

# Cities should be 'capitals' for more than a year

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**C**APE Town's success at becoming World Design Capital 2014 is likely to spur other cities to secure the status of Africa's most celebrated "eventful city". Hosting flagship events has become a fad in which cities seek to stand out from the crowd in order to attract more attention, investment and jobs. In the context of a more uniform consumer culture, staging events has become a popular device for places to showcase their distinctiveness. But is this a sensible use of government funds? And how can the economic and regenerative effects of events be optimised?

Many cities now brand themselves "cultural capitals", "festival cities" or "creative cities". Events help to do this by creating an appealing image and generating media coverage. They can also attract visitor spending, increase social participation and improve amenities in run-down areas.

Events are cheaper than investing in iconic buildings, major infrastructure projects or new technologies. They are also more flexible because themes can change with the times. Events can help to revitalise underused sports stadiums, sustain conference venues, revamp redundant buildings and fill half-empty hotels.

Yet there are dangers in focusing on events to revitalise cities. They can amount to little more than one-off spectacles, temporary

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gestures and opportunities for professionals to party. The organising expense can escalate and there are hidden costs in diverting the energies of politicians and officials from more pressing priorities.

International experience suggests several factors that determine whether the benefits of events outweigh the costs. For instance, setting clear objectives at the outset is vital to build a compelling case for the event. It is important to be explicit about what tangible gains it will bring to local citizens.

It is pointless having a series of laudable but vague goals that stand no chance of being realised. Places should start from their existing condition and inherited resources, not some abstract ideal of becoming a "world-class" city.

Events shouldn't be seen in isolation — as ends in themselves — because it is difficult for them to deliver much on their own. They should be approached as part of a long-term development strategy that they can help to get going or accelerate.

This is essential if Cape Town's new status as World Design Capital is to be a real catalyst for rethinking the structure of the city and

how it functions. Enlightened design can be a tool for reshaping the built environment, but to have real effect it must be embedded in institutional practices. Timing and sequencing are critical to ensure that the main features of the event reinforce other necessary changes in policy and procedures.

Events should be closely connected to the city or district in which they are located, not gimmicks to grab attention. They must draw on and reflect the authentic character and creative strengths of the city.

Will being World Design Capital help Cape Town break the logjam that stops all attempts to boost residential densities and bring about a more socially integrated city? The natural desire to reposition a city in new markets by changing how people think about it needs to be managed with great sensitivity to avoid alienating existing residents. Above all, the temptation to imitate flashy projects from elsewhere should be resisted.

Successful events have effective champions who can mobilise wider support and ensure political will at the highest levels in order to deliver meaningful change. Activities should capture the public imagination and involve all major groups and interests. They should help to build relationships between the relevant stakeholders in the public and private sectors, universities and civil society.

It is vital to encourage spontaneity and risk-taking — a genuine spirit of creativity and imagination. Careful event planning should

not exclude the opportunities for new ideas to emerge and for new relationships to be forged. Space can be created for all kinds of experimentation, to provoke established ways of thinking, challenge orthodox and outdated practices, and spark debates about how to solve our most intractable problems. Some edginess and uncertainty will add to the experience. Predictable programmes will prove boring and lose their appeal.

Legacy planning is the final ingredient of good practice. This requires dedicated time and investment in follow-through activities to secure a sustained effect. The best legacy is to develop the capabilities of talented local people and enterprises. The capacity for original analysis, creative thinking, new efforts and conscious innovation all need support. Public organisations must think hard about how to use their powers as regulators, investors and purchasers of goods and services to nurture local design capabilities for the future.

There is no panacea for creating a city that is more prosperous, equitable and resilient. Cities need a plan based on their intrinsic strengths and challenges. A strategic approach aimed at incremental improvement and building the capabilities for more fundamental change could help to bring lasting improvements to people's lives and to the underlying fabric of the city.

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