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ESSAY

SPORTS FACILITIES & URBAN REDEVELOPMENT

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The 1990s was a decade in which new sports facilities of every type and description were built throughout the United States and Canada. Not since the 1960s when baseball began its major expansion has there been such a boom in new facilities. The decade began with the construction of New Comiskey Park in Chicago in 1991. The following construction boom has continued unabated into the present.

What explains this explosion in new design, concepts and construction? It is more than the mere aging of structures (i.e., Wrigley Field is still going strong even though it dates back to 1916). Changes in the economics of the game explain much of the need for new facilities that generate more revenue that can then be retained by the team to pay ever-increasing player salaries.

The specifics of the economics of modern professional sports are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the fundamental changes in all major professional sports in the United States resulting from player free agency, increased broadcast revenue, merchandise and other non-game revenue, and the conversion from family to corporate ownership of teams has made the financial bottom line just as important as the team's place in the standings. This business dominated "tilt" began in the 1970s, expanded in the 1980s, and erupted in the 1990s to a point where it is clear that a professional sports team is a business that needs to make money - it merely happens to operate within the sport and entertainment business. There is no end in sight to this development in professional sports. This construction boom has changed the face of the game and, as is discussed below, the seat that you sit in at that very game.

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A ballpark, stadium or arena was historically a place where one went to watch a sporting event. These facilities were not very comfortable, but they were convenient. Usually located in the heart of the city near transit stations or within walking distance of the business center, they reflected the American city of the turn of the century through the post war years of the late 40s. People lived for the most part in the urban core or near it. Public services were in the vicinity as were entertainment venues including; theaters, movie houses, and sports facilities. These facilities were built on the city grid system and did not need extensive parking accommodations. Trains and buses brought customers to the ballpark or they walked. If a patron did arrive by car, he or she could park in a nearby office parking garage or on the street.

This changed during the 1950s and 1960s when Americans bought their cars and moved to the suburbs. Ballparks, arenas and stadiums that were once so convenient, now became difficult to reach. The neighborhood surrounding the ballpark changed, and it seemed that these changes were always for the worse. Suburbanites who fled the “chaos” of the downtown core did not want to return to it to see a sporting event. Teams relocated from older urban areas to newer ones with promises of new, modern ballparks easily accessible to the middle class fan and his or her automobile.

In 1953, the Boston Braves left downtown Boston and moved to the “western” city of Milwaukee. County Stadium was the first new ballpark to be built in years and included some of the most recent architectural features, such as cantilever construction that eliminated many but not all of the support posts that obstructed the view for so many seats in the older stadiums. Within a few years, the Dodgers and the Giants left for the West Coast and new ballparks were built in Los Angeles and San Francisco, ballparks which were located near freeways where fans from throughout the region could drive to the stadium, park their car, and attend the game without ever entering the downtown area.

The 60s and 70s saw the advent of the multi-purpose facility. Be it a stadium (e.g., Three Rivers, Veterans, and Riverfront) or an arena (e.g., Madison Square Garden), these facilities were intended to be economical by allowing more than one sport to be played in the building. The fan’s comfort was raised to a slightly higher standard and more attention was given to concession services.

Perhaps most importantly during this time, the Astrodome opened in Houston in 1965 as the first indoor baseball stadium. Dubbed the “Eighth Wonder of the World” when it opened, it overcame the problem of dying grass by using the first artificial turf, known as, what else – As-

troturf™. But perhaps more important for the future of sports facilities, the Astrodome had the first so-called luxury suites or skyboxes. Fan comfort had risen to a new level, both in terms of quality and price.

Many of the new facilities in the 60s and 70s were located adjacent to downtown areas. Yet some, such as the Astrodome, were located far from the urban core at interstate highway system interchanges. The interstate highway became a key determinant of stadium or ballpark location. Fans lived in the suburbs. They had to get to the games from home or on their way home from work. The downtown sites were avoided as too cramped, unable to provide enough parking, and too expensive. It became better to build a stadium or arena at an undeveloped interchange and to then let the town come to the site. For example, when the National Basketball Association (NBA) team in Cleveland needed a home, Richfield Arena was constructed far from the center of Cleveland, in a location that was then considered to be a disaster (it was in a cornfield). But this location was accessible to the suburban fan.

Even the stadiums built in or near downtown cores, such as the Cookie Cutter Trio of Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati, Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, and Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, were situated more for fan access from interstate highways than for pedestrian or transit access. They may have been built in a downtown area, but they functioned similar to a suburban facility and they did not really contribute to the area in which they were located. The areas surrounding these stadiums did not flourish and did not benefit from the stadium's location nearby. Fans seemed to go to the game and to then leave the area as quickly as possible. There was no need to linger in the dilapidated downtown area.

The move to the suburbs had no more visible example than the Truman Sports Complex in Kansas City. Built in the early 1970s and opened in 1973, this complex had two separate stadiums located immediately adjacent to each other with acres and acres of parking surrounding them, all located at an interstate interchange. The complex was miles from downtown, and the site of Municipal Stadium where the baseball and football teams of Kansas City had played for years, but it was reachable in minutes for residents of the affluent suburbs who could afford the escalating price of tickets to the games.

While Royals Stadium and Arrowhead Stadium at the Truman Sports Complex may have exemplified the move of sports facilities as far from downtown as possible, the design of the stadiums themselves was a significant step forward. Today, almost thirty years after they opened, the designs are considered modern, sleek and attractive. The stadiums have

proved to be extremely functional and fan friendly and have been beautiful facilities in which to watch a ballgame. More recent facilities may have more "revenue points" but these two stadiums showed what a radical new design could do to increase the fan experience at the game by making the whole event part of a complete entertainment experience.

If the 1960s and early 1970s were the years of moving to suburbia, then the later 1970s and early 1980s were the years of the move indoors. While the Astrodome was opened in the mid 1960s, it was not until 1975 that the next domed stadium, the Pontiac Silverdome opened. That facility was also the first with a "light roof" made of teflon that avoided the need for expensive support structures. Soon thereafter came downtown domed stadiums in New Orleans and Seattle and the ultimate domed stadium, the Skydome in Toronto, which opened in 1989. These later structures were located in downtown areas, but much like the Cookie-Cutter Trio described above, they were not part of the downtown area.

The light roof variety of domes reappeared with the Metrodome in Minneapolis and the Hoosier Dome (now RCA Dome) in Indianapolis. These facilities were part of the downtown redevelopment effort and were located in such a way as to increase pedestrian traffic in the downtown area. In fact, the Metrodome was paid for with the proceeds of so-called "sin taxes" on liquor and cigarettes that in turn made local officials desire more bars, restaurants and other locations which would then sell those products and as a result increase tax revenues. This dome era ended with the Georgia Dome in Atlanta and the Trans World Dome in St. Louis in the early 1990s.

The beginning of the 1990s saw the first facility that was slated to move to the suburbs, but instead was built in the downtown area. The Chicago White Sox had threatened to relocate to the suburbs west of Chicago thereby abandoning historic Comiskey Park on the South Side. When Chicago officials blocked the team's effort to move to the western location, the team flirted with relocating to St. Petersburg, Florida to an empty light roof dome that had been built in downtown St. Petersburg in the late 1980s. When the political wrangling ended the team agreed to move to a new stadium built adjacent to the existing facility.

New Comiskey Park opened in 1991 and old Comiskey was torn down to make way for parking. Located adjacent to an expressway and a transit line, New Comiskey can be reached by suburban fans as well as those in the downtown area. Because of the location of the new ballpark, efforts were also made to minimize any negative effects on the surrounding residential neighborhoods. While New Comiskey has not been a model of using a sports facility to revitalize an area, the process

surrounding its construction demonstrated officials who were among the first to recognize the issue of revitalization, and to attempt to address the issue if only in a limited fashion.

What the process surrounding the construction of New Comiskey Park did bring to new sports facilities was an awareness of the fan and the need to increase the fan's convenience, comfort and opportunities to spend money while at the stadium. This is clearly demonstrated within the stadium as concession stands ring the main concourse level, luxury boxes surround the field, and a stadium club restaurant is located in the right field corner.

In essence New Comiskey Park was a transitional park from the ballparks and stadiums of the past. Its basic design was consistent with the ballparks of the 60s through the 80s, but it led the way in making the ballpark an entertainment venue with numerous food and beverage opportunities and souvenir stands which include a full team store at the stadium. The ballparks to come may look different from New Comiskey, but they owe a debt of gratitude to that ballpark for leading sports facilities into the 1990s with a push toward the fan as a revenue source.

After New Comiskey Park came the line of breakthrough, neo-traditional downtown ballparks that became the model for the sports facility of the 1990s. Oriole Park at Camden Yards opened in 1992 at a downtown location not far from Inner Harbor and downtown restaurants, bars and stores. Unlike many facilities built before it, Camden Yards was designed to fit into its environment, and not to repudiate it. While accessible by an interstate highway, the ballpark is most often reached by public transit, including a train station at the ballpark, or a walk from the Inner Harbor or the nearby downtown parking facilities. Its design complements the city, it does not clash with it.

Coors Field in Denver and Jacobs Field in Cleveland, both built in 1995, and Safeco Field in Seattle which was built in 1999, followed Camden Yards. These ballparks were built to spur redevelopment and revitalization and to be a part of the downtown area. For example, in Denver, Coors Field has spurred an upsurge in the so-called "Lo-Do" section of downtown Denver. In Cleveland, Jacobs Field is part of the Gateway complex that includes Gund Arena, and acts as an entrance to downtown Cleveland. In both cases, numerous bars, restaurants and souvenir shops have sprouted up near the ballpark. Fans can reach each stadium not only by car (both have interstate highway access), but also by nearby transit and by walking from near, but not adjacent, parking areas.

Baseball stadiums may have lead the way with downtown locations and new designs in the 1990s, but football stadiums and basketball and hockey arenas have also moved downtown and been integrated into downtown redevelopment efforts. All of these facilities generate business for restaurants, bars and shops in the stadium area and use parking removed from the facility itself. For example, the Ice Palace in Tampa, Florida is located in a community redevelopment area as is the Orlando Arena. The new arena in Nashville, Tennessee is located in the heart of that city's resurgent downtown and generates traffic for the entertainment locations nearby. The MCI Center in downtown Washington is evidence of the desire of a sports franchise owner to move to a location affording him greater opportunities to sell suites and club seats than existed in their previous suburban location. The new American Airlines Arena in downtown Miami is another example of relocating just a few blocks from a previously used arena, but maintaining a linkage with the downtown area. However, due to the inability of the separate owners of the Heat and the Panthers to agree on a single facility, the Panthers moved to a new arena located far from any downtown area - an exception to the recent trend.

Sports facilities will continue to be an integral part of a city's downtown redevelopment efforts. In the 1980s and 1990s America's cities embarked on ambitious efforts to revitalize their downtown areas which had long been neglected. A key element to the success of these efforts was the retention of, or attraction of people to the downtown area for longer than just the work week. Sports facilities and other types of entertainment venues help keep workers downtown for evening events and to bring them back downtown on weekends and holidays.

As more facility developers and potential customers have realized the convenience associated with these downtown locations, there have been ancillary effects as residential units have sprouted up near these facilities. Indianapolis based its entire downtown redevelopment program on locating professional and amateur sports facilities and offices in the downtown area. These facilities have transformed downtown Indianapolis into a sort of center for sports, a trend which culminated in the relocation of the NCAA headquarters from Kansas City to Indianapolis in 1999.

The trend to use sports facilities as redevelopment tools has also moved from the big league level to the minor league level. Minor league baseball stadiums and hockey arenas are increasingly being built in downtown areas as a linchpin of a revitalization strategy for the commu-

nity. Whether big league or minor league, the issues and the objectives are the same, even if the costs differ.

As cities continue to struggle with revitalization of their urban areas they will continue to look to sports facilities as a key player in achieving success. Admittedly, the public's resentment of the cost of so-called "palaces" for wealthy owners, and rich players to play in, is an issue that local leaders must confront and overcome. Local leaders must also be attentive to the needs of their community and negotiate agreements with the teams that ensure both long term use of these facilities by the teams and that these facilities will be an integral part of the redevelopment effort.

In the end, to effectively use sports facilities for redevelopment, local officials must keep these points in mind:

- Develop a plan in advance of a team owner's request, or more frequently demand for a new facility. Understand what is realistically within and what is beyond the city's means.
- Identify the best sites for a sports facility from the perspective of redevelopment of the entire area. Do not let the team owner dictate the site that works for his purposes, but defeats the goal of revitalization. Be sure to pick the most favorable sites, and not only those that are cheaper or more easily attainable.
- Negotiate tough buy-out provisions into the lease agreement in case the team wants to relocate when the facility begins to age. Recognize the lease or use agreement for what it is - a sort of pre-nuptial agreement. If the team really wants to move, it will find a way to do so. Still, local officials must protect the city as best as they can for when that event occurs. Always keep in mind that the professional sports business is changing rapidly everyday. Teams do not know what to expect years into the future because their perspective is often no further ahead than the expiration of the next particular collective bargaining agreement with the players association in their sport.
- Ensure that the agreement makes certain that the more control the team wants over the facility, the more costs the team should bear (i.e., in maintenance, security, operations, etcetera).
- Ensure that the facility is designed so that it complements the surrounding area and is not a fortress impenetrable from the community. The team can have control over interior design issues, but the community must retain ultimate control over

the exterior appearance, finishings, and accessibility (e.g., food and souvenir shops that open onto the street when there is no event in the building) of the entire facility.

- Recognize also that the sports team is really just another type of business entity and that the deal negotiated with the team should be similar to any business deal that the city may develop with a private business.

The team owner must also recognize the difficult position that public officials are in and be sensitive to their needs. Team representatives should listen carefully to what the community needs and work with the community to accomplish mutual goals. Still, the ultimate goals of the community and the team should be the same - a successful facility. This should be a win-win situation. Identify the essential goals for the project, achieve those goals, and do not insist on the other minor subsidiary provisions.

Sports facilities and redevelopment will continue to be intertwined in the foreseeable future for many American cities. The public interest in redevelopment, neighborhood revitalization, historic preservation, and a return to the downtown area has coincided with the boom in the development of new sports facilities. While the boom may have initially been ignited by the change in the economics of the sports business, it has been fueled and nurtured by the desire of communities to have a place that they can be proud of and enjoy. Working together, the local government, the community and the sports team can create a facility that serves a variety of needs and fulfills these needs for everyone.