brussels experience, I called those pitfalls "the seven deadly sins of mega-event planning". Here they are:

Sin 1: Overpromising of benefits

Overpromising is widespread when prospective hosts forecast the economic impacts of mega-events. The mayor of Chicago, for example, in the city's bid to host the 2016 Olympic Games, promised that the event would create 315,000 new jobs – a forecast



Pieter Brueghel
“Luxuria”

dismissed as ‘crazy’ by an economist. Sports economists agree that providing subsidies for mega-events is not a sensible economic policy and incurs significant opportunity costs.

Sin 2: Underestimation of costs

This symptom is the alter ego of overpromising benefits. Like most mega-projects, mega-events overrun their budget – sometimes massively so. The average cost overrun for the Olympic Games since 1960, including operating and direct capital costs, is 179% – much more than the 27% average overrun for transport mega-projects.

Sin 3: Event takeover

Mega-event priorities often take over long-term urban development priorities. Instead of the event becoming an instrument for urban development, as supporters claim, urban development becomes the instrument for the event. The most extreme example is perhaps Rio de Janeiro where urban development over the past ten years has been driven almost exclusively by mega-events: the Pan American Games (2007), the Football World Cup (2014) and the Olympic Games (2016). The mayor of Rio, Eduardo Paes, acknowledged as much when he said: “The Olympic plan is Rio’s plan, and Rio’s plan is the Olympics”.

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Sin 4: Public risk-taking

Cities hosting mega-events see them as a way of attracting private capital. The public, however, carries the risk of cost overruns in preparing for the mega-event because they provide the deficit guarantees that event governing bodies demand. The organizers of the Football World Cup 2014 in Brazil and the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi expected private investment to make up a large share of the funding for the event, but in both cases the public was forced to pay more than 95% of the costs.

Sin 5: Rule of exception

Mega-events are exceptional happenings and so, too, is the time during which the hosts prepare for them. The preparation for most mega-events includes special legislation that suspends the regular rules to facilitate hosting the event. Many governments pass laws that introduce exceptions in areas such as taxation, immigration, property rights, urban planning, and freedom of speech. That hosts expropriate private property and displace residents during the run-up for a mega-event is common and occurs in democratic and authoritarian countries alike.

Sin 6: Elite capture

Proponents often justify hosting a mega-event because it will create broad societal benefits. Yet, mega-event planning tends to privilege local business and real estate interests, global corporations, and cronies of political elites. Event-induced gentrification contributes to elite capture and has become a familiar sight in most mega-event host cities that harness events for urban regeneration, from Atlanta and Sydney to Vancouver, London and Rio.

For many cities and countries, hosting a mega-event resembles what Brueghel has captured so well in his famous rendition of the Tower of Babel: an oversized, grandiose extravaganza with the tendency to escalate.

Sin 7: Event fix

Event fix occurs where mega-events become seemingly quick fixes to fast-track major urban development projects – a “shot of adrenalin” for cities to clean up their act and



Pieter Brueghel
“The Tower of Babel”

get projects done that would otherwise have stalled or never happened. As a result, cities and countries spend large sums on hosting an event to justify or create enough pressure to attain the non-sports investment they want to pursue.

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How to repent

Cities, national governments, and governing bodies of events all have good reasons to reduce the negative fall-out from mega-events. Cities, national governments, and citizens should want to avoid cost overruns, inefficient allocation of resources, and oversized infrastructure. Event governing bodies, such as the IOC or FIFA, should be concerned about their reputation, which constitutes their key capital, and about losing potential hosts if cities start to perceive mega-events as expensive burdens.

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But so far, reforms – such as the [Olympic Agenda 2020](#) – have but tinkered with the seven deadly sins. At least five radical changes to the rules of the game are needed.

1. **Avoid tying mega-events to large-scale urban development:** If the new airport is tied to hosting the Football World Cup, it becomes subject to the very same conditions – tight time lines, rushed and often subpar construction, lax tendering, excessive scoping, shutting out of public participation.
2. **Bargain with event governing bodies:** The IOC, FIFA, UEFA, and others are monopolies which can dictate their terms and make substantial risk-free income, as long as there is enough demand for their events. This is why host cities should attempt to gain concessions from event governing bodies through bargaining.
3. **Cap and earmark public expenditure:** The hosts should cap expenditures and earmark the funds to avoid having the public sector compensate mega-event cost overruns or projects with limited public benefit.

4. **Seek independent expert assessment:** Independent expert advice is crucial for decision-makers in cities, national governments, organizing committees, and governing bodies of events to assess the costs and benefits of mega-events.
5. **Reduce or cap size and requirements of events:** Mega-events have become much too large to be beneficial for cities or citizens. The most important change then is also the simplest: mega-events should shed the “mega” – and just become events!

During my visit in Brussels in the spring of 2015, the time to act on the seven deadly sins of mega-event planning was opportune. The IOC was facing difficulties finding enough cities interested in bidding for the Olympic Games and [the arrests of FIFA officials had led Sepp Blatter](#), the FIFA President, to resign, opening a window for reform. Time not just to repent – but also to attempt betterment.

Biography

A human geographer, **Martin Müller** works on the planning, organisation and impacts of mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the Football World Cup. He has done much work in Russia, where he conducted research on the 2014 Sochi Olympic Winter Games and the 2018 World Cup. His conceptual interests revolve around actor-network theory, mobilities and the socio-material, translocal composition of the world. He is a commentator in Neue Zürcher Zeitung and DIE ZEIT and his research has received coverage in media such as the New York Times, Financial Times, ABC, Newsweek, Der Spiegel, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Le Temps. www.martin-muller.net