

The Edifice Complex: Reliance on New Sports Stadiums to Solve Urban Problems

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Kenneth L Shropshire, *The Sports Franchise Game: Cities in Pursuit of Sports Franchises: Events, Stadiums, and Arenas*. **University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1995. pp. xii+102.**

Arthur T Johnson, *Minor League Baseball and Local Economic Development*. **University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1995. pp. xvi+273.**

Charles C Euchner, *Playing the Field: Why Sports Teams Move and Cities Fight to Keep Them*. **John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1993. pp. xiv + 213.**

It has seemed curious to me that critical urban studies scholars have, by and large, neglected substantive exploration of issues related to professional sports stadium construction and urban development.¹ Considering that sports stadiums can require a larger commitment of resources and may alter the urban environment more than any other urban development project, this omission is especially perplexing. Sports studies scholars, on the other hand, have tended to ignore the broader political economy of urban development in their research into the specifics of stadium construction and location. By focusing on the micro-economy of stadium development, these analyses have rarely framed the larger social, historical, economic and political issues that constitute the urban context in which stadium construction is embedded.² In numerous American cities, the building of new sports facilities and the attempt to obtain or retain professional franchises has been included in political strategies aimed at stimulating local urban development. Three recent books that attempt to place stadium development in the broader context of US urban society are Kenneth L Shropshire's (1995) *The Sports Franchise Game*, Arthur T Johnson's (1995) *Minor League Baseball and Local Economic*

Development, and Charles C Euchner's (1993) *Playing the Field*. Each of these books presents unique insights into the professional sport/urban community problematic, read together, they provide a rich description of the complexities of this relationship in late capitalist America. Through a case study approach; Shropshire, Johnson, and Euchner focus their collective attention on 25 US cities and describe the various struggles that have taken place between sports franchise owners, state and local politicians and community residents. Each of these case studies is located in the time period between 1980 and the early 1990s. Shropshire and Johnson focus their concern on major league franchise relocations and expansion, while Johnson deals exclusively with minor league baseball and the use of public resources to support private sports-related enterprise. All of these authors highlight the politics of stadium construction and question the economic and social value of professional sports franchises for host communities.

One of the more troubling peculiarities of the US urban context, says urban sociologist Harvey Molotch,³ is the perception that overarching social problems should be handled at local levels and that 'more development' is the solution. The US urban scene is contoured by a doctrine of home rule that implies that cities and communities can best handle 'their own' problems, even though realistically these problems are only tangentially place-related. Local level politicians are expected to 'do something about' the cumulative effects of various broad-scale social problems (violent crime and structural unemployment for example) that manifest themselves in local areas. Coupled with this expectation is the fact that locally elected officials are held accountable for problems (such as fiscal shortfalls and decaying infrastructure) that are authentically place-connected. The solution for many politicians is to 'do something' by manipulating the use and regulation of urban land, one of the few autonomous realms of local-level governance. The result is the ideological hegemony of pro-growth politics and the use of public subsidies for convention centres, urban shopping malls, retail anchors and cultural centre development. In many cities, these projects are trumpeted as 'successful' not because of any objective assessment about their benefits to local residents, asserts Molotch, but rather because of the symbolic power attached to the edifices themselves. What they point to is a 'something' that can be done, and their mere presence colours local perceptions and builds political careers. As Susan Zukin⁴ has demonstrated

in her book, *Landscapes of Power*, because these urban centres contain the types of glamorous ‘landscapes’ (a concept she uses to embrace material practices as well as aesthetic forms) that now symbolises revival, they are read as urban triumph. In their books Shropshire, Johnson and Euchner address some of the ways in which localities have relied upon the sports edifice (and the professional franchises they house) to serve similar purposes.

Currently the US is undergoing a ‘stadium boom’ — publicly-funded stadium construction has recently been completed or is underway in Baltimore, Jacksonville, Nashville, St Louis, Columbus, Cincinnati and Cleveland. In Cincinnati, pro-growth leaders launched a \$20 million advertising campaign (in 1994) supporting an increase in the local sales tax to finance the construction of two downtown, state-of-the-art sports facilities. In 1995, Cincinnati voters approved a \$544 million stadium development scheme — the largest in North American history. In Cleveland, construction has just begun on a new \$280 million, tax-supported football stadium. This, despite the fact that the publicly-supported baseball and basketball facilities (termed the ‘Gateway Complex’), which opened in 1994 at a cost of \$344 million, is \$20 million in debt, has an annual operating deficit of more than \$1 million, and owes \$600,000 in unpaid Cuyahoga County property taxes.⁵ Brookings Institute Economist, Roger Noll stated in 1974 that the ‘history of stadium development in the United States has been written in red ink’.⁶ Given the number and location of American cities that are currently developing or planning new stadiums, it is reasonable to predict that by the year 2000, not one major league sports franchise will have to share a facility with another tenant. Has anything changed in the 24 years since Noll’s statement? Information presented by Shropshire, Johnson and Euchner suggest not. Yet despite their weak economic justification, questionable grounds of social good, and dubious distribution of burdens and benefits among community residents, a stadium has come to symbolise civic health. Given this context, one might be compelled to ask: if stadium development is the solution; what must be the problem?

In *The Sports Franchise Game*, Kenneth L Shropshire reviews the ways in which cities battle one another for the right to host professional sports. Localities believe, first of all, that a new, state-of-the-art stadium is the solution to capturing footloose franchises, and secondly that franchises are ‘worth’ keeping in the first place. In a context where teams are free to

relocate wherever they wish, winners and losers of the franchise game are determined by the economic calculus of team owners. What these calculations often boil down to are issues related to the stadium. Due to league profit sharing rules, the particulars of which are presented in chapter one, new revenue sources for owners are limited. Shropshire's case studies reveal that (publicly team) owners complain about stadium leases, fan support, or stadium sharing with other major league tenants. However, the most powerful determinant of owner loyalty to a stadium is the presence or absence of luxury boxes, sky boxes or luxury suites. The revenue generated from these boxes (which varies from stadium to stadium) is not likely to be shared with other team owners.

Shropshire's case studies focus on five American cities — Philadelphia, San Francisco, Oakland, Baltimore, and Washington, DC — that have competed in the 'franchise game'. One of the book's strengths is that it presents an overview of the legal issues involved in attempts to limit or prohibit team movement (for example, anti-trust legislation and eminent domain suits) that is accessible to readers outside the legal field. Another of the book's strengths, is that it illustrates the lengths to which key players in the 'Game' will go to obtain or retain professional sports teams. Key parties are motivated to look out for his or her own best interests, says Shropshire, and in so doing effect the outcome of the franchise game. Shropshire includes among these influential players, sports fans, who he says often urge local politicians to 'do whatever it takes' to win the competition (p. 8). But, while Shropshire holds fans partially accountable for the escalating stakes involved in the competition for franchises, he suggests that many fans believe that public spending on sports is justified because it is 'good for the community'. This belief rests upon quantitative return-on-investment studies that have more to do with the research's 'imagination' than with 'science' (p. 19).

Economic impact studies are a 'key piece of evidence used by city leaders and franchise owners to convince citizens of the benefits of a sports franchise' (p. 5). Both proponents and opponents of publicly-supported sports franchises, stadiums, and events use quantitative analyses in controversial ways warns Shropshire. With respect to the franchise game, Shropshire states that 'owners exploit the figures from favourable impact studies to compel the host city to retain the franchise, and to entice other cities to submit bids for relocation' (p. 19). With so many issues to consider, so many possible models to use and so widely

ranging types of data to draw upon, every measure of 'direct' and 'indirect' impact must be viewed with suspicion. Shropshire relies upon the critical analyses of economists Robert Baade and Dean Baim to cite examples of how these studies are skewed according to the assumptions (and goals) of their sponsors.

One of Shropshire's aims in The Sports Franchise Game is to help the reader gain a 'clearer or different perspective on the value of sports' and to assess the 'true value of sports to American cities' (p. 6). In the purpose statement (p. 2), he states that he will 'provide a framework for understanding the true impact of sports franchise on a community'. Yet one of the themes, that runs throughout *The Sports Franchise Game* and is discussed in the concluding chapter, is that real value of sports cannot be objectively determined or statistically measured. Sports' value to a community rests largely on the assertion that it serves an intangible, image-enhancing function. However, the direct and indirect benefits associated with civic image enhancement through sports (for example, increased tourism, tax revenue and employment) are dismissed by Shropshire as 'mythical' guarantees. In actuality, says Shropshire, the only reward for winning cities in the franchise game is the 'public perception that their metropolis has been thrust into that class of cities nebulously described as "big-league"' (p. 8). Shropshire misses the opportunity to deal with these issues on a more in-depth level. So while the readability of this book may be one of its strengths, one of its weaknesses is that Shropshire takes too soft a position on the high risks involved for cities that compete in the franchise game. Further, since the analysis suffers from a lack of breadth (which could have been provided by utilising sports studies or urban studies literature), I am not sure the reader fully understands why cities get in the game in the first place.

In Minor League Baseball and Local Economic Development, Arthur T Johnson along with eight other chapter authors, present case studies of fifteen small and medium-sized American communities. Contributions to this book are organised around two themes, both drawn from the urban studies and 'sports policy' literature. The first focuses attention on the political realm and explores the ways in which economic development policies are made. For Johnson, the central political issue relative to minor league baseball and local economic development involves proposals to build sports stadiums. Each case study explores the relationship between the local government and minor league baseball and addresses substantive

public policy issues relative to the public ownership of stadiums. The second theme focuses attention on the value of development projects to the community in an attempt to assess the worthiness of public resource investment.

Nearly two hundred American and Canadian communities host minor league baseball franchises; dozens more communities are seeking them. Most minor league teams play in publicly-owned stadiums. Even though these stadiums cost much less than their major league counterparts, a \$10-12 million price tag is burdensome to smaller communities. The stadium is the 'crux' of the relationship between a minor league team and its community host. Prior to Johnson's analysis, most social science knowledge about stadium politics was based upon the experiences of large cities and major league franchises. However, because the economic and governance structure of minor league baseball is vastly different from that of the major leagues, it is misguided to base minor league public policy decisions upon big league examples.

The most obvious difference between the two leagues relates to the fans they draw. For example, in a single season a major league team is capable of attracting over a million fans; many of whom live outside of its local jurisdiction. A minor league team, on the other hand, is considered successful if it draws over a few hundred thousand local fans. Minor league franchise ownership requirements, the existence of the Player Development Contract, and the formal rules that govern the minor league-major league nexus all contribute to the uniqueness of minor league baseball with the professional sports industry. Public policy issues regarding stadium construction must take place with a clear understanding of this context. In almost all cases, minor league teams have small to no economic impact on local communities. Hence, a broad-based 'development strategy is necessary to maximise the likelihood' that the stadium that houses the team will contribute positively to local development (p. 32).

While stadium construction may be a highly visible component of an economic development plan, it will not effect economic growth merely by its presence. If stadium construction is included on a community's agenda for economic development, it must be connected to specific goals. Johnson's book highlights a number of different approaches to developing a 'sports strategy' and examines the different goals that a community may select for major league baseball franchises. Case studies are grouped

by goals to which the stadium is directed: attracting existing sport franchises for civic image enhancement; the use of stadiums for downtown redevelopment; and the use of stadiums to stimulate new development. These case studies illustrate that the role of minor league baseball in a sports strategy may greatly differ from city to city. For example, Indianapolis pursued a sports strategy for the purpose of creating a nationally- recognised image. The relocation of the National Football League's Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis in 1984 brought the city national attention. Indianapolis's minor league baseball franchise played virtually no part in the city's general development plan. Buffalo, in contrast, exploited its minor league baseball team and new stadium in an attempt to obtain a major league franchise.

According to Johnson, the final evaluation of the success or failure of a minor league stadium project must be made in terms of the specific goals that were used to justify it. In the long run, a 'nonspecific assertion of economic impact' will not hold up to public scrutiny (p. 245). The small economic impact of a minor league team cannot alone justify the large amount of public resources necessary to construct the stadium. In the book's conclusion, Johnson offers some alternative standards by which stadium construction success may be measured: is the stadium self-supporting, exclusive of debt service? Has the stadium stimulated spin-off benefits of targeted development? Does the stadium enhance the community's image? Does the stadium increase the recreational opportunities of local residents? Apparently these are difficult goals to reach. By Johnson's own assessment, not one of the 25 case study communities 'had yet reached the goal of making the stadium a true community resource' (p. 252).

Of the three books in this collective, Charles C Euchner's *Playing the Field* presents the most thorough analysis of the professional sports franchise/urban community relationship. Euchner provides an in-depth empirical analysis of actual and threatened franchise relocation in Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Chicago. Like Shropshire's and Johnson's contributions, a main focus in *Playing the Field* is on the politics of stadium construction. Shropshire describes for us how political struggles unfold. Johnson offers us standards for how we might evaluate stadium development success. Euchner provides the necessary socio-political and historical context for understanding why building stadiums and courting sports franchises have become major parts of city agendas. Euchner

grappling with the complexity of urban affairs by drawing upon a wide range of academic literature and supporting data. The result is a richly textured discourse about the local political economy and the professional sports industry.

In the 1970s and 1980s, nearly every professional sports franchise demanded a new stadium and other benefits. Threats, either implicit or explicit, to relocate their teams to another community accompanied each demand. These types of tactics are not unique to the professional sports industry. 'Playing the field' — encouraging inter-city bidding wars — is a standard feature of US capitalist system. In a confrontation between a firm and a city, says Euchner, 'the city is like a boxer with his shoes nailed to the ground' (p. 167). The quest for capital accumulation and the mobility of firms vis-a-vis cities and communities means that cities must compete with one another for capital investment. Capital that promises investment and growth can also threaten disinvestment and decline. The 'tension caused by mobile economic firms has been the defining characteristic of urban politics in the later part of the twentieth century' (p. 165). It is local politicians that take the credit or blame for the functioning of the urban economy even though capital effectively controls production of most goods and services.

Throughout *Playing the Field* Euchner resists the temptation to embrace the city-as-a-whole assumptions that dominate much of the discourse related to professional sport. These assumptions are evidenced in the following commonly-asked questions: Are professional sports good for 'a city'? Is a new stadium complex a wise use of 'the city's' resources? And, does a sports development policy serve the 'public interest'? These questions are at best conceptually flawed and politically naive: at worst, they lead to regressive public policy. A sports team may serve as a vehicle to symbolically construct community consensus. However, such a powerful symbol of common interest may also obscure 'other less dramatic concerns that might be more important for the community, like schools, parks, housing, and libraries' (p. 12).

A city is not a unitary entity that benefits uniformly from economic development policy. The disparate effects of development often produce winner and loser social groups within cities. Further, as Stone⁷ has argued the 'public interest' that is supposedly addressed in development policy cannot be determined objectively. Public need gets defined through political arrangements of urban elites who have similar interests and

concerns. People whose needs differ from those within these elite coalitions are often excluded from the planning process. Euchner demonstrates in his case study of Baltimore's stadium politics that neighbourhoods had no power to influence their own destinies. The beneficiaries of stadium development were able to manipulate the political process so that residents' views of the proposed stadium location were excluded. Residents' fears that a new major league baseball stadium would effect the 'fabric of their communities' were discounted (p. 118). In the final analysis, says Euchner, civic boosterism advanced by like-minded elites wins the day. Local media covet association with professional sports franchises because of the status attainment their relationship offers. Bankers and real estate developers promote professional sport for the capital investment/accumulation opportunities they present. Local politicians cannot resist the symbolic power of professional sports franchise. In Euchner's words, the city-as-team analogy is useful to political elites for 'giving definition and legitimacy to their necessarily biased administration of the city' (p. 172).

Locally elected officials have very limited governing powers. Their political careers are won and lost over the ways in which they handle neighbourhood disputes or rescue civic institutions. Their energies are spent attempting to exert modest influence over a very small number of policies and hoping for any positive impact on the local political economy. Large-scale, brick-and-mortar projects are perhaps the most ambitious of the 'local official's repertoire' (p. 177). Promoting these projects and taking the lead in drawing together coalitions of supporters, provides local officials the opportunity to demonstrate leadership skills. Even if it does not improve the material conditions of city residents, promoting professional sport is a temptation few politicians can resist. Inevitably the path to stadium development is paved by a steady stream of reports from the mayor's office that promise economic benefits. Euchner tells us that these reports serve a number of important political functions: first, in order to hide the project's impact on specific groups, they emphasise the city-as-a-whole. Second, 'they focus on statistics and technical concerns that drown down' qualitative considerations. The 'politics of numbers' reduces neighbourhoods to measurable and undifferentiated parts. Third, the 'appearance of officialness enables those who wield these reports to depict even the most perfunctory encounters with citizens as serious deliberations' (p. 116). Ultimately though, city leaders are attracted to

sports development out of a desire to achieve something tangible. Local politicians can point to stadiums, towering skyscrapers, or convention centres and say, 'without my help, these would have never come about'.⁸ 'The edifice complex', according to Euchner, 'is one way to turn a politician's overall inefficacy into political gain' (p. 178).

NOTES:

- 1 Notable exceptions include M Smith and D Keller, 'Managed Growth and the Politics of Uneven Development in New Orleans' in S S Fainstein, N I Fainstein, R C Hill, D R Judd and M P Smith, eds, *Restructuring the City: The Political Economy of Urban Development*, Longman, New York, 1983, pp. 126-66; MS Rosentraub, *Major League Losers*, Basicbooks, Boston, 1997.
- 2 Notable exceptions include G Lipsitz, 'Sports Stadia and Urban Development: A Tale of Three Cities', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1984, pp. 1-18; K Schimmel, A Ingham, and J Howell, 'Professional Team Sport and the American City: Urban Politics and Franchise Relocations' in A Ingham and J Loy, eds, *Sport in Social Development*, Human Kinetics' Champaign, IL, 1993, pp. 21 1-44; K Schimmel, 'Growth Politics, Urban Development, and Sports Stadium Construction in the United States: A Case Study' in J Bale and O Moen, eds, *The Stadium and the City*, Keele University Press, Staffordshire, 1995, pp. 111-56; D Whitson and D Macintosh 'Becoming a "World Class" City: Hallmark Events and Sport Franchises in the Growth Strategies of Western Canadian Cities', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1993, pp. 221-40.
- 3 H Molotch, 'The Political Economy of Growth Machines' *Journal of Urban Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1993, pp. 29-53.
- 4 S Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, University of California Press, Berkeley' 1991.
- 5 K Schimmel, 'It's an Eerie Strategy: Urban Regime Theory, Professional Sport, and Economic Development in Cleveland', unpub. paper presented, NASSS, Birmingham' Al., Nov. 1996.
- 6 R Noll, *Government and the Sports Business*, Brookings Institute, Washington, DC, 1974.
- 7 C Stone, 'The Study of the Politics of Urban Development' in C Stone and H Sanders, eds, *The Politics of Urban Development*, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Ks, pp. 3-24, 1987.
- 8 Euchner cites I Rubin and H Rubin, 'Economic Development Incentives: The Poor (Cities) Pay More', *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, vol. 23, 1987, pp. 37-62.