



## Introduction

## Sports facilities and urban development: An introduction

The relationship between sport, sporting infrastructure, and cities endures as city leaders and other stakeholders continue to embed the hosting of sporting events and teams – and the construction of related infrastructure – within broader discourses of competitiveness, quality of life, city image, branding, and other economic and intangible benefits. While sport remains only a small part of what makes a city unique, vibrant, or economically sustainable, investing in sports stadiums and arenas can be among the most expensive infrastructure decisions that city leaders can make. In addition, given the size of sports facilities – which can take up a considerable development footprint – and the types of events that are held there – which can result in different usage patterns, traffic, and other effects – deciding where to place these venues can influence land use in urban areas for decades. The following special issue features articles from academics who have sought to examine, critique, and further understand the process whereby facilities are built, and the impacts they have on their respective communities. In doing so each addresses some fundamental issues associated with the relationship between sport and urban development.

## Sports and the pro-growth agenda

Some would argue that sports stadiums and arenas, like many other large scale urban infrastructure projects, are a necessary investment in order to promote a broader growth agenda. Civic growth results in opportunities for businesses such as construction companies, banks, law firms, and other entities to advance their own interests, while allowing city governments to expand the local tax base. This agenda provides a common ground for both political and business elites to align their interests (cf. Elkin, 1987; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Stone, 1989). And although many among the local regime or coalition may not even be sports fans, they likely understand how interest in sports teams can be leveraged in order to attain broader development goals.

Garnering widespread support for sports facilities can be a highly contested process. However, while proponent groups may agree upon the utility of building state-of-the-art sports infrastructure, persuading local citizens that using public funds for said use is another issue altogether. Messages about the value of such developments are debated and articulated through local media sources,

where newspapers become arbiters of discourse surrounding the debate (Buist & Mason, 2010; Delaney & Eckstein, 2008; Turner & Marichal, 1998). At the same time, newspapers also stand to benefit from the broader pro-growth strategy that sports facility construction tends to privilege (Logan & Molotch, 1987). This process is explored in Joshua Sapotichne's analysis of newspaper frames in the case of two Seattle referenda. As Sapotichne discovers, this process is a complicated and nuanced one; while stadium proponents tend to have substantial resource and organizational advantages (Paul & Brown, 2001), this does not necessarily mean that their campaigns will be successful. Instead, he uncovers how in the first of two separate referenda, opponents were able to challenge certain arguments regarding the economic benefits associated with the proposed facility. A subsequent referendum debate involved a much more interactive and engaged process of arguing for the merits of a stadium development project, where economic development arguments were less widely employed by proponents (and therefore less challengeable).

**Is there still a disconnect between what some think sports facilities deliver versus what they deliver in reality?**

While clearly stadium proponents are aware of the types of arguments that need to be made in order to garner popular support, and are becoming more sophisticated in the arguments they are making to gain support for them, there is still considerable disagreement on whether sports facilities indeed can provide the types of benefits that are promised. As noted in Sylvia Trendafilova, Steven Waller, Robert Daniell and Jacques McClendon's exploration of the views of industry stakeholders in Detroit, MI, proponents will often use economic impact studies to argue for the merits of investing in stadiums and the events that are hosted there. Not surprisingly, their findings show that individuals involved in sport and economic development in the city of Detroit strongly believe that the teams and events drive economic development in that city, and that sport has had a hand in improving the image of Detroit. In addition, these same individuals acknowledge the potential problems related to depending too heavily on sport, and that issues may arise where projects are not a part of an integrated development plan. This would suggest that those involved directly with leveraging the presence of the teams and facilities are also aware of

the risks associated with investing public resources into this type of development.

#### **What benefits are generated by these facilities that may justify the public's investment in them?**

While there has been a long-standing body of evidence that has refuted the claims of significant economic impacts created by sports facilities and the teams that play in them (Baade & Dye, 1988; Coates & Humphreys, 1999), there is evidence that there are intangible benefits to having teams and facilities in communities (Johnson, Groothuis, & Whitehead, 2001; Johnson, Mondello, & Whitehead, 2007; Santo, 2007). This may be manifest in increased real estate prices surrounding areas where new facilities are anchored. The rationale here is that if having a professional sports team play nearby contributes to quality of life, that this may be found in increased housing values in the area surrounding where the team plays. Xia Feng's and Brad Humphreys study of major league sports facilities throughout North America using census block group data finds some evidence of this, where housing prices decrease as the distance from the stadium increases. This is an important finding as any additional tax revenues that might be generated from increased property values could be used to justify the public subsidization of the facility itself. Bruce Johnson, John Whitehead, Daniel Mason, and Gordon Walker explore this further as they take an alternative approach to examining the intangible impacts of sports facilities in their study of Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta. They consider how the positioning of a new arena for a National Hockey League franchise in a downtown core contributes more broadly to the vibrancy of the downtown itself. In doing so, they explore willingness to pay for a new arena as it contributes to the overall intangible benefits conferred by a city's downtown. Despite their findings, the intangible benefits created by sports facilities and teams do not appear to approach the total amount of public funds invested in these types of projects.

#### **Why don't the benefits match the size of the subsidy?**

There is a straightforward explanation for this; for North American cities, the number of available major league franchises is kept lower than what a free market might dictate, which allows teams and leagues to leverage the threat of relocation to exact higher subsidies from local governments. Thus, although the economic and intangible benefits of having a team in a facility may be significant, this value rarely exceeds the amount that local communities ante up for their respective teams.

However, paying upwards of hundreds of million dollars for sports facilities in order to make downtowns more vibrant may not be a questionable investment solely in terms of financial returns. As Michael Friedman, Jacob Bustad, and David Andrews explain, the desire to build state-of-the-art facilities and host major sporting events is driven by neoliberal logics that create a perpetual race against other cities to create new and innovative experiences for tourists and locals alike. As they argue in their study of Baltimore, Maryland, this strategy can be highly problematic in cities that sorely need resources for other essential services.

#### **How do we evaluate successful projects?**

The body of evidence available suggests that the number of questionable stadium and arena projects outnumbers the success stories where such developments are held out as solutions to urban issues. Even where sports facility-anchored development projects have been widely acclaimed in the revitalization of cities, the facilities themselves and the teams that play there have not always enjoyed the same success. In Columbus, OH, the Arena District has been noted for its design and role in making Columbus' downtown area a destination (Rosentraub, 2010). However, the anchor tenant, Columbus Blue Jackets, have struggled on the ice and competition from another large arena in the vicinity has made arena operations less lucrative. In other cases, projects have failed miserably where facilities have been built and it has been assumed or hoped that other development would follow.

As Mark Rosentraub and Michael Cantor's study of San Diego, California, shows, cities that have actively integrated their sport facility projects into a broad urban development agenda tend to find get more returns on their investment. In their article they review the Ballpark District in terms of broader aims that civic leaders have for development projects, including increasing or sustaining property values, the economic integration of residents, population growth in targeted areas of a city, and the attraction of more diverse socioeconomic groups. On these grounds, they consider San Diego's project a success. In doing so, they introduce alternative ways of exploring how cities should evaluate these projects.

#### **Conclusions**

This raises the issue of whether, as academics, we are really asking the right questions when it comes to examining sports facilities and urban development. Cities invest in sports facilities for a number of reasons, including economic development, tourism, community development, image enhancement, and quality of life. However, each city possesses unique characteristics – such as history, weather, location, and the combinations of other amenities – that may ultimately influence the success or failure of a given sport facility-anchored urban development project. For this reason, the needs and expectations of specific cities will vary considerably, as will the manner through which sports facilities are leveraged to attain the types of benefits explored in this special issue. Research has tended to examine the impacts of teams and facilities without the specific context of a city taken into consideration. For example, a city that views sports infrastructure and the team playing there as contributing to the quality of life of residents will more likely value the intangible benefits that are conferred when assessing the value of its investment. For this reason, perhaps a more appropriate way to view sport facility development is in terms of how each facility fits into a much broader context in each city, and how that broader development meets the aims of that given city. Thus, future research should continue to explore the ways in which sports-related infrastructure is integrated into the other development occurring in cities, how it fits into overall city strategy, and how the infrastructure combines with other civic amenities to impact tourism, quality of life, and/or

community development. In the meantime, it is hoped that the articles appearing in this issue have taken some steps in this direction.

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