

When hosting mega-events like FIFA, cities market themselves at the expense of the most vulnerable

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Few events capture the attention of the globe like the Men's FIFA World Cup—in 2018, the event boasted a viewership of [3.5 billion people](#). Yet,

despite the enormous popularity of the World Cup, [host cities and countries invariably lose money](#) on the event itself, with FIFA capturing most of the profits despite its non-profit status.

The calculus of host cities is based on the hope that successfully hosting a World Cup (or Olympics) will significantly enhance a [city's](#) urban brand and ultimately lead to long-term increases in tourism and foreign direct investment.

In other words, the argument is that a successful stint as a [host city](#) will identify that city as "[world-class](#)" and change its economic fortunes. This justification, at least from an economic point of view, relies on [some pretty fuzzy math and long-term forecasting that rarely gets audited](#).

I attended the 2010 World Cup in South Africa to study how various communities attempted to have their voices heard and needs met through the planning process for that event. I continue to research how hosting large-scale events intersect with other trends in global and local urbanization.

Urban branding

This mission of improving one's urban brand to attract tourist and [foreign investment](#) leads cities to focus their attention to the perceived needs. Or, more precisely, the perceived desires of potential tourists and investors, as opposed to the needs and desires of the people who already live, work and play in these cities.

This shift in focus is part of larger trends of cities becoming [increasingly entrepreneurial in our globalized world](#).

And to this end, host cities pursue a fairly predictable path to demonstrate their world-classness. As Streetnet International, a South

Africa-based international organization of street vendors, put it in their World Class Cities For All campaign:

"It has become a boringly predictable reality that, when a country prepares to host a high-profile international event, [the country and its local government authorities prepare to create 'World Class Cities' of a particular type](#), i.e. 'World Class Cities' which will attract foreign investment; have modern up-to-date infrastructure; have no visible signs of urban decay; have smooth traffic flows; have no visible poor people or social problems."

Increased policing, decreased social investment

There are common themes to how cities approach their hosting duties and branding pursuits. However, the particular interventions that each city makes to create this type of world-class city are unique to their particular context.

Unfailingly, cities significantly increase policing, both in the sheer numbers of police, military and surveillance measures as well as the powers afforded to the police and military. These powers are used to police undesirable activities and individuals—those activities and people deemed incommensurate with the desired world-class brand.

Youth, the unhoused or precariously housed, street vendors and racialized individuals [experience the brunt of these increases](#).

In South Africa in 2010, FIFA courts were established to exact "[swift and severe justice](#)" for crimes committed against tourists and journalists during the 2010 World Cup. In Qatar, there has been [targeted policing of LGBTQ+ people and allies](#).

Additionally, the quest for this type of world-class-city brand also leads

to uneven investment and under-investment as cities are forced to make choices about how to invest their municipal budgets.

Tourist areas [see significant infrastructure investments while those off the tourist map are often ignored](#). This is intensified by [television coverage of these places and events](#).

In Durban, South Africa, this meant significant investment along the waterfront and the construction of a shiny new soccer stadium (across the street from an existing rugby stadium) while other parts of the city, off the beaten path of journalists and tourists, continued to lack even basic infrastructure.

Exposes the cracks

The current approach to hosting a World Cup puts unique and focused pressures on urban systems and infrastructure. In the process, it exposes the already existing cracks in the system and exacerbates existing inequalities.

The World Cup did not create the labor system and working conditions of temporary migrant workers in Doha. However, both the magnitude and speed of construction to meet hosting needs undoubtedly ramped up the exploitation of the system, leading to [thousands of worker deaths](#).

We need to reframe how a world-class city is defined to one that is more liveable, sustainable and just. This will inspire future host cities to pursue this status in a manner that does not increase policing and exacerbate inequalities.

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