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Re-imagining the World Expo ^[1]

Few had probably even heard of the country Kazakhstan until the 2006 film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. At the time, the satiric film starring Sacha Baron Cohen was roundly denounced by Kazakhstan for its unflattering portrayal of the country, still coming out of the shadows of the former Soviet Union.

Now, Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan, has won the bid to host the International Exposition in 2017, beating out another candidate city, Liège of Belgium. The President of Kazakhstan hailed it as the world's recognition of not only the city but also his country. As he proclaimed, "this event will once again make Kazakhstan famous all across the world and will show our capacities." Of course, this time Kazakhstan is to express its aspirations and potential on its own terms through one of the few most sought-after global platforms.



The World Expo began at the height of the Industrial Revolution and had for a long time drawn broad enthusiasm among organizers and visitors alike in the industrialized nations. It had, however, faded from popular imagination in the West. These days the mere mention of the Expo (also known as the "world's fair" in the United States) often conjures up images of an archaic and anachronistic event.

Yet this global cultural institution is alive and well, and most importantly has gained increased attention in the developing world. All five of the countries currently bidding to host the 2020 World Expo—Brazil, Russia, Thailand, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates—represent emerging economies. And the membership to the Expo governing body, the Bureau International des Expositions, has swelled to 161, the highest ever in its history. This then raises the question of why the renewed interest.

First, it is undoubtedly a reflection of the changing landscape of global order and engagement. Today, countries compete like companies, whether for political influence or trade and tourism. A country's international profile affects its competitive capabilities. Countries naturally strive to develop and maximize their image capital on the world stage. The quest for this soft side of power is a global phenomenon now more than ever. And the Expo is a prime example of such soft-power cultivation and projection.

The mass event helps to cast a spotlight on the host nation and affords it a global platform to advertise its ambitions. It also presents an illustrative case of place branding—place being not only an object of branding but also its vehicle. "All nations are places," as the historian Jill

Lepore has noted, “but they are also acts of imagination.” The Expo’s national pavilions?around which the Expo is organized?represent spatial and cultural forms that seek to embody a larger meaning and identity about a country to its overseas publics. Indeed, for most participating countries, the Expo is the single largest promotional event of a country and its image outside of its own borders.

The expanding Expo phenomenon is also riding on the coattails of its enormous success at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, China, the largest such gathering in Expo history. The Shanghai Expo attracted an unprecedented 246 official exhibitors, including 190 countries and scores of international organizations and corporations, and also set a new attendance record of 73 million visitors. Many countries pulled out all the stops to court and engage the vast, growing Chinese middle class through their state-of-the-art pavilions.

Moreover, the Expo movement has benefited from the increasing mobility of people, culture and commerce within the country as well as across borders. At the Shanghai Expo, for instance, Denmark brought the Little Mermaid statue all the way from the Copenhagen harbor to Shanghai for display. World-renowned art works and national treasures from countries such as France and Mexico were also on exhibit.

Finally, the World Expo represents a unique global communal moment. Unlike the Olympics, arguably the most popular global mega-event nowadays, the Expo is not a “media event,” an event primarily experienced through media broadcasts. The spectacle of the Expo is to be sensed and experienced by “being there” as a pedestrian on the expo ground and through immersion inside the pavilion spaces. This aspect embodies, what the sociologist John Urry has called, the “collective gaze”?a sense of conviviality with the presence and movement of large numbers of people.

And the Expo experience is also educational. Granted all country pavilions are not created equal. Some are far more successful than others in not only drawing visitors’ attention but also transforming their interests into appreciation of the countries and cultures represented in the stylized pavilions. Our comparative analysis of the various pavilions at the Shanghai Expo, for example, clearly demonstrates what communication strategies worked, what didn’t, and why.

In short, given its enduring presence and impact on public life and global imagination, the World Expo deserves our continuing attention in both the study and practice of public diplomacy and nation branding.
