

Russia's World Cup: Stadium and Urban Development in Ekaterinburg

Sven Daniel Wolfe – University of Zurich

dwolfe@geo.uzh.ch

Cite as: Wolfe, Sven Daniel. "Russia's 2018 World Cup - A Conversation Beyond Sport." Futbolgrad, December 22, 2016. <https://www.futbolgrad.com/russias-2018-world-cup-conversation-beyond-sport/>.

The World Cup is not just about the clashes between national teams on the pitch. These battles are the highlight, of course, and the focus of attention for billions of people worldwide. But I'm also interested in the battleground itself: the football stadium, where it's built and why it looks the way it does. Exploring a stadium gives us a different way to explore a city. It provides a different view of the World Cup and lets us see how football is used to change host cities, for better and worse.

I am investigating the 2018 World Cup in Russia, focusing on stadium and urban development. This follows from statements by Russian organizers who have spoken from all levels of government about using the World Cup to improve the nation's infrastructure, particularly in the regional cities. Alexey Sorokin, CEO of the Russia 2018 Organizing Committee, put it this way: "We are building for our country. The World Cup will benefit from this infrastructure, but inevitably it would have been built anyway... The World Cup is a big accelerator of these developments, of this investment, of essential things." This reveals an underlying tension in the event preparations, a conflict between the short-term needs of the World Cup and the longer-term needs of the people in the host cities. Sometimes these needs overlap, so event-led developments benefit the population, but other times they don't. Let's take a look at examples of both.

We'll start with one of the most controversial projects in the country: Central Stadium in Ekaterinburg. This industrial city of 1.5 million, located about 1500km east of Moscow, is home to FC Ural, a Russian Premier League team currently near the bottom of the table. Central Stadium, their home, was completed in 1956 and is one of the most beautiful facilities in the country. It is sited in a prime location downtown and is famous for its gorgeous neoclassical

façade, complete with freestanding Doric columns and decorative statues. In the 1990s, in order to honor and preserve this façade, Central Stadium was protected as historical heritage.

I first saw the stadium in 1998 when my friend took me on a tour of Ekaterinburg. Even though it was too late in the year to catch a game, we walked in through the open gates to explore the territory. The stadium itself was locked, but even from outside it was clear that repair was overdue. Perched on rusty towers in the lot, the stadium lights looked old and feeble. The façade itself needed fresh paint and, in places, more serious attention: where it wasn't stained with age, it was actively peeling, and underneath I saw cracks in the plaster. From our position outside, we could spy over the low end of the walls to see ramshackle stands and seats. My friend told me the pitch was in bad shape too, trampled and muddy. Even so, Central Stadium was stunning. I told my friend that I had never seen its equal, and to this day it remains the most originally beautiful stadium I've ever seen.

In 2006, authorities finally closed the stadium for repair. The project was scheduled for completion in 2009, but it was beset by delay and disaster – fire struck the construction site five times – and it opened only in 2011. For USD \$85 million, the citizens of Ekaterinburg got a stadium with repaired and repainted façade, statues cleaned and replaced atop new decorative pillars, and top-of-the-line lighting. New seats and stands were installed for 27,000 fans, a partial roof offered shade from the summer sun, and the new pitch was built to the highest international standards. So what if the project was over budget and behind schedule? The end result was a hit and the lavish opening celebration played before a capacity crowd.

By this time, FIFA had chosen Russia to host the World Cup, but the list of host cities still was not finalized. It was expected that the new Central Stadium would help Ekaterinburg make the cut. Media proclaimed that the refurbished facility fulfilled all of FIFA's requirements and, at the grand opening, seven hundred musicians from military orchestras around the nation marched onto the pitch to

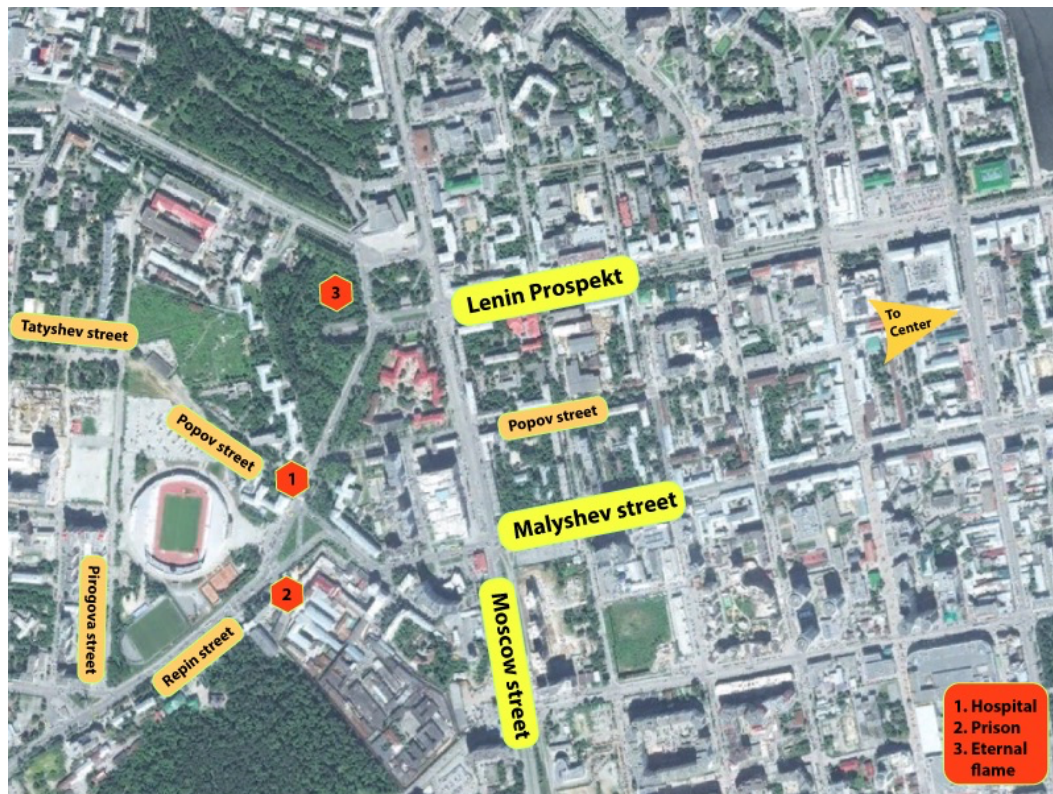
perform the FIFA anthem (earning a place in the Guinness Book of World Records, too). The Minister of Sport, Vitaly Mutko, gave a speech congratulating the city on its international quality stadium and hoped for national victories here in the World Cup. So it was no surprise when officials announced that Ekaterinburg would indeed be one of the eleven host cities, but people were shocked to hear that the stadium now needed further work. Local media reported that Central Stadium must undergo a “gentle reconstruction” in order to bring the facility in line with FIFA requirements.

In short order, this meant the wholesale demolition of the rebuilt stadium. The new pitch was dug up, the lights torn down, the seats ripped out and donated or sold; everything except the protected façade was either smashed, buried, or removed. The budget for this second reconstruction currently stands at USD \$400 million. In the end, the city will have (another) world-class stadium, this time seating 35,000 – FIFA’s required minimum. It will be a modern steel construction with a new pitch sunk into the earth, all constrained within the historical façade. Given that Ekaterinburg will host only four World Cup matches, and factoring in the cost of the initial five-year reconstruction, this comes to USD \$1.6 million per minute of football.



It would be unfair to focus only on the exorbitant cost of Central Stadium, however. The stadium project, no matter how central, is not the only outcome of World Cup preparations. Since the mega-event is being touted as a developmental boon to the country at large, where else in Ekaterinburg can we see changes? Preparing for the World Cup spurs a variety of urban development projects around the host city, both directly and indirectly related to the World Cup. FIFA requirements affect the stadium site and surrounding territory, the transit hubs and public transportation system, secondary sport facilities for training, and hotel infrastructure for teams, VIPs, and fans. Aside from this, host city planners often try to leverage the World Cup preparations to secure funding for other developments. Some projects may legitimately benefit the city in the longer term, while others might be little more than thinly disguised giveaways of government cash.

In Ekaterinburg, we can argue that the re-reconstruction of Central Stadium is a gift to favored developers and contractors. This seems a reasonable conclusion, given that several notable figures in the city – including the mayor, the owner of FC Ural, and a famous architect – suggested an alternative site that is equally central, cheaper, and less controversial. Regional and federal authorities overruled this alternative in favor of Central Stadium. But what about other sites? Near the stadium, there are three areas of note: a prestigious children's hospital and research institute, a federal prison, and a public park with a war memorial. Aside from this, there are also developments in the transportation network to examine. Let's look at each in turn.



The children’s hospital will likely be relocated to a suburb on the city’s edge, freeing up its buildings for temporary use by FIFA. Some media tout this as an improvement for the hospital, selling it as a move into larger, modern facilities, but other commentators in the city are more hesitant. In any event, it says something about the city’s priorities if a temporary event permanently relocates a hospital, shifting it from a central to a peripheral location. It is also worth noting that various forces in business and government are contesting this process, and the outcome is still unclear.

The federal prison is sited across the street from Central Stadium’s main entrance. This is not an ideal backdrop for an event broadcast around the globe, so city officials wanted to move the prison. As Tsarist-era federal property, however, it requires special permission from Moscow, and would be extremely costly to boot. The initial strategy was to hide the prison behind a “beautification barrier” – a kind of Potemkin village idea masking unsavory sights from visitors – but now it appears there may be enough political will and funding to move the prison before 2018. However, this process is slow and opaque, and as with the hospital, the outcomes are still unknown.

Next, just north of the stadium there is a public park with a small square, a war memorial, and an eternal flame. This park has been bulldozed to link two roads and create a super-boulevard that bisects nearly the entire city. The eternal flame will remain, as the new road curves around on both sides, and official plans show that the park will be rebuilt and expanded, with some form of pedestrian access to the memorial. As the new road promises to relieve traffic congestion, drivers in the city have welcomed these developments, but there is also a sense that the city's character is changing. Aside from the destruction of a beloved park, part of the road expansion project involves demolishing many of the city's historic Tsarist-era wooden houses and replacing them with high-rise apartments. That irreplaceable parts of the city's architectural heritage are vanishing contributes to the feeling of loss among certain residents.

FIFA requirements also mandate good transportation links from the airport and train station, and within the city to the stadium. Ekaterinburg already has a good transit system, but connections to Central Stadium need improvement. Partly to satisfy FIFA's requirements and partly to improve the system overall, the city is rolling out a comprehensive new system of aboveground transport. Designed in cooperation between Russian and international experts, the new scheme should improve transit times and connections for residents, not just during the World Cup, but for the long term. Unfortunately, these improvements do not extend to the city's metro, a small single-line system that has long waited for expansion. Even with World Cup-related attention and funding from Moscow, the city cannot afford to build a second metro line or even a new station by the stadium.

Finally, the city has embarked on a widespread program of road repair, particularly focusing on streets in the city center where tourists are more likely to go. City authorities have also promised to repair the buildings in this central zone – not just the façades but even inside, including stairwells, electricity, and plumbing improvements. It is not clear, however, where they will find funding for this project, so it is not likely to be fulfilled. A deeper point is that many people live outside the city center who could also benefit from infrastructure

repair. Indeed, you could make the argument that in many cases the people living outside the city center need it more.

So what we see in pre-World Cup Ekaterinburg is a mix. Some of the developments are necessary and welcome, such as road repairs and transit improvements, even if they are not distributed equally within the city. Other projects, like the latest reconstruction of Central Stadium, are controversial and costly and will bring only limited benefits to residents in the longer term. As we approach the 2018 World Cup, it will be too easy to focus only on stories of cost overrun and scandal, though this is what that makes headlines. Instead, highlighting the nuances in the preparations allows us to tell a richer story about what's actually happening on the ground in Russia. And this will let us ask better questions, too, such as whether it is a good idea to tie sport to urban development at all.