

#1 WINNING MEGA-EVENT CANDIDATURES

Lessons from
Expo 2030 Riyadh and
Milano Cortina 2026



Foreword

Mega-events are complex projects that combine political vision, organisational capacity and long-term development strategies. At **WePlan**, we have had the privilege of supporting cities and nations in preparing candidatures that have gone on to win international recognition.

This paper is intended as an effort to share insights from two recent experiences - Expo 2030 Riyadh and Milano Cortina 2026 - which may be useful to future bidders.

Our aim is to contribute to a better understanding of how candidatures can be designed to inspire international decision-makers while leaving a lasting legacy for host communities.

Roberto Daneo & Giorgio Re
Founders, WePlan

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Abstract

Cities and nations compete intensely to host mega-events. These occasions are seen not only as showcases of culture and innovation but also as catalysts for infrastructure investment, international recognition, and long-term legacy development.

Achieving the status of host requires more than ambition. It demands a **balance of vision and**

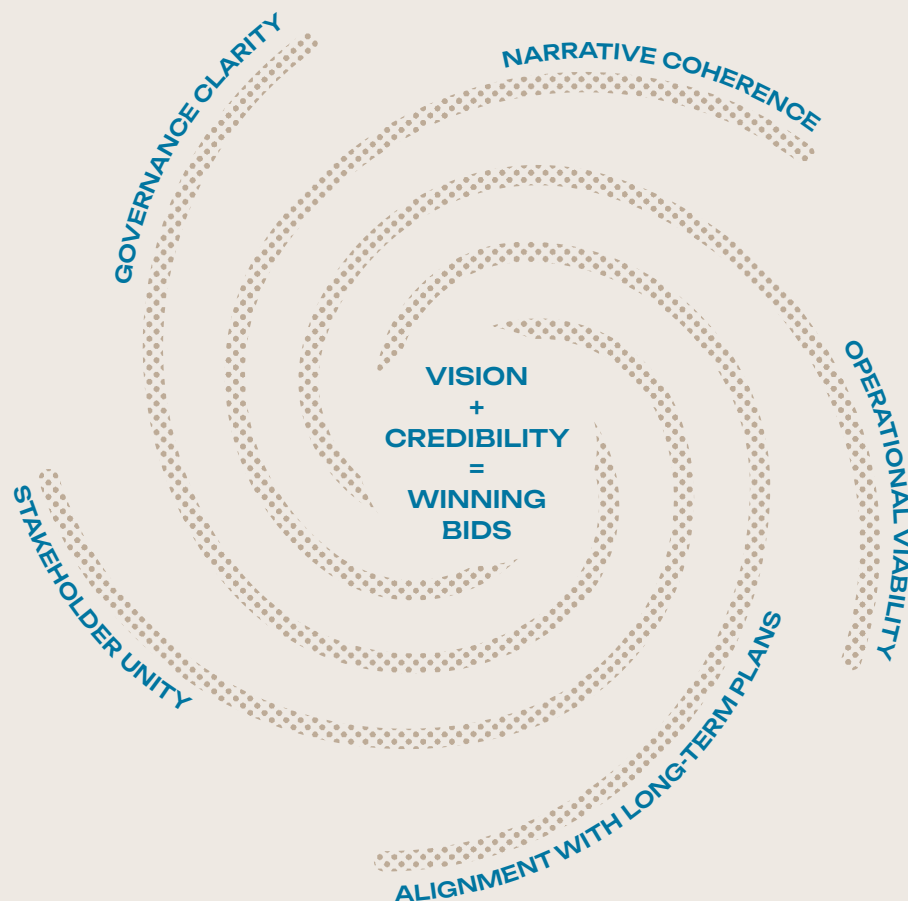
operational credibility, careful governance, financial clarity, and a persuasive narrative that resonates with international decision-makers.

This paper reflects on two recent experiences to which **WePlan** had the opportunity to contribute: Expo 2030 Riyadh and the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. The two cases are different in

geography, scale, and institutional framework, but together they provide valuable insights into the mechanisms that determine the success of a candidature.

By examining these experiences, we can identify cross-cutting lessons that may guide future host cities in preparing their bids and in laying the groundwork for delivery.

5 pillars of a winning bid



Introduction

Mega-events have become increasingly central in the strategies of nations and metropolitan regions that seek to position themselves in the global arena. Whether the objective is to attract investment, to enhance international image, or to accelerate local development, a successful candidature to host a world-scale event is often perceived as a turning point. Over the last two decades, dozens of cities and countries have invested substantial political and financial capital into bids to host Expos, Olympic Games, the European Capital of Culture or World Championships in multiple sports.

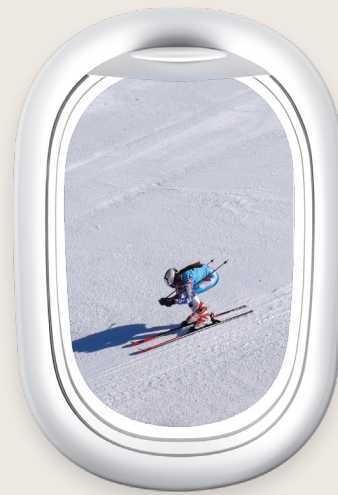
Within this context, one aspect has become particularly decisive in ensuring the success of the event those cities and countries were bidding for: **the alignment between the event strategic framework and the long-term development plans of the host city or region.**

International organisations such as the International Olympic Committee or the *Bureau International des Expositions* are increasingly attentive to whether events are conceived as stand-alone exercises or as accelerators of existing urban and national strategies.

When candidatures are anchored in broader frameworks of sustainable mobility, urban regeneration, or economic diversification, they are more credible, more persuasive, and **more resilient in delivery**. Experience also shows that successful bids are rarely the

product of technical quality alone. They combine clear governance structures, coherent narratives, and operational credibility with the ability to demonstrate how the event will strengthen long-term development objectives.

The following chapters examine two concrete cases to which **WePlan** contributed its expertise: Expo 2030 Riyadh and Milano-Cortina 2026. Both offer valuable lessons on how to design candidatures that inspire international decision-makers while leaving legacies that extend beyond the event itself.



The global bidding landscape

Mega-event candidatures have evolved across the decades from largely political exercises into highly professionalised competitions. International organisations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the *Bureau International des Expositions (BIE)* now evaluate bids through structured criteria, focusing on legacy, sustainability, governance and financial credibility.

At the same time, the number of candidatures has declined. For example, the Olympic Games, which once attracted up to ten competing cities, now often see only two or three. However, this

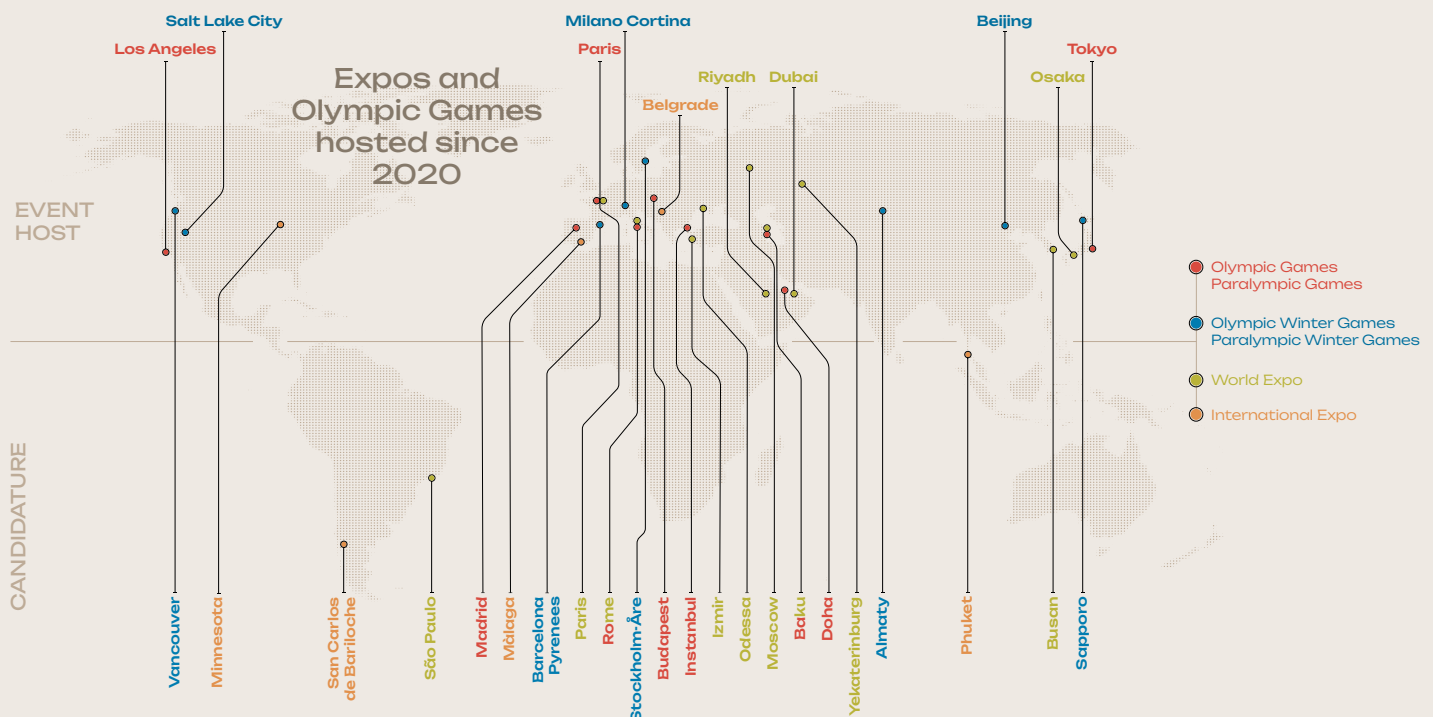
seems to reflect more selective and conscious candidacies, stricter standards, and careful prioritisation of public resources, rather than diminished appeal. The Expos continue to attract multiple competitors, with sharper geopolitical dimensions and stronger emphasis on alignment with national development programmes. Several trends stand out in this context:

- **Legacy orientation** has become central. Hosts must demonstrate how the event will contribute to long-term strategies, not just deliver a spectacle.
- **Financial accountability** is under closer examination.

Unrealistic budgets or excessive reliance on extraordinary funding weaken bids.

- **Geopolitical rotation** remains important. International bodies balance regional representation in their awarding decisions.
- **Public perception** matters. Bids that fail to show tangible benefits for local citizens often face resistance.

In this environment, success depends on clarity, credibility and alignment. **Ambition must be matched by a disciplined demonstration of how the event fits into the city or country's wider development path.**





CASE STUDY 1

EXPO 2030 RIYADH

*Alignment
with national
transformation
made Riyadh's
bid unique.*

The competition to host Expo 2030 initially involved five candidates: Busan, Moscow, Odessa, Riyadh, and Rome. Given the geo-political context, only three of them – Busan, Riyadh, and Rome – completed the candidature process until the vote in the BIE General Assembly held in November 2023.

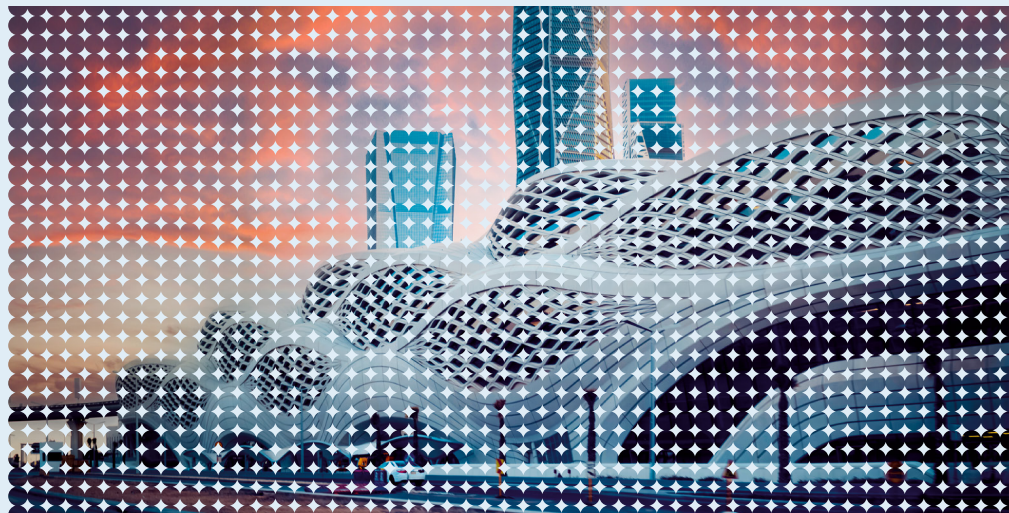
For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the candidature was closely linked to the national Vision 2030 strategy and to the ambition of presenting Riyadh as a global capital in transformation.

The focus was on grounding this ambition in an achievable plan that could convince the *Bureau International des Expositions (BIE)* and its member states. Several elements proved to be decisive in the Riyadh bid. The narrative of transformation was clear and coherent, closely tied to national policies.

The bid book offered detailed information on the proposed Expo theme, demonstrating its international relevance for participants and visitors, its universality, and its relevance to the local, national and regional contexts. At the same time, the file provided technical responses on Expo Site

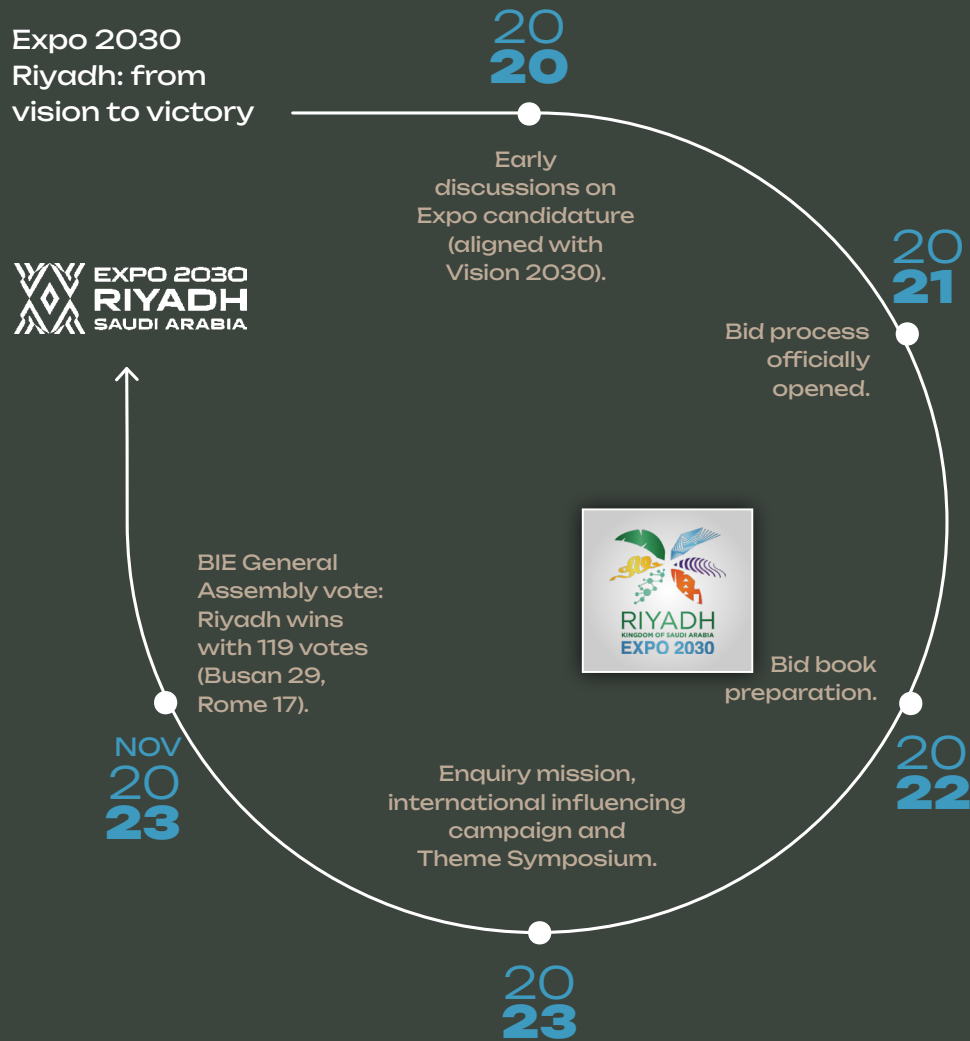
“Expo 2030 represented a major milestone for the Kingdom. Roberto and Giorgio integrated seamlessly within the pool of local and international experts, contributing effectively through their professionalism and extensive experience to the shaping of a candidature that embodied both ambition and execution strength.”

A. Al-Ghannam, Expo 2030 Commissioner General



organisation, operational feasibility, urban planning, sustainability, and legacy. Finally, the mobilisation of stakeholders was visible

and convincing, with institutions, private companies, and international advisors contributing to a unified effort.



WePlan coordinated the bid book and helped develop the presentation and drafting frameworks for the Theme Seminars and Theme Symposium in Paris before the final vote. This involved ensuring consistency across the technical and narrative components, and advising on governance arran-

gements to present a coherent model that could reassure international evaluators about the Kingdom's capacity to deliver.

The experience highlighted the importance of demonstrating not only vision but also the operational foundations necessary to transform that vision into reality.

As Abdulaziz Al-Ghannam of the Royal Commission for Riyadh City noted, Expo 2030 was a major step for the Kingdom, and the professionalism and experience of our team contributed to shaping a strong candidature that reflected both national ambition and delivery capacity.

A full-page background image of a skier in a blue and green racing suit, helmet, and goggles, leaning into a turn on a snowy mountain slope. A purple flag on a pole is visible in the foreground, and another pink flag is partially visible on the right. The sky is blue with some clouds.

CASE STUDY 2 MILANO CORTINA 2026

*Clarity in governance
across two Regions
and two autonomous
Provinces reassured
the IOC of Italy's
capacity to deliver.*

The selection of the host city for the 2026 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games was decided in June 2019 between two candidates: Milano Cortina in Italy and Stockholm-Åre in Sweden.

The Italian candidature had to overcome the complexity of a multi-regional structure involving Lombardy, Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, and the Host cities of Milano and Cortina.

Achieving consensus and operational clarity across this fragmented governance was one of the main challenges.

The bid succeeded thanks to several converging factors. Political alignment was strong and demonstrated to the International Olympic Committee that Italy was committed at all levels of government.

The reliance on existing venues, combined with the symbolic value of the Alps, reinforced the sustainability and authenticity of the candidature.

The narrative combined tradition with innovation, presenting Italy as a nation capable of hosting Games that would be both rooted and forward-looking.

Milano Cortina 2026 adopted a clear, criteria-based selection of the best-available venues,

“WePlan’s contribution in managing the candidature process with competence and dedication was instrumental in presenting a convincing project to the IOC.”

G. Malagò, President of Fondazione Milano Cortina 2026

prioritising existing, proven sites with strong event expertise. By allocating each sport to regions that already hosted top-level competitions and have seasoned operators, the candidature file shaped a pragmatic, polycentric model limiting new builds to what was strictly necessary, leveraging established infrastructure, and strengthening legacy. This approach was fully consistent with Olympic Agenda 2020 (and 2020+5) principles - use of existing/temporary venues, cost control, sustainability, and long-term community benefit - and offered a replicable blueprint for future hosts, like French Alps 2030.





WePlan's contribution was primarily in coordinating the candidature file preparation and providing its project management methodology. Our technical support ensured that commitments were presented in a coherent and timely manner and that the

complex governance structure could be translated into a form understandable to international evaluators. The ability to produce a clear, credible candidature file was fundamental to earning the IOC's confidence. Giovanni Malagò, President of

Fondazione Milano Cortina 2026, later underlined that **WePlan's** contribution in managing the candidature process with competence and dedication played an important role in presenting a credible and convincing project to the IOC.

Cross-cutting lessons

The experiences of Expo 2030 Riyadh and Milano Cortina 2026 highlight recurring conditions for success that are relevant to all mega-event candidatures.



Governance clarity

is fundamental. Without it, even the most visionary projects risk losing credibility. International evaluators are sensitive to confusion, overlaps, or political disputes. By contrast, when governance is presented as clear, inclusive, and decisive, it reassures that the event can be delivered efficiently.



Narrative coherence

is equally critical. A bid is not a technical dossier alone: it's the narrative of why the event fits that city, at that specific time. In Riyadh, the narrative was inseparable from Vision 2030. In Italy, the narrative linked Alpine identity and sport expertise with the modernisation of infrastructure and hospitality. Both demonstrated that successful narratives are both authentic and strategically aligned.



Operational viability

assessment cannot be postponed to after the award. Even at the candidature stage, organisers must show realistic plans for venues, transport, and visitor services. Vague promises or speculative projects weaken credibility. Evidence of readiness - through existing facilities, tested transport models, or clear timelines - strengthens the case.



Stakeholder unity

often determines the margin of victory. In divided bids, international organisations fear delays, cost overruns, and political disputes. Visible alignment among national government, cities, and private partners signals commitment and reduces risk. The Italian Olympic bid overcame its complex geography precisely by showing unity at the decisive moment.



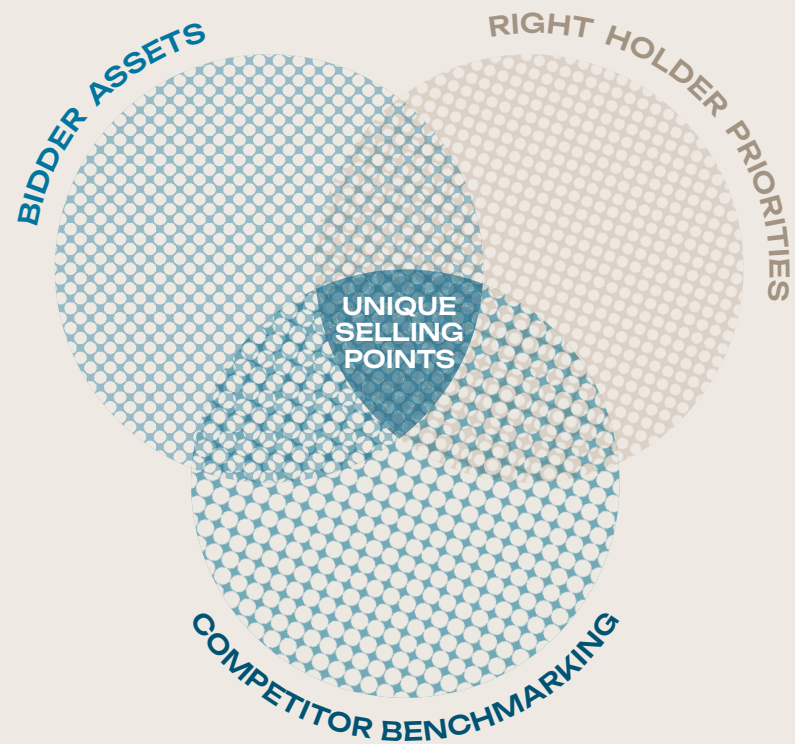
Finally, alignment with long-term development plans

may be the single most important differentiator today. Events conceived in isolation struggle to justify their cost and relevance. By contrast, candidatures embedded within broader strategies for urban regeneration, sustainability, or national transformation demonstrate that they are investments rather than expenditures. Both Riyadh 2030 and Milano Cortina 2026 presented themselves not as exceptions but as accelerators of existing plans, and this was central to their success.

The WePlan methodology

At the heart of a successful bid lies the capacity to translate ambition into a structured, credible project. Based on its experience, **WePlan** has developed a disciplined methodology that brings clarity to candidature planning. A central component is the **WePlan Unique Selling Points Positioning Framework™**, which addresses a recurring weakness of many bids: the tendency to emphasise what local stakeholders believe to be their strengths, without sufficiently considering how these are perceived by the right holder or how they compare to competing candidates. The framework cross-references three dimensions.

1. It begins with the intrinsic assets of the bidder, such as infrastructure, cultural positioning, accessibility, or governance models.
2. These are then assessed against the priorities of the right holder, which may include sustainability, innovation, geographic balance, or legacy.
3. Finally, the same assets are benchmarked against the



strengths and weaknesses of other bidders in the same competition.

The result is a rigorous identification of **which selling points are not only valid but truly distinctive and persuasive**. This prevents bias and ensures that the narrative of the candidature highlights the elements most likely to influence the decision.

Beyond the USP analysis, **WePlan's** methodology integrates other essential dimensions:

the elaboration of a clear and credible vision, the demonstration of operational viability, the presentation of transparent and sustainable financial models, and - perhaps most critically - the alignment of the event project with the long-term development strategies of the host city or region. Together, these elements provide a coherent framework for designing candidatures that inspire international decision-makers while laying the foundations for legacy.

Conclusion

Mega-event candidatures are complex undertakings that test the organisational capacity of nations, regions and cities. They are won not only through compelling visions but also through evidence of governance, credibility, and disciplined preparation.

Expo 2030 Riyadh and Milano Cortina 2026, though distinct in context, both demonstrate how coherence of narrative, stakeholder unity, and alignment with long-term development plans can transform aspirations into

“By embedding events within wider strategies of sustainable growth and urban development, host cities and nations can ensure that the impact of these occasions will extend far beyond their duration and leave a positive, lasting legacy.”

successful outcomes.

Future candidates - whether for Expos, Olympic Games, or World Championships - can draw on these lessons to design bids that are both inspiring and feasible.

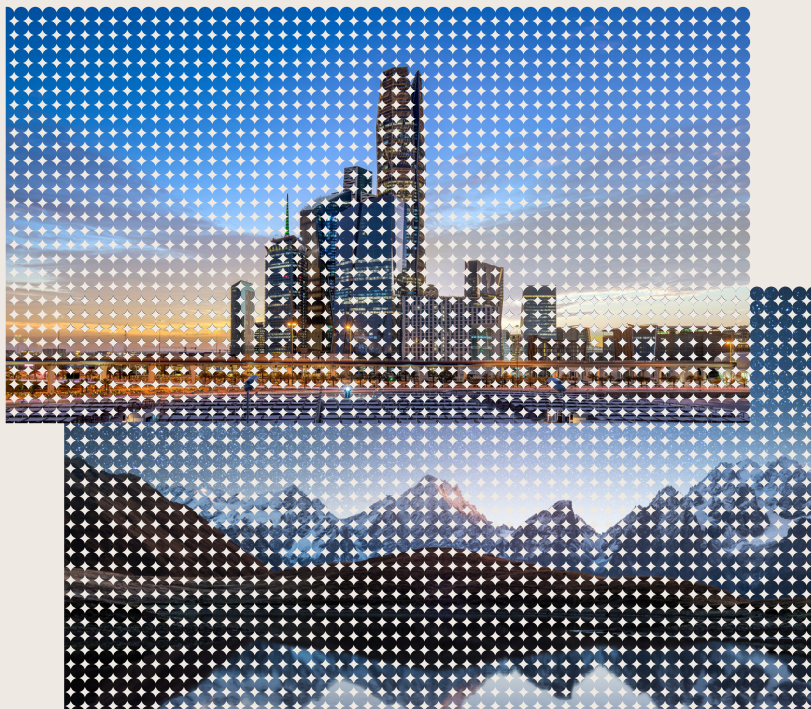
Looking ahead

The next decade will bring new challenges for bidders. Sustainability will be scrutinised more closely, financial transparency will be non-negotiable, and legacy will carry even greater weight in evaluation criteria.

Events will increasingly be judged not as exceptional undertakings but as catalysts for long-term development.

WePlan believes that structured methodologies, disciplined governance, and alignment with broader strategies will remain the decisive ingredients of successful candidatures.

The lessons from Expo 2030 Riyadh and Milano Cortina 2026 are not limited to those cases but provide a compass for future host cities and nations.





*WePlan is a consulting boutique specialised in **mega-event candidatures, delivery planning, and legacy strategies**. Founded by **Roberto Daneo** and **Giorgio Re**, the firm has contributed to major international projects including **Expo 2030 Riyadh, Milano Cortina 2026, Expo 2020 Dubai, Matera European Capital of Culture 2019**, and the **Ryder Cup 2022**.*

*Beyond their advisory work, the founders have also held **managing roles within large-scale events**, gaining direct operational experience. Their previous positions include **Expo Milano 2015**, where Roberto served as **Managing Director of the Bid Committee** and **Coordinator of City Operations**, while Giorgio was **Head of Finance of the Italian Pavilion**. Roberto also acted as **Managing Director for Authority Relations** during the **Torino 2006 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games**.*

This blend of strategic advisory and on-the-ground management gives WePlan a comprehensive understanding of how vision, governance, and delivery must align to achieve successful and sustainable mega-events.

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