CHAPTER 4

Behind the Golden Glow: The Soft Power, Potemkinism, and Protest of Australian Mega-Events

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Abstract As Australia looks forward to hosting the 2032 Olympics, it is an opportune time to reflect on the hard edges of mega-event soft power in the land down under, especially in relation to Brisbane's experience with Expo 88. This chapter provides a brief review of the history of Australian mega-events, including international exhibitions and the Olympic Games. It then applies a lens of Potemkinism to Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, and the surrounding region that will host the XXXV Olympiad. The golden glow associated with this event conceals a complex and contested history of neoliberal ambitions, demolition, and displacement. That Queensland is already a destination for domestic and international tourists and retirees, has not made hosting the 2032 Olympic Games any more palatable. Queensland's history of mega-events demonstrates how the state uses unique funding opportunities and moments of

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regulatory power to address not only the event at hand but to execute larger priorities related to infrastructure, economic development, and land use.

Keywords Soft power • Potemkinism • Neoliberalism • Australia • Mega-events

Introduction

Mega-events project national power in pursuit of increased commercial and cultural clout abroad. From nineteenth-century international exhibitions to the Olympic Games, Australian mega-events have served as catalysts to rebrand national and city identities (Aronczyk, 2013) and accelerate urban transformations (Ganis, 2015; Goad, 2021). They have also been used to mobilize pathways for city-to-city economic cooperation and small-scale diplomacy (Acuto, 2013). While mega-events have demonstrated soft power or "the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than just coercion and payment" (Nye, 2017, p. 2), they have proven costly, controversial, and involved in the suppression of civil protest (Lenskyj, 2000; Ryan, 2018). Mega-events have been locally powerful in signifying a newly energized growth coalition that can demolish whole neighborhoods, stymie opposition, particularly anti-development activists (Lancione, 2017), and alert investors to opportunity. They have also provided a platform to broadcast protests of wider injustices and government policies and to organize for change (Neilson, 2002). Behind the alluring visage of these popular mega-events, soft power has a decidedly hard edge.

As Australia once again takes the mantle as host of the 2032 Olympics, it is an opportune time to reflect on the Potemkinism of mega-events in the land down under. Wolfe (2024: 3) describes Potemkinism as a false front or "superficial covering [that] can conceal unpleasant realities." This concept describes the contradictions between the golden glow that promotes host cities, regions, and nations that disguises the harsher reality of hosting international events of this scale (Broudehoux, 2017; Wolfe, 2024). In action, soft power is wielded not only as a force for shaping narratives to persuade international audiences. It also quells internal conflicts and discourses from within the nation (Wolfe, 2020). The locus of growing discontent is a rising awareness of the economic risks and social impacts of hosting a mega-event. How this discontent will play out ahead of the Brisbane Olympics is an open question.

To this end, this chapter examines the past and future of mega-event soft power in Australia. It does this by applying the lens of Potemkinism in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, and the surrounding region that will host the XXXV Olympiad. Over the last half century or so, Brisbane and Queensland have been particularly active in bidding for mega-events. While the city's goal has been to harness soft power domestically and establish a global profile, Brisbane has never strayed far from controversy. In the lead up to Brisbane's Expo 88, for instance, protests were limited and deliberately muted by the government. Similarly, the Gold Coast Commonwealth games of 2018 boosted the regional unity of Southeast Queensland and its surrounding beachfront urbanization (the most concentrated touristic area in Australia). Nowadays, protesters are openly contesting how the design and planning for the Brisbane Olympics, spread regionally within the State of Queensland, should unfold. Indeed, the contention has grown into a high-profile political drama as planning efforts gear up. These protests call into question the social, economic, and sustainability promises made by the Games' boosters.

Ahead of the 2032 Olympics, this chapter argues there is a lesson in mega-event soft power that can be learned from Brisbane's past: how past and present social movements organize against a mega-event not only offers clues about the future of mega-events but also their projection of soft power. What can we learn about Potemkinism, protest, and soft power in examining the past and future of Australian mega-events? To answer this question, we draw on the history of mega-events in Australia. We then focus on Brisbane's historical and contemporary urban transformations, discussing activist opposition to Expo 88 and the forthcoming 2032 Olympics. This chapter draws from multiple sources including municipal documents, scholarly literature, local newspapers, interviews, and media including protest films.

FROM NATION BUILDING AND CITY BOOSTERISM TO PROTEST AND NEOLIBERALISM

Australian cities have long used mega-events, from international exhibitions to sporting events, for city boosterism. The state has employed these happenings to build a national image (Broudehoux, 2004). The history of internationally facing events in Australia extends back to nineteenth-century examples such as the Intercolonial Exhibition Sydney (1870), Sydney International Exhibition (1879), Melbourne International Exhibition (1880), and Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition (1888). These expositions created new public spaces and works, as well as constructing images of the past, prowess, and future promise of Australia. These events projected images of host cities and nation as emerging from the benefits of colonization and settler society, such as the ethnographic displays in the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition used to portray Aboriginal peoples as Other (Jones, 2016).[1]

Beginning in the 1950s, Australian cities, enriched and growing in post-World War II, began competing to host mega-events to bolster tourism and show an increased regional geopolitical role. Melbourne was the first Australian city to take the mantle as Summer Olympics host in 1956.[2] According to Davison (1997), the lead-up to the games included much contestation between those promoting modernization of Melbourne to impress an imagined international audience versus “a small but vocal minority of Labor politicians and welfare workers had opposed the Games as an unjustifiable extravagance” (p. 69) in the face of a post-war housing crisis. Internal pressure exerted by business elites to change the city to meet the requirements of an external audience was used to overcome opposition. According to Davidson: “The fear of what the world might think was a powerful weapon in the hands of local modernizers. … ‘Australia would be the laughingstock of the world if the 1956 Games were not a success’, said the Melbourne businessman, K.G. Luke upon his return from the Helsinki Olympics” (p. 70). Skepticism toward the benefits of hosting versus costs would be echoed in subsequent marquee mega-events. Likewise, the gaze of the internal audience would be used to justify change in the host city and nation.

The next large-scale effort to elevate Australia on the global stage, besides the Commonwealth Games in 1982, came 32 years later. Brisbane’s Expo ‘88 exemplified a turn toward the explicit use of mega-events in neoliberal-style planning to entice private investment through supportive public expenditures . It was representative of a growing trend in the 1980s to use mega-events as a tool to transition urban waterfronts from marine and industrial uses and working-class homes and businesses to new leisure spaces. This formula had been developed in earlier World Expos such as the Expo '67 in Montreal and Expo '86 in Vancouver . Organized for the year of Australia's Bicentennial, Expo 88 was also a site of Aboriginal protest against the lack of sovereignty and land rights, as well as a place of performance that celebrated Aboriginal cultures (Ryan, 2018).

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[1] The memory of this nineteenth-century mega-event and trauma inflicted on Aboriginal peoples was the center of a 2016 public art project in Sydney called *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*. See Jones, 2016; Minner, 2019; Abbott & Minner, 2024.

[2] Australia hosted the Commonwealth Games in Sydney in 1932, Perth in 1962, Brisbane in 1982, Melbourne in 2006, and Gold Coast in 2018. Melbourne was also awarded the 2026 Commonwealth Games and later withdrew their bid.

Shortly thereafter, in 1993, Sydney was announced as the host of the 2000 Olympics. The Olympic Games were once again used to broadcast images of an Australian identity globally, while repositioning Australia and the Olympic Games as "green" through the high-profile clean-up of Homebush Bay. Although touted as an environmental success, there have been noted shortcomings in the environmental clean-up (Gold & Gold, 2024) as well as the suppression of protest (Lenskyj, 2000).

Neilson (2002) points out that the Olympic Games provided a global media platform by which Indigenous groups hoped to "generate international pressure that might expedite legislative or constitutional change in Australia" (p. 14). He notes:

> Contrary to mainstream belief, the protests surrounding the Sydney Olympic Games were quite successful. It is just that these activities did not take the expected form of street demonstrations, but sought rather to avoid violent conflict while working through the communicative networks of the media. (p. 13)

The enduring racial tension in Australian society was on show throughout the Sydney Olympics. The inclusion of Aboriginal performances in the Opening Ceremony and Midnight Oil's performance "Beds Are Burning" while wearing "sorry" shirts at the Closing Ceremony stirred controversy. In between, the symbolism of Cathy Freeman's gold medal performance in the 400 meters was questioned in heated discussions about identity and culture (Bruce & Wensing, 2009). The subsequent global attention spotlighted stories of Australia's Stolen Generation, lack of sovereignty, and the prime minister's refusal to apologize—Olympic spectacles cited as garnering international support that applied political pressure within Australia (Neilson, 2002).

Australian mega-events of the twentieth century took place in a somewhat more halcyon time for large outlays of public funds. Urban regeneration models, such as the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, were touted in the press, rather than the overspending, graft, and white elephant projects that would come to define the Olympic movement over the next two decades in Athens (2004), Sochi (2014), and Rio de Janeiro (2016). However, even the roaring success of Expo ‘88 and the 2000 Sydney Olympics were hotly contested. Activists protested the loss of community landmarks, housing, and other social, environmental, and economic costs (Lenskyj, 2000). Protesters called attention to the continued exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from the benefits of both the mega-events and the Nation as a whole. This history of protest and community organizing, whether inward facing within the host city or region, or integral to the international spectacle, is essential to understanding how mega-events shape urban growth.

Unsettling the Triumphant Tale of Brisbane’s Mega-Event Past

In considering soft power and the future of mega-events in Australia, it is instructive to return to Brisbane’s hosting of Expo ‘88. The impact of Expo 88 has been consciously revived as a success to be replicated in the lead-up to the 2032 Olympics. However, the singular positive memory of staging this event papers over a complex and contested history of neoliberal ambitions, demolition, and displacement. In this sense, mega-events serve as an act of Potemkinism, presenting a highly specific geography and moment in a city as a stand-in for the whole, one that can often be inaccurate or even misleading.

In the post-World War II era, low prices and relatively cheap housing fueled rapid growth in permanent residents at a time of corrupt state leadership under Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen who governed from 1968 to 1987 (Sampford, 2009; Wear, 2002). In the 1980s, Brisbane was the fastest-growing Australian city (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996). Bjelke-Petersen worked to attract the 1982 Commonwealth Games and Expo 88; the mega-events fit into a wider strategy of quick and large-scale urbanization. These mega-events were not the cause of new development but ratified the intensive growth that came before them. However, Brisbane had only 1.2 million people in 1985, so its success in attracting mega-events shows an ability to corral federal funding at an outsized scale.

The fact that Queensland began campaigning for mega-events under the leadership of Bjelke-Petersen, later investigated for corruption (Sampford, 2009; Wear, 2002), also demonstrates how bidding, preparing, and executing these events under an international spotlight can sometimes be a substitute for democratic processes that are either moribund or non-functioning. Peterson was also instrumental in shutting down all street protests in the state from 1977 to 1979, after several more ad-hoc measures often directed at the fracas around sporting events (Heath & Burdon, 2017). As in other places heavily invested in mega-events, they can often help to expand policing powers in a state of exception and then normalize a unique moment into the status quo (Pauschinger, 2020).

In Queensland, Expo 88 came at a time of renewed cooperation between city, state, and federal government to make Brisbane a destination city for tourism and new residents. This came to the chagrin of local residents who saw mega-events as land grabs and a means to turbocharge gentrification. This was not refuted by Premier Bjelke-Petersen. Quite the contrary, Bjelke-Petersen said of the Expo:

> Goodness gracious me, there I was looking out my window at Parliament House when I saw South Brisbane and I thought: "What a good place for a land deal!", and then some bright sparks came up with a way for the government to pay for it. We have got some very free enterprise in Queensland—get yours now. (Piccini, 2016)

Bjelke-Petersen was also instrumental in turning the Gold Coast (just south of Brisbane) into Australia's major mass tourism hub. Today it is one of the most densely urbanized places in the country. The Gold Coast also hosted the 2018 Commonwealth Games, cementing the city's reputation and ability to act on the world stage, a not-so-difficult task given its abundant hotel space, famous coastline, and vertical urbanization. Bjelke-Petersen sold the greater Brisbane region to the world as an important new destination for people and capital.

The historian Jon Piccini argues that Brisbane has a long history of mobilization from Aboriginal, working class, and immigrant populations, often in the South of the City, that intensified during the 1982 Commonwealth Games. By the planning stage of the 1988 Expo, a countercultural and working-class opposition had gelled into a social movement that connected mega-events to graft. *The Cane Toad Times*, a local alternative newspaper at the time, satirized (Woodward & Pyle, 1985):

> [C]ome to the banks of the muddy and chemically-tainted Brisbane River and join Queensland, Australia, the World in a no-holds barred, you-pick-up-the-cheque-and-the-Cabinet-picks-up-the-capital-gains celebration of two hundred years of opportunism, shady land deals and sharp accounting practices.

Piccini even uses the trope of developing country corruption to lacerate the pretensions of Queensland's business class attempting to enrich themselves with the public purse: "[T]he global, cultured pretensions of Expo were ill-suited to the subtropical corrupt free market paradise of Brisbane."[3] As in many other circumstances, mega-events offered a means to demonstrate newly acquired prestige but they also could be sources of international embarrassment if events were mismanaged, corruption too blatant, or facilities deemed subpar. As a fast-growing region, Queensland had the pressure not just of creating a successful international image but also of making a name for Brisbane compared to much larger, and historically wealthier, Melbourne and Sydney.

Within some accounts, the story of Expo 88 is a triumphal narrative about its host city's rise from an underdog city in the "Deep North" with its beguiling history of political corruption to the "world class city" that it has become today (Ryan, 2018). As the narrative goes, seemingly against all odds, Brisbane hosted Expo 88, a *coup de chance* for a city considered a country town with a reputation of being hopelessly provincial (Ryan, 2018). New spaces of consumption made the destruction of the South Bank and West End communities and a portion of the central business district more palatable, with the introduction in the leftover spaces of new outdoor dining opportunities, and Expo 88 is credited with the transformation of Brisbane into an al fresco dining paradise (O'Brien & Chalip, 2008). Thus, it is not only destruction but opportunities for consumption that helped to erase the more troubling history of land resumptions and demolitions.

Another dominant narrative is that the neighborhood that was to become the site for Expo 88 was derelict and blighted, and devoid of the characteristics and people of a successful world-class city. To justify redevelopment, the neighborhood was denigrated. The Expo 88 souvenir program described it as "an area of derelict dockyards, unacknowledged brothels and disreputable hotels," write Smith & Mair, 2018 who explain:

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[3] Ibid.

> Like many other mega-event projects and waterfront schemes, the development of Brisbane's South Bank displaced low-income groups and "scruffy" industries which were swept aside by a growth regime intent on property development and new investment. (n.p.)

Only by representing the South Bank as an area that was decaying, depraved, and worthless could such a large-scale transformation be justified (Smith and Mair (2018), np).

Essay films about Brisbane created in the years prior to Expo 88 offer counter-views.[4] These include Wendy Rogers and Sue Ward's 16 mm film *City for Sale: Images in the Modern City* (1988), Debra Beattie's *Expo Schmexpo* (1984), and Stephen Stockwell's This City Is Dead (1985). Archived in the Queensland State Library, on Vimeo, and on YouTube, these films directly challenge the triumphal narrative of Expo 88. Rogers and Ward's film depicts harrowing images of demolitions in preparation for the Expo, juxtaposing them with images of skyscrapers and upscale downtown shopping intended to dramatize the commercialization of Brisbane and the dispossession of its low-income residents. *Expo Schmexpo* portrays quotidian scenes of Brisbane, mourning the loss of community spaces, while lampooning political figures of that time. Stockwell's film includes an interview with Bob Weatherall, CEO of the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, who speaks about the significance of Musgrave Park, which was threatened by redevelopment for the Expo and was used as a site of gatherings and protests for land rights before and during Expo 88.[5] These films are part of a historical record of the strife that Expo 88 caused in the lives of the residents who were displaced for an Expo that sported a theme of leisure. The films offered insights into a countercultural scene attempting to challenge the idea that Brisbane was a city for sale to the highest bidder.

In general, the confluence of public funds and developers was of great concern to Queenslanders who had previously seen the mass urbanization of the Gold Coast with frequently lax environmental oversight. Some called this "adolescent urbanism": both a jab at its building quality and the intoxicated young spring breakers who holidayed there (Burton, 2016).

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[4] The discussion of *City for Sale: Images in the Modern City* is elaborated upon in Abbott and Minner (2024).

[5] In addition to Musgrave Park, there were the "beats" or networks of pubs, hotels, and other community gathering spaces in this area that were important to the social life of Aboriginal community members (Greenop & Memmott, 2007).

The adoption of the "entertainment city" model of development (Clark, 2011) meant prioritizing tourism needs and cultural tastes over spaces and businesses that served longtime residents. What's more, it made clear that mega-events were land deals negotiated between a real estate power elite rather than a participatory process that listened to and acted upon the needs of residents.

Growing Storm Clouds for Brisbane's Olympic Games

The global phenomenon of rising skepticism about hosting games fueled changes to the bidding process that has affected the 2032 Olympics. Brisbane was selected as the first host city in a revamped process in which contenders save money through speedier selection rather than outright competition (Tham, 2023). New requirements for both Olympic and World Expo host cities to consider the built and social legacy of hosting in their bids have come in response to criticisms about displacement, white elephant stadia, and other social and economic costs to host cities and regions. Brisbane will also be subject to more sustainable development goals that were enacted to lessen the carbon footprint of such events (Weaver et al., 2023). Additionally, the games come at a time when the geopolitical soft power of the Olympics (Wolfe, 2020) has both renewed urgency and a growing sense of obsolescence. One might ask generally how countries can come together through sport to achieve common goals. Of the 2032 Olympics, one should ask how Brisbane and the state of Queensland more broadly will weather the internal fissures, protests, and critiques that have already begun to surface.

Urban redevelopment in the lead-up to the Games appears to echo the controversial redevelopment schemes of 1980s Brisbane. On a Queensland State Government website, the Honorable Dr. Steven Miles proclaims that a "[w]orld-class Woolloongabba revitalization kicks off," rebranding the Woolloongabba district as the "East Bank" and calling it "the largest urban renewal since South Bank" (Miles, 2023).[6] In the same government release and echoed in the press is a rendering that shows a new Olympic Stadium glowing luminously in the foreground of the Gabba Priority Redevelopment Area. A golden Brisbane River glistens in the sweaty hereafter of Olympian dreams for urban renewal. In the Priority Development Area, private land for homes and businesses can be resumed for redevelopment to accommodate the expansion of sporting facilities. In other newspaper articles and social media posts, photos show school children and parents holding protest signs questioning the fate of their school, which is a listed historic property threatened with demolition.

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[6] The Honorable Dr. Steven Miles is described as Deputy Premier, Minister for State Development, Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning and Minister Assisting the Premier on Olympic and Paralympic Games Infrastructure.

Rifts have grown between the Brisbane City Council and the State of Queensland over costs. Consequently, the lack of consultation (Messenger, 2024) led the Lord Mayor of Brisbane to resign from an intergovernmental committee whose charge is the organization of the 2032 Olympic Games. One major point of contention has been the proposal to tear down the existing Gabba Stadium for a new one that is the centerpiece of the East Bank plan. While protests over this are vaguely reminiscent of Expo 88, the Woolloongabba district is already much wealthier than South Bank and not the bastion of diversity and affordable housing lost in the 1980s. Additionally, heritage logics of the present include concern over the loss of embodied carbon that might otherwise be saved in a preservation scenario. More generally, Olympic projects have been widely criticized for their cost, including by the federal government, which has declined to follow through with promised funding because it accused the Queensland government of including expenses beyond the scope of the Olympics (Messenger, 2023). In another example, a proposed AU$ 100 million Whitewater Olympic venue has been criticized as a “white water elephant” that threatens koala habitat and includes “heritage-listed wells and indigenous landmark” and lands primarily designated for conservation (Kerr, 2023).

The risk of overt withdrawal from hosting mega-events may be growing in Australia. In 2023, the Premier of Victoria canceled plans to host the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne over fears of an inflated budget. By walking away, the State of Victoria lost approximately AU$ 250 million in funds already spent that could not be recovered. Indeed, the critique of cost overruns without long-term benefits has gone from an activist talking point, supported by community organizations and some residents, to a mainstream policy argument (Minnaert, 2012), with serious repercussions for the future of mega-events.

Brisbane has also seen protests against the rising expense of hosting the games amid a cost of living and housing crisis. Queensland, once a bastion of conservatism, has seen surprising electoral success in the past two elections for federal parliamentary seats taken by the Australian Green Party.

The Green Party opposed the tearing down of the Gabba Stadium and, more broadly, for taking away construction resources from building up housing stock (Smee, 2023).[7] The Queensland Green Party has also invigorated environmental protest in the city, pointing out the irony of "the most sustainable games ever" in a city with an extreme flooding problem.

While infrastructure is created for temporary events, long-term "climate proofing" has languished in Brisbane. The often-overflowing Brisbane River (Meanjin River in the language of the Indigenous Turrbal people) poses an existential threat to the city (Cook, 2019). Questions abound regarding the long-term utility of infrastructure, focus on entertainment rather than housing, and deal with politically powerful construction companies. Other more Queensland-specific problems include an overreliance on tourism and the possibility of mass flooding in the newly built precincts along the Meanjin River. Skepticism directed at mega-events has brought together three major constituencies: environmental activists, neighborhood and heritage advocates who do not want the city to be radically altered, and an interesting mix of fiscal conservatives and housing advocates (who have no issue with public spending but believe it should be for low-income housing rather than sport).

Conclusion

This chapter argued that much can be learned from past Australian mega-events, especially in reflecting on Brisbane's experiences with Expo 88, as the region and nation look forward to the 2032 Olympics. Brisbane's experience hosting Expo '88 offers clues about the future of mega-events in the city and the projection of soft power. In looking to the past, the aim should be to learn how to address the hard edges of mega-events that so often trammel the needs of local residents. Brisbane and the State Government of Queensland could do more to engage with present social movements that are organizing against sweeping redevelopment agendas.

Without considering the questionable mega-event past in Australia and in the region, any soft power benefits derived from hosting the Olympics will be tarnished. With plans to nix the demolition and rebuild the Gabba Stadium, perhaps there is hope that host city and state will bend to citizen concerns.

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[7] Plans to tear down the stadium were scrapped in March 2024 (McKay & Stewart, 2024).

The fact that Queensland is already a hub for tourism and retirement has not made the 2032 Olympic Games more palatable. Like other places that have seen a major shift to a tourism economy, particularly mass beachfront tourism (Holleran, 2013), there is concerted local animus about prioritizing the needs of visitors over long-term residents, particularly when construction resources are limited. While those in favor of the 2032 Brisbane Olympics have attempted to make a strong economic case for improving the city's tourism infrastructure through state and federal financing (Eeles, 2023), they have been stymied by a coalition of environmentalists, neighborhood, heritage, and housing advocates. More problematically for the Olympic organizing committee, economic arguments against the mega-event have already been compelling because of major fissures between state and local government. Regulatory dysfunction has not proven that the Games are untenable, but it has cast doubt on the lasting benefits and long-term planning of the event. State and federal infighting has been mobilized as a talking point from those opposed to urban redevelopment in the name of mega-events to show that the project will not have lasting benefits and that slipshod planning will guarantee that public funds are wasted. In this sense, the spectacle of mega-events serves as a Potemkin façade to distract from more intractable issues (Wolfe, 2024).

Queensland's history of mega-events demonstrates how the state often uses unique funding opportunities and moments of regulatory power to address not only the task at hand but to execute larger priorities related to infrastructure, economic development, and land use. Sustainability goals may also be added to these moments of exception but that remains to be seen (Pauschinger, 2020). While Queensland has promised to build all 2032 structures to higher standards of energy efficiency, they have not taken advantage of accumulated planning powers to propose new master planning that addresses flooding vulnerability. As in other places where mega-events have been contested, the primacy of economic development over social and environmental goals is a standout issue and one that has caused a great deal of ire.

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