Atlanta’s Urban Renewal Reprise: Coupling the 1996 Olympic Stadium and 2017 SunTrust Park Developments

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Abstract 2016-250

North America’s arenas, ballparks, and stadiums—both those in existence and under construction—are inextricably linked with the cities in which they are located. In nearly every case, with the construction of a new state-of-the-art facility comes the promise of economic development (or redevelopment) and enhanced livability and vibrancy in the neighborhoods surrounding the venue (Chapin, 2002, 2004; Mason, Washington, & Buist, 2015; Rosentraub, 2010). As has been well established in the literature, stadium issues are often sources of significant debate among citizens and policymakers, who deliberate over cost, financing, and location at public hearings, in the media, and occasionally, at the ballot box (e.g., Kellison & Mondello, 2014). Embedded in these conversations are questions of urban renewal (i.e., to what degree will a new downtown stadium create jobs and spur economic growth?) and displacement (i.e., if building a new stadium downtown, what happens to those in the nearby neighborhoods, who are commonly poor and racial minorities?; Eisinger, 2000; Sze, 2009).

Such questions are currently being asked in Atlanta, Georgia. At the center of the current debate is SunTrust Park, the Atlanta Braves’ new $672-million ballpark, which is scheduled to open approximately 15 miles northwest of the team’s current downtown location in 2017. For the Braves, the new ballpark’s appeal is in large part due to its improved proximity to the team’s core consumer base (Gillooly, 2013). The stadium is expected to anchor a much larger development called The Battery Atlanta, a mixed-use district that will include shops, restaurants, offices, a hotel, and permanent residences (Wenk, 2015). Although the public–private ballpark initiative received widespread support from Cobb County policymakers, the decision to relocate from downtown to a suburban location was not without controversy. In addition to concerns that the decision-making process lacked transparency and due diligence, some Atlantans expressed disappointment in the Braves’ relocation from Turner Field (née Olympic Stadium), a facility less than 20 years old at the time of the announcement (Tierney, 2014).

Dating back to the construction of Atlanta–Fulton County Stadium in the 1960s, the promised economic growth that was supposed to come with Atlanta’s downtown stadiums has been largely unrealized (Hurley, 2013). Scholars have argued that downtown neighborhoods such as Summerhill were fractured from the development that followed the city’s successful bid for the 1996 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games. Gustafson (2013) points out: “Olympics-related displacement worked to create a particular demographic without the homeless, public housing residents, and other low-income Atlantans who were also predominantly racial minorities” (p. 199). In the two decades since the Olympics, stadium-proximate neighborhoods remain underdeveloped. Following the SunTrust Park announcement, Burns (2013) reminded Atlanta citizens of the state of Turner Field’s surrounding neighborhoods: “Like other impoverished sections of Atlanta, the stadium community is a ‘food desert,’ where fresh, affordable groceries are impossible to find.” She continued, “Nor is there a single bank in the area. And no pharmacy. No hardware store. In Peoplestown there is not one licensed child care provider” (para. 90). This stadium-proximate degradation is, of course, not unique to Atlanta or Turner Field. In cities ranging from Tampa (Raymond James Stadium) to New Orleans (Mercedes-Benz Superdome) to Cleveland (Progressive Field), stadium-based gentrification and redevelopment projects undertaken in recent decades have often failed to curb—and in many cases exacerbated—urban blight and economic underdevelopment.

Looking at Atlanta’s latest stadium project more critically, in this study we extend the established line of sport stadium-specific research seeking to contrast the public perceptions and attitudes about stadium development with the mediated frames provided by public policymakers and other public–private intermediaries (i.e., the promises being made about the process and outcome of redevelopment). More specifically, we draw upon Friedman, Mason, and colleagues’ (Coates & Friedman, 2011; Friedman & Mason, 2004; 2005; Friedman, Andrews, & Silk, 2004; Friedman, Bustad, Andrews, 2012) critical analyses of the local politics of stadium development to counterfactually...
compare media framings versus actualized economic, political, and social outcomes of two Atlanta-based stadium development projects.

To wit, the proposal for (and subsequent legislative support of) SunTrust Park and the surrounding mixed-use development suggest planners in Cobb anticipate a different outcome than that of Turner Field and its surrounding neighborhoods. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to identify distinctions between the two plans. Therefore, in this study, we examine the key differences between the Turner Field and SunTrust Park proposals. In particular, we explore: (1) the sociopolitical conditions under which each stadium plan was proposed; (2) the environmental, economic, and social concerns raised by local citizens in each case; and (3) the specific details of each plan’s long-term economic vision for its respective stadium district.

Method

We employed a case study approach to compare the Turner Field and SunTrust Park (re)development projects. Case studies are especially advantageous when researching stadium projects given the wide range of contextual differences that can exist between cities and individual cases (e.g., Reid, 2014). For both cases, we aggregated media reports using the Access World News database. Following the reasoning of Mason et al. (2015), our primary interest was in capturing media frames—that is, the primary narratives associated with the case or issue. Newspaper articles were collected for two time periods: Turner Field from planning to opening (1987–1996; n = 2,009) and SunTrust Park from announcement to present day (2013–2015; n = 510).

Given the fact that the SunTrust Park development is currently in the construction phase, media reports were complemented by paper-and-pencil surveys sent to 4,000 randomly selected registered voters in Cobb. The surveys were designed to provide an indication of public opinion on the SunTrust Park plan (Goidel, 2011). A total of 374 individuals returned surveys, which asked respondents to report their attitudes toward the financing plan, the Braves, and policymakers. As part of the surveys, 134 respondents also provided substantive comments that were analyzed for this study.

Discussion

Although open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) of the empirical material is ongoing, an initial review of media related to the Turner Field development suggests that although many Atlantans were caught up in the euphoria of the successful Olympic bid, some citizens were vocal in their concerns about renewal and displacement around the stadium site. Specifically, neighborhood advocates questioned how the city’s effort to develop the areas around the stadium footprint would encroach on existing residences in the Summerhill, Mechanicsville, and Peoplestown neighborhoods. After further analysis, additional media frames will be identified and discussed.

Interestingly, similar concerns about Atlanta’s downtown neighborhoods have surfaced in the rhetoric associated with SunTrust Park. Local residents have expressed a keen interest in the fate of Turner Field (the Atlanta Fulton County Recreation Authority is currently accepting proposals for the ballpark’s redevelopment; Leslie & Trubey, 2015). Survey responses from Cobb residents, while mostly supportive of SunTrust Park, indicated several concerns, including the possibility of increased traffic and crime, the opportunity costs associated with financing the stadium, and the perceived lack of transparency of Cobb policymakers’ decision-making process.

Turner Field’s inability to significantly impact the surrounding area is not an uncommon occurrence. Even in Baltimore, where the Orioles’ Camden Yards has been identified as a major catalyst of revitalization, critics have pointed out that the neighborhoods within the venue’s purview remain in decay (e.g., Hamilton & Kahn, 1997). Furthermore, the downtown area of Cleveland has been termed a “dual city” for its juxtaposed neighborhoods, the result of “urban planners [drawing] up entire downtown developments while ignoring big chunks of the population as if the local needy didn’t exist” (deMause & Cagan, 2008, p. 158). In light of these examples, we aim to explain the sociopolitical factors that connect (and in some cases, differentiate) Atlanta’s ballpark developments. In doing so, we provide insight on how Cobb planners intend on avoiding past mistakes with Turner Field while considering the future of Atlanta’s downtown neighborhoods.