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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SPORTS FACILITY LOCATION: AN END-OF-THE-CENTURY REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

TIM CHAPIN*

I. INTRODUCTION

A great deal of research in recent years has focused upon sports facilities, with particular attention paid to the tremendous amount of public funding that has been spent on stadia and arenas that are the homes of professional sports franchises in the “big four” sports leagues.¹ This research has almost uniformly condemned public spending on these projects, demonstrating that the economic impact of the teams and facilities is quite small and that any image-related benefits of these facilities do not translate into economic gains.² Even in cities that have aggressively pursued sports as an economic development strategy, evidence suggests that these cities have not fared as well as other peer cities that have chosen other development strategies.³

On the political front, studies of the political economy of these facilities have investigated the “machine” that gets behind these projects and asserts political and economic pressure to get stadia and arenas funded with public funds.⁴ These studies subscribe to either the growth machine argument that the economic and social elite in a city drive the local development agenda, often over the wishes of the local citizenry, or that a “sports regime” mobilizes and pushes for this policy option and then scatters once the decision has been made. In either model, the central argument is that sports facilities represent politically attractive policy op-

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1. The “big four” sports leagues include the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), and the National Hockey League (NHL).

2. See *SPORTS, JOBS, AND TAXES* (Roger G. Noll & Andrew Zimbalist eds., 1997); MARK ROSENTRAUB, *MAJOR LEAGUE LOSERS* (1997).

3. See Mark Rosentraub et al., *Sport and Downtown Development Strategy: If You Build It, Will Jobs Come?* 16 J. of Urb. Aff. 221 (1994).

4. See AMY KLOBUCHAR, *UNCOVERING THE DOME* (1982); John Pelisserio et al., *Urban Regimes, Sports Stadiums, and the Politics of Economic Development Agendas in Chicago*, POL’Y STUD. REV. Spring/Summer 1991, at 117, 117; CHARLES C. EUCHNER, *PLAYING THE FIELD* (1993); MICHAEL N. DANIELSON, *HOME TEAM* (1997); JOANNA CAGAN & NEIL DEMAUSE, *FIELD OF SCHEMES* (1998).

tions for public decision-makers and socially and culturally attractive policy options to city boosters and civic leaders. The attractiveness of this public policy option, even in the face of more pressing issues such as troubled education systems and crumbling infrastructure, drives these groups to mobilize economic and political resources to push for a new facility.

Perhaps the one major issue that the sports literature has yet to fully address is the question of facility location. While some authors have begun to investigate the location of sports facilities at the metropolitan level in their work,⁵ geographers have studied the landscape of sports,⁶ and practitioners have identified important criteria in the location of sports facilities,⁷ the question of location has often gone uninvestigated by political scientists and planners. This gap in the literature is unfortunate as sports facility location provides an excellent indicator of the ebb and flow of the political economy surrounding these facilities over the course of the past century. As the public sector has become increasingly willing to provide monetary and political incentives to professional sports teams and leagues, the location of sports facilities within the metropolitan area has quite clearly been impacted. Whereas research has focused upon issues of team relocation and regional shifts in sports franchises at the national level, very little attention has been paid to the political economy surrounding the location of facilities within metropolitan areas.⁸ This leads us into the central questions that will be addressed in this article. How has the location of sports facilities changed over the course of the last century? What factors have influenced the siting of sports facilities within the metropolitan area? Did these factors change over the course of the century? What explanations can be offered for these locational shifts and changes in siting factors?

It is widely believed that sports facilities have shown an unsurprising affinity for following their fan base when locating within a given metro-

5. See Thomas Chema, *When Professional Sports Justify the Subsidy, A Reply to Robert A. Baade*, 18 J. OF URB. AFF. 19 (1996); Ziona Austrian & Mark Rosentraub, *Cleveland's Gateway to the Future*, in SPORTS, JOBS, AND TAXES, *supra* note 2, at 355.

6. See JOHN ROONEY, *A GEOGRAPHY OF AMERICAN SPORT: FROM CABIN CREEK TO ANAHEIM* (1974); JOHN BALE, *SPORTS GEOGRAPHY* (1989) [hereinafter *SPORTS GEOGRAPHY*]; JOHN BALE, *SPORT, SPACE, AND THE CITY* (1992) [hereinafter *SPORT, SPACE, AND THE CITY*]; JOHN BALE, *LANDSCAPES OF MODERN SPORT* (1994) [hereinafter *LANDSCAPES OF MODERN SPORT*].

7. See DAVID PETERSEN, *SPORTS, CONVENTION, AND ENTERTAINMENT FACILITIES* (1996); GERAINT JOHN & ROD SHEARD, *STADIA: A DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT GUIDE* (1997).

8. See EUCHNER, *supra* note 4; DANIELSON, *supra* note 4.

politan area. Over the course of the last century the location of sports facilities has generally mirrored spatial changes in the location of middle class families. Early stadia, it is widely believed, were located in dense urban neighborhoods, with an intentional high degree of accessibility to their working class and middle class fan base. As cities decentralized, so did sports facilities. With the coming of suburbanization in the 1950s, sports facilities also began their migration to outlying locations, thereby providing vehicular access to their core markets. Mirroring the "rural renaissance" of the 1970s, that decade saw many facilities constructed in remote suburban locations, off major interstates, insuring easy access by car to the facility by the fast suburbanizing middle class. As classic location theory would suggest, sports facility location appears to be linked directly to the location of their core market over time. Just as retailers have shifted the location of department stores from central cities to suburban malls to insure adequate access to local purchasing power, so have sports facilities (and the teams that call them home) migrated to locations that are more likely to be profitable.

Within the past fifteen to twenty years, however, there has been a massive return of sports facilities to the central city. Projects like the Metrodome in Minneapolis, the Miami Arena, Pioneer Field in Buffalo, Camden Yards in Baltimore, Gateway in Cleveland, MCI Center in Washington D.C., and BankOne Ballpark in Phoenix have all been sited in central city locations that provide what many have glowingly referred to as a return to the "good old days" of the early sports facilities. The majority of recently constructed facilities are located in central cities, adding to the perception of a central city renaissance in North America. These facilities provide an intensely urban experience, making visitors interact with cities that they had long since been abandoned (as in Buffalo and Cleveland) or never been known (as in Phoenix).

The location of sports facilities in these dense, complex, urban environments initially seems to fly in the face of location theory and even good transportation planning. It would appear that sports facilities have become separated from their core market, middle and upper middle class households, in other words those fans that can afford to attend sporting contests that become more expensive each year. In addition, the accessibility of many of these urban facilities is clearly hampered by the heavy traffic of downtown areas, the constricted streets of the central city, and what appears to be limited parking surrounding these facilities. Even given good mass transit connections, as there are for Baltimore's Camden Yards, the vast majority of people still travel to games via automobiles, requiring parking and easy ingress and egress to the facil-

ity. From a purely theoretical perspective, these locations appear to be poorly thought out at best and an economic disaster at worst.

A principal purpose of this article is to outline the history of sports facility location in North America in the twentieth century and discuss how the factors for siting these facilities have adapted to the changing political economy of professional team sports. It will be shown that prior to 1950, sports facilities were almost always located due to facility costs and market forces, not because of political factors. The location of the local fan base, the availability of cheap land, and transportation access to the stadium were the factors of paramount importance in the siting of these early facilities. However, with the increase in public spending on these sports projects and the linkage of economic development goals to these projects, facility location has become a hotly contested decision at both the national and intra-metropolitan levels. As will be detailed, this has led to the inclusion of political factors in the facility siting process. While traditional fan base, land costs, and transportation are still important factors in determining facility location, political factors have clearly become a major determinant in the siting of sports facilities in North American cities.

To preview the central finding of the article, the return of sports facilities to central cities, despite the high land costs and inaccessibility of many of these in-city sites, has occurred in part because political factors have pulled these facilities to urban locations. However, the element that served to guarantee the massive return construction of sports facilities to the central city was the recognition by the sports teams and leagues that these central city sites were profitable. While economic development initiatives and public funding (political factors) have been partly responsible for pulling teams back to center city facilities, it was the changing economics of professional team sports that provided the essential ingredient in this locational shift.

II. SPORTS FACILITIES AND URBAN SPACE: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Sports geographers have long been interested in the "landscapes of modern sport," including the changing location of sports facilities within metropolitan areas. An early classic of sports geography, Rooney's *A Geography of American Sport*, does not delve too deeply into sports facility location, but instead investigates the incidence of different aspects

of sports across space.⁹ A more recent work by British geographer John Bale and Swedish geographer Olaf Moen investigated more specifically the intersection of sports stadia and metropolitan location. In his extensive study of sports and geography, Bale considered the argument that stadia are “nuisances,”¹⁰ written on “stadiums as gardens and athletes as pets,”¹¹ and, with Moen, investigated the economic, social, and geographic intersections between sports facilities and urban area in *The Stadium and the City*, their edited volume from 1994.¹²

Sports geographers have brought to the literature a better understanding of the changing nature of sports arenas and stadia as spaces for play. The literature traces the physical and cultural changes from the unique, place-specific early venues in which fans of all economic levels sat together, to the modern “cookie-cutter” stadia of the 1960s and 1970s. These later stadia denoted no sense of place and slowly began the separation of fans by economic class, a practice that continues through today. These authors have also discussed the metropolitan shift of sports facilities from dense, urban environments, usually accessible by mass transit or foot, to suburban, automobile accessible facilities surrounded by acres of asphalt. The suburbanization of sports stadia has been a part of the segmentation of cities into distinct, less complex sectors, defined largely by land uses and activities that take place in these areas. Bale summarizes this viewpoint (in discussing the work of Moen) when he writes, “during the twentieth century sporting land use has not only become more suburban but has also become much more segmented with distinct agglomerations or zones of specialized sporting land use.”¹³

Despite their excellent research and wonderful writing style, the work of both Bale and Moen has somewhat limited application to the analysis of sports facility location in the North America. In Europe, sports stadia are still suburbanizing, with (mainly soccer) teams leaving historic, but cramped inner city stadia for suburban spaces that offer cheap land and opportunities for larger facilities that can lead to greater profits in the long run. As will be detailed shortly, North America has experienced a similar shift in sports facility location at the metropolitan level, but this era appears to have been superseded by the downtown facility push of the 1980s and 1990s. In addition, within Europe the relo-

9. Rooney, *supra* note 6.

10. See John Bale, *In the Shadow of the Stadium: Football Grounds as Urban Nuisances*, 75 GEOGRAPHY 325 (1990).

11. See SPORT, SPACE AND THE CITY, *supra* note 6.

12. See THE STADIUM AND THE CITY (John Bale & Olaf Moen eds., 1994).

13. SPORT, SPACE AND THE CITY, *supra* note 6, at 95.

cation of teams and the construction of new sports facilities is usually instigated and paid for almost entirely by the teams themselves. Localities have not been as avid in their pursuit of professional sports teams, with much less public funding available for relocation expenses and new facility construction. In contrast, North America has a long history of team relocations and inter-jurisdictional bidding wars for sports teams, with a publicly funded new stadium or arena often at the heart of the competition. Despite these limitations, the work of these sports geographers has been instrumental in forming the approach to studying the intersection of sport, space, and cities.

As noted earlier, the central research agenda for North American researchers has usually been upon the economic impacts, financing boondoggles, and political processes surrounding the provision and construction of major league sports facilities. Most of this research has focused upon the recent facility building boom (approximately 1985-present), with only a handful of studies looking at changes over the course of the century. Even the few studies that have discussed facility location have tended to focus upon the development impacts of these facilities. Austrian and Rosentraub investigated the employment impacts of the Gateway project on Cleveland's downtown, only tangentially discussing the decision to locate the facility downtown.¹⁴ In his book *Major League Losers*, Rosentraub includes a number of excellent case studies that outline the political history of the projects, sometimes discussing the locational conflicts surrounding these facilities.¹⁵ One of the more interesting discussions of sports facility location and metropolitan development comes from Baade and Dye.¹⁶ In their article the authors outline the factors that can cement the link between a sports stadium and microarea development; the regular use of the facility, the linkage of the project to other nearby activity centers, the capture of spending in the "microarea," and limiting the spread of surface parking. However, while their piece provides an excellent set of recommendations for planners and decision makers involved with a soon-to-be-sited stadium or arena, it does little to illuminate how and why facility location has changed over the course of the century or how sites are chosen by local governments and teams.

14. See Austrian & Rosentraub, *supra* note 5.

15. See ROSENTRAUB, *supra* note 3.

16. See Robert Baade & Richard Dye, *Sports Stadiums and Area Development: A Critical Review*, 2 ECON. DEV. Q. 265 (1988).

The "How To" books of the sports facility literature provide some insight into the criteria that are usually considered when locating a facility within the metropolitan area. In *Stadia: A Design and Development Guide*, authors John and Sheard note that a sports stadium can be built in any portion of the city, but that the primary "decision factors" for siting the facility should be client base, land cost, land availability, and land use regulations.¹⁷ A similar set of criteria are offered up by Petersen in his book *Sports, Convention, and Entertainment Facilities*.¹⁸ Petersen states that the "three most important factors to consider in selecting a site for a convention, sports, or entertainment facility are those that affect attendance, income, and occupancy. In other words, location, location, location."¹⁹ The siting criteria specifically identified by Petersen as important for stadia are considerations of size, visibility and scale, parking availability, and transportation accessibility.²⁰ Clearly, these factors indicate that the primary criteria for siting sports facilities are based in site characteristics (size, availability), economic factors (land costs), and transportation (accessibility). As we shall soon see, these factors were the principal criteria for siting sports facilities in the first half of the last century, but in more recent years additional factors have come into play.

III. SPORTS FACILITY LOCATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

With the massive financial success, glowing architectural reviews, and seemingly jump-started districts surrounding Camden Yards in Baltimore, Jacobs Field in Cleveland, and Coors Field in Denver, many have concluded that baseball has finally returned to its roots. These neotraditional ballparks (ballparks, not stadia) have style and flair, urban roots, and few empty seats, appealing to fans, players, owners, city officials, and local merchants. Their success has spurred similar projects in Seattle, Houston, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee, as well as maybe a hundred others in other major league sports and in the minor leagues. Because of their success and their settings, many have compared these new ballparks with many the great old ballparks that were built in the early stages of the twentieth century; Wrigley Field, Fenway Park, Ebbets Field, Shibe Park, Yankee Stadium, and the original Comiskey Park among others.

17. See JOHN & SHEARD, *supra* note 7, at 35-36.

18. See PETERSEN, *supra* note 7.

19. *Id.* at 43.

20. See *id.* at 43-46.

What few have recognized, however, is that most of these early sports stadia were not constructed in the dense urban environments that most recall them situated in. Many of the classic ballparks that still stand today were originally sited on cheap land surrounded by little development or near low density industrial areas (like railyards or stockyards), and not in the complex, urban, sometimes residential areas as they appear today. In Chicago, Wrigley Field was built in 1914 on the largely undeveloped North Side of the city, far away from most fans on the South Side of the city.²¹ Comiskey Park, which opened in 1910, was sited on a former garbage dump, near the "odiferous stockyards."²² Fenway Park and Yankee Stadium were both located in largely undeveloped portions of Boston and New York, respectively, because land was cheap and development was recognized as an eventual certainty for that area of the city. Even the grand old ballpark Ebbets Field, held by some to be the greatest ever,²³ was situated in a low density part of the city, on the "cheapest land in Brooklyn, which lay between the bustling village of Flatbush and somewhat suburban Bedford."²⁴ Only in subsequent years did the area surrounding Ebbets Field mature, as the addition of numerous transportation connections (trolley lines) provided access to the ballpark and helped to make the land in the district more available for development.

An article by Bluthardt provides the most direct discussion of the location of sports facilities in this era.²⁵ This piece focuses on the early ballparks of the first building boom (1909-1925) and does very well to outline the main factors that went into site selection during this period. "When a site was chosen, four factors were considered: accessibility, neighborhood, room for expansion, and availability."²⁶ These factors allowed the team owners to reap profits because these sites provided cheap, available land that allowed room for expansion if new decks or stands were added to the stadia in later years. Accessibility was usually provided via subway lines or trolley lines that existed within walking distance or were built in subsequent years. In some cases, the ballpark helped to spur growth in the area (as with Ebbets Field and Shibe Park),

21. See MICHAEL GERSHMAN, *DIAMONDS: THE EVOLUTION OF THE BALLPARK* 118-120 (1993).

22. *Id.* at 92.

23. See MICHAEL BENSON, *BALLPARKS OF NORTH AMERICA* (1989); GERSHMAN, *supra* note 21.

24. GERSHMAN, *supra* note 21, at 110.

25. See Robert Bluthardt, *Fenway Park and the Golden Age of the Baseball Park, 1909-1915*, 21 J. OF POPULAR CULTURE 43 (1987).

26. *Id.* at 43.

while in other cases the new stadium had very little affect upon development patterns (as with Fenway Park).²⁷ All of these ballparks have been lauded for their in-city locations, dense environments, and quintessential "city character," but what most seem to forget is that these stadia grew to be *urban* facilities over time. They were not sited in a complex urban environment, but often at the urban edge where cheap, acceptable land was available. Certainly, neighborhood-centered ballparks, like Shibe Park in Philadelphia, were to be found in some cities, but the dominant factor for siting the earliest sports facilities was cheap and available land. Transportation and accessibility to the fan base were important, but secondary concerns.

Only a handful of new facilities came online between 1925 and 1950. However, existing siting criteria continued to assert themselves. As sports became a profitable business, larger stadia were built to accommodate bigger crowds. Consequently, larger parcels of land were required to house these facilities. Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles was sited ten minutes south of downtown, in Exposition Park, near the University of Southern California. Built as part of that city's efforts to (successfully) attract the Olympic Games, the stadium was one of the first to be municipally financed. The location for the Coliseum was chosen because it provided available land (already leased by the city), offered good transportation connections for the region (with many nearby trolley lines), and was centrally located in the region.²⁸ The massive Cleveland Stadium, which seated over 80,000 on its busiest days, was built on fill along that city's waterfront. This stadium was located there in part because of the size of the stadium and the unavailability of affordable land elsewhere in the city. Like these stadia, other facilities that opened their doors in this relatively quiet stadium construction era were also located on the edges of cities on available, cheap land, including Sicks' Stadium in Seattle and Mile High Stadium in Denver.

The central point to be made is that prior to 1950, the most pressing concern for team owners (and municipalities) trying to build a new stadium was cheap land. Proximity to the fan base and transportation accessibility were also important factors, but not as important as land costs. Why was this the case? Because team owners were usually financing and building the new stadium themselves, they had a very direct interest in keeping costs down while still siting the facility in a location accessible to

27. *See id.* at 50.

28. *See* Steven Riess, *Power Without Authority: Los Angeles' Elite and the Construction of the Coliseum*, 8 J. SPORT. HIST. 50 (1981).

their core market. As a result, the team owners sought urban edge locations, often near industrial areas, that kept land costs down, yet provided access to their core fan base. In several cases, such as Wrigley Field, Fenway Park, and Yankee Stadium, the city grew up around these facilities and within a handful of years the team owners had the best of both worlds, an in-city stadium built for city-edge prices.

After World War II, several demographic and transportation trends conspired to fuel a second stadium building boom. Suburbanization saw families leave central cities for outlying areas, with a combination of pull factors (cheaper land, larger homes) and push factors (inner city deterioration and racial tensions) reshaping the North American metropolitan landscape in a startlingly short period of time. At the heart of these changes was the relentless rise of the automobile. While America had long begun traveling the road towards an auto-oriented culture, the provision of large freeways and interstates opened up cities and millions of acres of land to new development. With the dismantling of many inner city mass transit systems, the automobile came to dominate settlement patterns. Retail and commercial uses followed families to the suburbs and suburban areas were soon "malled" and "stripped," with the automobile serving as the principal means of transportation to almost all of life's activities.

With the beginning of suburbanization in North American cities and the growth of southern and western cities, sports leagues and sports teams began to look to new markets for their product. Neilson writes, "Club owners followed their customers out of declining immigrant cities, into suburban landscapes of new affluence and mobility."²⁹ After the war, teams moved with remarkable frequency, with a total of forty-three moves since 1950.³⁰ Ten baseball teams moved to new markets between 1950 and 1972. The NBA had numerous moves to new cities during the post-war period, but Danielson notes that many of these moves were during the very unstable early years of that league. In addition to relocating teams, expansion brought new teams to many cities, requiring new or retrofitted facilities to host them. So, at the national level, leagues were restructuring to take advantage of these emerging Sun Belt markets. But, how did all of these changes impact the location of sports facilities *within* metropolitan areas?

29. Brian James Neilson, *Dialogue with the City: The Evolution of Baseball Parks*, 29 LANDSCAPE 39, 45 (1986).

30. See DANIELSON, *supra* note 4, at 134.

Not surprisingly, many of the facilities built in the 1950s and 1960s took on characteristics of this trend towards suburbanization. Milwaukee opened County Stadium in 1953 in the suburbs for the relocating baseball Braves of Boston. This stadium was surrounded by oceans of asphalt, effectively removing the city from the game of baseball and insuring that automobiles were the only means of access to the stadium. To attract the Dodgers from Brooklyn, the city of Los Angeles provided land for a new ballpark at Chavez Ravine. Originally planned to be home to public housing, this site was accessible solely by automobile, with ample parking provided on site. In San Francisco Candlestick Park opened in 1960 for the relocating Giants. Gershman notes that the city had promised the team a 40,000 seat stadium, with 12,000 parking spaces on site.³¹ Because this would require at least seventy-five acres and would bring a suburban project to dense central city San Francisco, downtown interests rejected locating the park downtown.³² Consequently, the stadium was located at Candlestick Point, well south of the downtown and accessible only by automobile. For the NFL's Vikings, the Minneapolis suburb of Bloomington opened Metropolitan Stadium in 1956. Bloomington was one of the first suburban areas to attempt to garner a 'big-league image' through the construction of a suburban sports facility. Anaheim Stadium, which opened in 1966, was sited at the intersection of not two, but five interstates to maximize automobile access to the facility.³³ These projects epitomize the spatial migration of sports facilities to suburban areas in the 1950s and 1960s. Numerous other projects were built in suburban locations or at the distant edges of cities in the 1960s, including Arlington Stadium (Dallas/Fort Worth), Shea Stadium (New York), the Oakland-Alameda Stadium/Arena complex, Tampa Stadium, The Great Western Forum (Los Angeles), the Metropolitan Center (Minneapolis), and the Houston Astrodome.

To be fair, a few projects in the 1960s attempted to recreate the urban stadia of the pre-suburban era. In St. Louis, Busch Stadium, which opened in 1966, was sited downtown in part to help spur the revitalization of the central city, with moderate success.³⁴ RFK Stadium in Washington D.C. and The Spectrum in Philadelphia were sited in long neglected portions of the city, with the hopes that these facilities might aid in reviving the central city. In 1970, both Cincinnati and Pittsburgh

31. See GERSHMAN, *supra* note 21, at 180-182.

32. See *id.*

33. See Neilson, *supra* note 29, at 45.

34. See John Rooney, *Sports from a Geographic Perspective in SPORT AND SOCIAL ORDER: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT* (Donald Ball & John Loy, eds., 1975).

opened new 'concrete doughnut' multi-sports stadia in downtown areas representing efforts to retain the core's centrality as a place for recreation and entertainment. Despite these attempts at locating sports facilities in the central city, though, a trend toward suburban facilities had been firmly established during the 1950s and 1960s.

The 1970s witnessed the spread of sports facilities into increasingly suburban and exurban locations. Kansas City located their new ballpark and football stadium at an interstate interchange, at great distance from the central city, with sprawling parking lots surrounding the facilities. As the NFL gained an increasing foothold on America's sports consciousness, new stadia sprouted up in suburban Dallas, Boston, Buffalo, and New York. In Detroit, suburban Pontiac built a huge new domed stadium for the NFL's Lions and Auburn Hills built an arena for the NBA's Pistons. Other NBA teams to migrate to distant suburban locations were Cleveland's Cavaliers and Baltimore's Bullets (now the Washington Wizards). Again, although examples of new downtown sports facilities of the 1970s can be found, such as Seattle's Kingdome and the Superdome in New Orleans, the general trend was towards the continued suburbanization of sports facilities. This spatial trend clearly mirrored demographic, business, and retail trends of the decade as people, jobs, and dollars continued to pour out of North America's central cities.

Despite the continued flight of middle class families and employment to the suburbs, the suburbanization of sports facilities slowed considerably in the 1980s. In fact, since 1980 the vast majority of new professional sports facilities have located in central city areas, with many projects sited specifically to address downtown development goals. Some suburban facilities were built, Joe Robbie Stadium in Miami is the most obvious example, but a move towards downtown facilities clearly had been established. Downtown domed stadia in Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Atlanta and St. Louis were built. New arenas in Miami, Charlotte, Orlando, Phoenix, Washington D.C., Cleveland, Tampa, Portland, Vancouver, Montreal, and Boston have all been located in central city areas. At the minor league level this trend has also taken root, with new ballparks and arenas locating in downtowns across America's smaller cities as well.

By far the hottest recent trend in sports facilities in the 1990s is the downtown "ballpark." While this renewed interest in central city ballparks might be more correctly be attributed to Pioneer Field in Buffalo, a downtown minor league ballpark, the facility that established downtowns as viable and possibly essential to the success of a new sports facility was Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore, which opened in 1992. Oriole Park at Camden Yards has had by far the greatest impact

upon sports facilities of any stadium or arena built within the past half-century. Located just west of the downtown tourism and entertainment district, which is centered on a Rouse built festival marketplace, Camden Yards was successfully integrated into the urban fabric of central city Baltimore. The massive commercial and critical success of Camden Yards has established downtown sites as the preferred location for baseball stadia, as almost all projects that have been planned and built since then have emphasized downtown locations, pedestrian connections, and synergy with existing entertainment and tourism anchors. Camden Yards is a "ballpark," one that is intimately tied to its host city and one that established the Orioles as Baltimore's team, and more specifically, the *city* of Baltimore's team. Despite some project shortcomings, such as a substantial price tag, a large site footprint compared to ballparks of the 1910s, and surface parking lots springing up in a neighboring industrial area, Camden Yards went a long way towards re-establishing the link between downtowns and sports again.³⁵ The sports facility was once again part of the urban fabric, an element of the city rather than separate from it.

Similar ballpark projects with urban locations have been built in or are planned for the cities of Cleveland, Seattle, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, San Diego, Atlanta, and Montreal. These facilities have all explicitly used Camden Yards as both their architectural and locational model. Even suburban facilities have attempted to attach themselves to this trend. New ballparks in suburban Dallas-Fort Worth (in Arlington next to the old Arlington Stadium) and suburban Milwaukee (next to County Stadium) have pedestrian paths and signature architectural elements that bring to mind Camden Yards. In addition, several new arenas for NBA and NHL teams have tried to emulate Camden Yards' urban setting, entertainment environment, and pedestrian connections.

What is interesting about the emergence of central city locations as the preferred site for sports facilities is how these locations differ so greatly from past trends. Over the first three-quarters of the century, sports facilities were sited with attention to three primary factors; 1) available, cheap land, 2) accessibility, usually through rail and pedestrian connections, and 3) proximity to the core fan group. As population and employment suburbanized, sports facilities followed. Between 1950 and

35. See Edward Guntz, *Grand Stand*, *ARCHITECTURE*, June 1992, at 64; Timothy Chapin, *Urban Revitalization Tools: Assessing the Impacts of Sports Stadia at the Microarea Level* (1999) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University) (on file with author).

1980 when most facilities were built in suburban settings, the above three factors still exhibited the most telling influence in the location of stadia and arenas. Large swaths of available, cheap land were required to help keep costs down and to house the thousands of automobiles that brought fans to games. Accessibility was still a key, but it now rested primarily with automobiles. Locations along interstates and other major highways represented an important factor for determining the site of a new facility, even for urban facilities. Finally, by following their markets to the suburbs, the migration of sports franchises and sports facilities to suburban and Sun Belt areas mirrored more general trends in population, retail, and employment.

The recent trend of locating sports facilities in urban settings flies in the face of these three siting factors. First, rather than locating facilities on large, cheap pieces of land, sports facilities are now sited on cramped, urban sites that are very expensive to acquire and time consuming to accumulate. Part of the skyrocketing costs of sports facilities can be attributed to expensive urban locations that require substantial investments in land prior to any work on the facility itself. Second, despite locations near major downtown expressways, these sites are often more accessible by mass transit than by automobiles, despite the increasing use of automobiles and the decline in the use of mass transit in the United States. Urban highways that bring fans to the central city to attend games are growing increasingly congested, further hindering the transportation accessibility of the urban sports facility. Lastly, central city locations are increasingly inaccessible to what had emerged to be the primary fan base for sports teams, middle and (increasingly) upper middle class fans. By locating their home venues in the central city, teams have distanced themselves from what had come to be their core fan base.

Within the past fifteen to twenty years, then, the location of sports stadia and arenas appears to have become increasingly distanced from the factors that have traditionally guided the siting of these facilities for much of the century. At first glance, land costs, accessibility, and proximity to the core fan base appear to have been supplanted by a new set of siting criteria, ones that dictate central city locations. The Camden Yards model, in which a new facility is located on very expensive land, with fair interstate connections but excellent transit connections, and located in a central city that continues to bleed out middle class families each year, has come to be the dominant location for these facilities. What can account for this metropolitan shift in facility location in the past twenty years?

IV. EXPLANATIONS FOR THE RETURN OF FACILITIES TO CENTRAL CITY SITES

In analyzing the locational shifts of sports facilities and the changing influence of the various siting factors over the course of the century, it is readily apparent that no single explanation can account for these changes. Instead, a host of factors have combined to produce this shift. These factors include the growing importance of the public sector in the site selection process, the linkage of sports facilities to economic development initiatives, and the changing economics of major league sports.

At first blush, the most obvious explanation for the return of sports facilities to central cities appears to be the growing influence of the public sector in the facility siting process. For almost all new stadium and arena projects a long, involved, official siting process is usually required before construction can begin on the facility. This usually involves public hearings, a public debate over the pros and cons of different sites in the local media, and publicly-commissioned studies that compare the different sites. What gives the public sector such an active role in the site selection process? First, large projects like sports facilities require environmental review because of the major impacts they will have on a given portion of the metropolitan area. To be sure, the growing number of environmental regulations guarantee the public sector a role in the siting of a facility this size, regardless of who pays for it. However, this has not been a major part in the rising influence of political factors in the siting process, nor in the return of sports facilities to central city areas. In many cases, environmental review is actually more likely to indicate suburban sites that offer better automobile access and fewer on-site environmental problems.

The second reason the public has gained an active role in the siting process is the influx of public dollars into stadia and arena projects. By bankrolling many of these projects, the public sector has guaranteed itself a major role in this siting process. The public sector has invested billions in sports facilities over the years, something on the order of \$15 billion dollars during the twentieth century,³⁶ with an estimated \$6-\$7 billion for the most recent building boom (1985-2005).³⁷ In return for these investments the public sector has effectively purchased the right to a major say in the location and even sometimes the design of these facilities.

36. See Raymond Keating, *Sports Pork: The Costly Relationship Between Major League Sports and Government*, 1999 BROOKINGS INSTITUTION POL'Y ANALYSIS 339.

37. See Chapin, *supra* note 35, at 31-32.

As noted in the earlier review of sports facility location over the course of the century, the public sector has not always played a significant role in the siting of sports facilities. In the first half of the century, team owners were primarily responsible for construction costs, land acquisition costs, and even some infrastructure upgrades for new sports facilities. Consequently, cheap land was sought and city-edge or industrial area sites were the primary locations for new facilities. In more recent decades, the public sector is more often than not a major financier of these projects. Even in cases where the public sector is not helping to cover construction costs they are often on the hook for major infrastructure upgrades and other concurrent investments in the district surrounding a new facility. Not surprisingly, with more money invested directly and/or indirectly in these projects, the public sector has demanded and received a greater role in the site selection process. As the costs of new sports facilities have skyrocketed, sports franchises have been more than happy to trade facility construction dollars for other facility characteristics, including location. This 'location for dollars' tradeoff benefits the teams in that they do not have to bankroll the entire project themselves, as they did in the first half of the century. In return for their investment, the public sector has received a role in the siting process and been more able to link these facilities to local economic development initiatives.

The influx of public dollars into sports facility projects provides only a partial explanation of the return of sports facilities to central cities over the past twenty years. Since the 1950s, almost all stadia and a majority of arenas have been financed primarily with public dollars. In fact, from the 1950s to the 1980s, sports facilities were financed by the public sector even more so than in recent years, as the public sector now has begun demanding some investment from the teams in these facilities rather than publicly financing the entire project. Yet, despite the growing influence of public dollars throughout the 1950s and 1960s, new facilities continued to locate in suburban areas, well away from central cities. Many suburban jurisdictions wanted to establish a local image as a "major-league place" and they viewed a major professional sports team as a means to that end. Consequently, Bloomington, Arlington, Pontiac, and several other jurisdictions used a locally financed facility to attract a team to the suburbs. So, in effect, suburban boosterism helped to lure teams away from older central city facilities.

However, siting requirements that had dominated the first half of the century, technical criteria (site size, accessibility) and economic criteria (low land costs, proximity to the core market), remained a major force in choosing sites for new facilities, even ones financed primarily by public

dollars. It is important to recognize that sports franchises voluntarily relocated to these suburban sites. The move of teams to Sun Belt areas and suburban areas came because the franchises recognized that their core market had migrated to these areas. In addition, the rise of the automobile convinced teams to identify and choose sites that maximized automobile accessibility. So, while the influx of public dollars helped to drastically reduce the team's expenses for a new facility, it did not contradict the factors that had long dictated the location of sports facilities in the metropolitan area.

A second possible explanation for the massive return of sports facilities to the central city has been the linkage of sports facilities and downtown development goals. In order to justify the massive outlays of scarce public dollars for sports projects in the 1950s and 1960s, project backers have maintained that stadia and arenas are local economic development engines. Project proponents have long argued that the employment impacts, tax revenues, and spin-off benefits of these projects more than compensate the public sector for their up-front investments in sports facilities. As noted in the opening section of this article, a great deal of research has gone a long way towards debunking this myth. As this pro-facility argument has been undermined, facility advocates have begun to link these projects to a slightly different set of economic development goals. Rather than arguing that sports stadia and arenas lead to broad-based economic development, proponents have increasingly targeted these projects to microarea, or district-level development. These projects, proponents argue, can help physically revitalize central city cores and re-establish the centrality of the center city as a place of recreation, tourism, and business.³⁸ While the entire metropolitan area may not be much better off, revitalization of a long-dilapidated district will lead to new construction, new jobs, an improved image, and a better ability to compete for tourist and entertainment dollars at the regional and national level.

This widely popular downtown or district development strategy has been a major factor in the return of sports facilities to the central city. Local political leaders, civic elites, and downtown land holders (elements of the 'growth machine') have successfully pushed this redevelopment agenda and been successful in relocating many teams to central city locations. Baltimore's Camden Yards is the best known example of this. This approach represents the continuation of the long-established "bricks and

38. See Mark Rosentraub, *Stadiums and Urban Space*, in *SPORTS, JOBS, AND TAXES*, *supra* note 2, at 178.

mortar" strategy of economic development in North America's central cities. It also represents the rise in influence of political factors in the siting of sports facilities. Stadia and arenas are now located on cramped, expensive central city land, often with poor automobile access and perceived limited nearby parking options. Technical criteria and economic criteria still play a role, but in the past twenty years political factors have come to dominate many siting processes and the local growth machine often receives their downtown stadium or arena, but usually at tremendous public expense.

Again, though, the linkage of sports facilities to downtown development initiatives does not fully explain why central city locations have come to be the dominant site for new facilities. Why did the downtown trend not take hold earlier? The public sector has long been bankrolling these projects and downtown 'bricks and mortar' projects have been a major part of urban policy since the 1950s. Downtown interests have long been a major force in metropolitan development. A few cities in the 1960s and 1970s, such as St. Louis, Seattle, and Pittsburgh, built downtown stadia despite the prevailing suburban trend, but these were the exception rather than the rule. Only over the past twenty years have downtown interests appeared to dominate the battle over the location of sports facilities within the metropolitan area. If dollars and political influence were the sole ingredients necessary for the return of facilities to the central city, then downtown sites would have dominated from the 1950s on. Yet, not until the 1980s did downtown facilities become the rule rather than the exception.

The final piece to the puzzle lies in the economics of professional sports. In the earlier discussion of the shift of sports facilities to the suburbs, it was argued that one of the factors fueling this shift was the migration of the core fan base to these same suburban areas. Like many other businesses during this period, sports franchises were following their market to the suburbs, insuring proximity to their fan base. Within the past twenty years, a second market shift has occurred, one that has helped to fuel the return of stadia and arenas to central cities. Major professional sports have come to identify a new core fan base, one with even deeper pockets than upper middle class families; corporations. Corporations are the primary purchasers of luxury suites (often called corporate boxes), which can run anywhere from \$50,000 to \$500,000 a year. Corporations purchase these boxes to entertain business clients and to reward employees for a job well done. A typical roster list of luxury box owners includes local financial institutions, local law firms, major regional vendors (like beer companies), and local businesses that have

been pushed to purchase a luxury box because it will help keep the team in the city. Luxury boxes bring in tens of millions of dollars to a team each year, revenue that does not have to be shared with other teams.³⁹ Because of the size of these revenues and because they do not have to be shared with the league or other teams, luxury boxes have been one of the primary factors behind the most recent stadium building boom.

What does this new revenue stream have to do with facility location? While large numbers of season ticket sales and club seating sales remain an integral part of a team's bottom line, it is luxury suites that really drive the financial success of a team. No longer are long-time blue-collar fans (as in the old days) or the more recently identified suburban, middle class fans the driving factor behind whether or not a team makes a profit. Instead, it is corporate clients that shell out hundreds of thousands of dollars a year that drive a team's financial success. Whereas the older fan base was located in suburban areas, this new core clientele is to be found in the central city, oftentimes in office towers that were a part of previous "bricks and mortar" strategies of downtown redevelopment. The central point to be made is that, with the identification of corporations as the new "core fan base," sports franchises have been more than willing to accept the location of new facilities in central city areas. Indeed, teams have begun to actively push for the construction of sports facilities in central city areas. These locations provide a much better locational fit for this new market, providing easy access for these fans.

Perhaps the best evidence of the importance of central city sites is provided by recently constructed privately financed sports facilities. In San Francisco, a new ballpark is being financed and built by the team not far south of the central business district, offering a much better location than the city-edge site previously occupied by the team. The MCI Center in Washington D.C. was sited in that city's old retail district, with excellent Metro connections and easy access to the law firms, banks, and other corporations that purchase luxury suites at the arena. Similar central city locations are seen for recently opened arenas in Portland, Vancouver, Boston, and Toronto. Even when new sports facilities are financed primarily by the teams, they have been more likely to choose central city locations that offer access to corporate markets. In those few cases where suburban stadia or arenas were constructed, like Jack Kent Cooke Stadium in suburban Washington D.C. and the National Car Rental Center in suburban Miami, these locations were chosen due to a

39. In the "big four" major professional sports leagues, teams usually split general ticket revenues, but not luxury box revenues.

lack of central city sites (as in D.C.) or a tremendous public financing package (as in Miami).

To be accurate, other factors have contributed to the return of sports facilities to central cities. The widespread perception of Camden Yards' success has fueled "downtown redevelopment through sports" efforts in many cities. In North America, political leaders have traditionally tried to model the success of projects in other cities; witness the previous building booms of festival marketplaces, convention centers, and aquariums after successful projects in Boston and Baltimore. Camden Yards has provided an attractive model that political leaders and the local media can utilize to generate support for new downtown sports facilities. There also seems to be something of a shift in consumer attitudes away from sterile and dull suburban shopping and living options towards more interesting and vibrant, yet still safe in-city options. Many North American cities are seeing a trickle of middle and upper-middle class households back to the city, although many cities are still experiencing net losses. The improving image of center cities has probably contributed some to the expansion of entertainment and tourism facilities in the central city.

The central argument of this article is that while public dollars and downtown redevelopment efforts have played an essential role in the return of sports facilities to central cities, the most important factor in this locational shift was when teams became active seekers and consumers of central city locations. Central city sites began to emerge as the dominant locational trend *only* when sports franchises determined it was in their financial interest to come back to the center city. While downtown sites may be politically more acceptable and more money may be available for (and necessary for) these sites, the acceptance and concurrent exploitation of these sites by the sports industry is what made the Camden Yards model the dominant model over the course of this recent building boom.

V. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SPORTS FACILITY LOCATION

The location of a professional sports facility within a metropolitan area is invariably tied to three sets of decision-guiding factors: technical factors like site characteristics, economic factors like land costs, and political factors like economic development initiatives. Over the first half of the century, technical and economic factors dominated the siting process. With teams financing their own facilities, team owners sought cheap, accessible locations in an attempt to minimize their costs. However, with the infusion of public dollars and the linkage of publicly-

backed economic development goals to these facilities, political factors grew in influence after 1950. Between 1950 and 1980, suburban jurisdictions successfully lured many teams to locations far from the central city. These locations provided a nice fit to the rearranging landscapes of metropolitan areas and the economics of professional sports, as teams followed their migrating fan base to the suburbs.

Within the past twenty years, however, sports facilities have shown a particularly intense affinity for urban locations. When professional sports began to exploit the corporate market, central city locations became financially attractive to teams and the preferred location for new facilities. Expensive, complex central city sites have become the dominant location of new sports facilities, what I have termed the Camden Yards model. Most cities currently planning a new facility have identified these urban locations as the desired location of a new facility. These locations have been lauded as a return to the "good old days" when sports and center cities were inextricably tied together, epitomized by Wrigley Field, Fenway Park, Madison Square Garden, and other historic facilities that would not be so beloved in different settings. However, it is important to recognize that most of these facilities were sited in city-edge or industrial areas, not due to their distinct urban character, but because these locations provided cheap, accessible land. In subsequent years the city filled in around them, creating the urban settings so highly valued today.

In many ways, the urban ballparks, stadia, and arenas of today actually represent a new locational model of the professional sports facility. This model is one that imposes itself upon the urban environment, sometimes successfully, as with ballparks in Cleveland, Baltimore, and Denver, and sometimes unsuccessfully, as in Chicago (New Comiskey Park) and Miami (the original Miami Arena). These new central city stadia and arenas are sited in largely built-out, very dense urban landscapes with a mix of land uses and historic structures and a location that requires careful planning and "contextualization" to make these sites work.⁴⁰ Despite all that is written about the great ballparks and arenas of the "golden age of the baseball park,"⁴¹ most of those classic old facilities were not sited in environments nearly as complex as those of the modern central city sports facility.

The political economy surrounding sports facility location continues to grow increasingly complex as the new century dawns. This article has

40. See Chapin, *supra* note 35, at 467-470.

41. See Bluthardt, *supra* note 25.

argued that the combination of public dollars, economic development goals, and the economics of professional team sports currently represent the major factors in sports facility location. There is no doubt that additional factors, including local development agendas, the power of the local growth machine, national development and retail trends, have all made contributions to the siting process as well. The ongoing collision of private sector profit-focused objectives and public sector economic development-centered goals requires the consideration of an increasingly broad set of criteria in siting sports facilities in the metropolitan area.

Of perhaps most importance to cities currently engaged in or soon-to-be engaged in a sports facility siting process is the recognition that only when the sports industry became convinced that central city locations were profitable and desirable did these locations become popular. Despite massive investments into sports facilities by the public sector and a long-established central city redevelopment agenda, North American cities were able to attract teams back to central city facilities en masse only when the industry deemed it in their best economic interest to return. The political economy of sports facilities and sports facility location continues to tilt towards the private sector. Even in the siting of sports facilities paid for largely by public funds, the sports industry itself remains "the straw that stirs the drink."