



FORUM: SPORTS IN THE 1970s

# Stadiums in the 1970s: Beyond the Myth of the Concrete Doughnut

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In the late 1990s and early 2000s, fans assembled at stadiums and arenas across the country to witness a recurring spectacular event. They headed toward the local ballpark or arena, not to watch their favorite teams and entertainers perform inside, but rather to witness the implosion of the facilities themselves. As the United States was in the midst of its latest stadium construction boom, a new community ritual took shape: the ceremonial demolition of stadiums that were built in the 1960s and 1970s. Facilities that were once celebrated for their modern designs and conveniences were deemed ugly and obsolete seemingly overnight. Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati, Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, among dozens of other professional stadiums, were demolished in this spectacular fashion (Figure 1). Explosives were strategically placed throughout the abandoned facilities, and fans gathered yards away to watch the buildings burst into gigantic clouds of dust and smoke, the environmental consequences of sending pollutants into the air notwithstanding. Television networks covered the detonations while fans donned team colors, cheered, and shed tears as their beloved community gathering places were blown into oblivion.<sup>1</sup>

Stadiums meeting the fate of the wrecking ball was hardly a new phenomenon, but the demolitions of the 1990s and early 2000s were quite different. They were staged as spectacular events, and they were also more frequent. Since the 1990s, at least 102 new facilities have been constructed for professional sports teams, almost double the amount of stadiums and arenas that were built during the previous three decades. Most of these new structures were built as replacements for pre-existing facilities.<sup>2</sup> The stadiums and arenas that the sports industry determined to be obsolete were often only a few decades old. The billowing clouds of detonated concrete and steel represented more than the death of a stadium; they also marked the denouement of the notion that stadiums were public monuments that served a purpose beyond their role as a home field for professional sports teams. Henceforth, stadium construction has been totally overdetermined by the dictates of sports franchises. The imploded facilities would be replaced by corporatized stadiums that became enclaves of exclusion masquerading as buildings designed for the entertainment of all.

In the decades since, it has become axiomatic that stadiums that were constructed during the 1960s and 1970s were inadequate because they were aesthetically unpleasing edifices that were unsatisfying to fans. Since the opening of Oriole Park at Camden Yards in 1992, which inaugurated the stadium-building craze of the 1990s and 2000s, the sports industry has repeatedly

<sup>1</sup>For a sampling of the implosions from this era, see Richard S. Dargan, “Top 10 U.S. Stadium Implosions,” YouTube Video, Mar. 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X7hWcctXLw> (accessed May 26, 2024).

<sup>2</sup>John Charles Bradbury, Dennis Coates, and Brad Humphreys, “Public Policy Toward Professional Sports Stadiums: A Review,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 43, no. 3 (Summer 2024): 899–937; Frank Andre Guridy, *The Stadium: An American History of Politics, Protest and Play* (New York, 2024).

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Figure 1. Cinergy Field (formerly Riverfront Stadium) imploding, December 30, 2002, photograph by Shelby Bell.

argued that the so-called “multipurpose” stadiums that were built to accommodate both professional football and baseball were ill-suited for both and were best replaced by facilities that were specifically designed for each sport. The standardized circular designs, which were hailed when they opened, were suddenly criticized for their lack of character and charm that earlier generations of ballparks supposedly possessed.

Architectural critic Paul Goldberger, who has been a leading voice among the legions of fans of the contemporary ballpark, has criticized what he calls the “concrete doughnuts” of the 1960s and 1970s. Goldberger derides Pittsburgh’s Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh as a “heavy handed concrete monolith,” while the Houston Astrodome—hailed as the “Eighth Wonder of the World” when it opened in 1965—is merely “gargantuan and banal.”<sup>3</sup> Versions of Goldberger’s arguments are routinely deployed by sports franchises as they have engaged in an unrelenting campaign for public subsidies for new facilities during the past three decades.<sup>4</sup>

This brief essay departs from the way the American stadium story is usually told. While acknowledging the importance of stadium architecture, it suggests that the fetishizing of stadium design mischaracterizes its fundamental qualities. Inspired by the architect Louis Sullivan’s aphorism, “form ever follows the function,” this article argues that the stadium’s functions are as important as the forms that they have taken over the years.<sup>5</sup> Rather than simply focus on stadiums as architects envisioned them—that is, their forms—this article highlights their larger social functions. Emphasizing function helps widen the frame beyond the almost exclusive focus on baseball ballparks in stadium scholarship and can illustrate the wider

<sup>3</sup>Paul Goldberger, *Ballpark: Baseball in the American City* (New York, 2019), 181, 185–6.

<sup>4</sup>See Goldberger’s advocacy for a new ballpark in Kevin Collison, “Downtown Ballpark for Kansas City Royals Now Makes Sense, Speaker Says,” *Flatland*, Jan. 31, 2020, <https://flatlandkc.org/news-issues/downtown-ballpark-for-kansas-city-royals-now-makes-sense-speaker-says/> (accessed May 26, 2024).

<sup>5</sup>Louis H. Sullivan, “The Tall Office Building Architecturally Considered,” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, March 1896, 403–9.

array of people who were drawn to the stadium's gates beyond the baseball fan. Moreover, an exclusive focus on stadium design tends to bolster the myths touted by the sports industry and its political supporters, who continue to advocate for public subsidies for new stadiums at great cost.<sup>6</sup> Finally, an examination of the stadium's social and political functions opens up possibilities to revisit its place in urban and metropolitan history in the decades after World War II.

The evidence of the use value of stadiums is particularly clear during the 1970s. Although many of these facilities of the period were constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, it was in the 1970s when their fullest expression was arguably achieved. The 1970s were, in many ways, the heyday of the public cultures that prevailed at the midcentury stadium. It was also the decade when the political gains of the freedom movements of the 1960s were becoming a part of mainstream American culture. The racial and gendered desegregation of the stadium on the field, in the stands, the locker room, and the press box during these years dramatized the larger changes enveloping the United States during this period.

The social revolutions enveloping the ballpark were facilitated by the fact that it was in the post-World War II era when stadiums became largely publicly owned and managed. While stadiums and arenas were not always wise investments of tax dollars, their public management structures in an era when the welfare state was dominant meant that they tended to serve a larger purpose than simply providing venues for sports franchises. As public facilities, stadiums were seen as institutions—as monuments to local civic identity—rather than as commodities and revenue generators. Moreover, politicians and sports commissions that managed these facilities tended to be held accountable to a larger public. This resulted in a social urbanism that prioritized accessibility over lavish amenities for a select group of affluent spectators.

The vision of Kenneth Hahn, the longtime Los Angeles County Board of Supervisor, was representative of a prevailing sentiment during the era. Hahn, a New Deal-style Democrat, who was part of the management team of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum during the 1960s and 1970s, argued in 1987: "The essence of a great community is providing great facilities so that people have the right to assemble and the right to free speech. These basic constitutional rights are put into effect in the Coliseum and Sports Arena."<sup>7</sup> This was consistent with the Coliseum management's mandate to make the arena available for "political conventions, religious gatherings, civic meetings, trade shows, conventions, and youth rallies."<sup>8</sup> In short, stadiums in this era were envisioned as monumental spaces where people could assemble for many purposes.

Hahn's conception of stadium usage illustrates the variety of events that occurred in stadiums during the post-World War II era, and especially during the 1970s. Many of these were influenced by the Black Freedom, antiwar, second-wave feminist, Chicano, and gay and lesbian movements. The variety of events, including political rallies, concerts, and other community activities that began in the 1960s, became more manifest in the 1970s. Antiwar rallies were held in San Francisco's Kezar Stadium and elsewhere. Benefit concerts, such as the Soul Bowl at Tulane Stadium in New Orleans in 1970, and Black college football classics organized by the National Urban League in New York and Los Angeles, were just a few of the many Black cultural events and rallies that occurred in stadiums and arenas that decade. In 1974, the Puerto Rican independence movement illustrated its strength by holding a massive rally in Madison Square Garden. In short, the stadium became one of the more visible manifestations of the inroads that America's dispossessed populations were making during the 1970s. This made the stadium of the 1970s arguably the most democratically constituted in the history of

<sup>6</sup>On stadiums and post-World War II suburbanization, see Benjamin Lisle, *Modern Coliseum: Stadiums and American Culture* (Philadelphia, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth Hahn, "Keeping the Coliseum Public," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 27, 1987, E4.

<sup>8</sup>"Statement by Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, Vice President of the Coliseum Commission," Feb. 25, 1966, Folder 6.2.1, Kenneth Hahn Collection, Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA.

American stadium construction that stands in sharp contrast to recent decades when indoor and outdoor stadiums have been transformed into highly securitized temples of exclusion.

If the post-1990s stadium has been turned into an enclave of exclusivity, the stadiums of the 1970s were far from that. Indeed, a close examination of social dynamics of the midcentury stadium complicates histories of white flight, deindustrialization, and suburbanization that dominate the historiography of the period. The general accessibility of the 1970s stadium was not only a holdover from the era of New Deal liberalism. It was also based on the fact that stadiums, by definition, are “sites of convergence” where large numbers of people congregate for a host of mundane and extraordinary purposes.<sup>9</sup> In a period when the borders of stadiums were lightly policed, it is not surprising that the marginalized and dispossessed found stadiums to be ideal places to engage in, what Gaye Theresa Johnson has called, “spatial entitlement” in the midst of new forms of dispossession.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the “invisible walls of steel” of residential racial segregation, job discrimination, and racialized policing tended to be largely absent at the local stadium and the arena. The Black Freedom movement prompted the desegregation of both the playing field and the stands. Previously marginalized fan bases took up larger chunks of stadium real estate, bringing new spectatorial practices to the ballpark. “People would come dressed to kill, men with the big hats, women in the best coats with their big fur collars. The whole atmosphere was like a black social event,” basketball Hall of Famer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar recalled of the atmosphere at Cobo Arena in downtown Detroit during the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

Suburbanization did not prevent Black and other fans of color from congregating at stadiums and arenas. Even as many stadiums were constructed to attract white fans who fled to the suburbs in the decades after World War II, the ballpark became a place where urban Black youth could, and did, congregate. A plethora of visual evidence, from NFL Films highlight reels to telecasts of sporting events and concerts, many now widely available on the internet, illustrate the substantial presence of Black and other marginalized groups in the 1970s stadium. Minimal security and more permeable boundaries between spectators and performers made it easier for marginalized people to become part of the action. This dynamic is clear even in Oakland, California, a region profoundly shaped by suburbanization and urban disinvestment.<sup>12</sup> Stanley Burrell, who eventually became known as the rap star MC Hammer, is perhaps the most famous case of African American sociability at the 1970s ballpark. Burrell and his friends regularly socialized in the parking lot outside the Oakland Coliseum. Oakland A’s owner Charlie Finley took a liking to the young East Oakland native and eventually hired him as a jack-of-all-trades team employee. Even as stadium builders imagined catering to the suburban demographic, stadiums attracted people from across the social spectrum. African American and working-class youth arrived in cars and took mass transit to the happening spot in town.

The 1970s was also a period of unbridled fan expressiveness. Fan expression illustrates how stadiums operated as semipublic spheres where spectators could express themselves freely. Sometimes fan expression veered into the realm of violence. Throughout the decade, fans showed a penchant for stampeding on the fields and courts during championship celebrations. At times they engaged in excessive drunken unruliness, as they did in Cleveland during the infamous 1974 Ten Cent Beer Night debacle. Or they attacked referees, as an irate fan did in the Boston Garden during game five of the 1976 NBA Finals. Or they were whipped into a

<sup>9</sup>Christopher Thomas Gaffney, *Temples of the Earthbound Gods: Stadiums in the Cultural Landscapes of Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires* (Austin, TX, 2008), 20.

<sup>10</sup>Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA, 2013).

<sup>11</sup>Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Peter Knobler, *Giant Steps: The Autobiography of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar* (New York, 1983), 290.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2003).

frenzy by the homophobic anti-disco movement that led to a riot on the field in Comiskey Park during the ill-fated Disco Demolition promotion in 1979.

Still, in the 1970s, fan self-expression, whether it was a display of fandom or an affiliation with a political cause, pervaded stadium spectating culture in an unprecedented manner. By the middle of the decade, homemade banners and signs were very much part of the décor of the stadium scene. Banners were sometimes officially encouraged, as the New York Mets did when the team inaugurated its Banner Day promotion in 1963, or when the franchise allowed Ken Erhardt, also known as the “Sign Man,” to unveil his witty messages on signs that he brought to the ballpark for years. Most often fan expression occurred organically. Gigantic bedsheets with elaborate messages were prominently displayed by fans and draped over stadium walls and balconies. The numerous fan clubs of the Pittsburgh Steelers, for example, displayed their affections for their favorite players on larger placards and bedsheets displayed all over Three Rivers Stadium. Puerto Rican fans displayed their flag in a variety of settings, from the Yankee Stadium bleacher seats or on the wall behind home plate at the Houston Astrodome during the 1980 playoffs. In the midcentury stadium, banners and signs occupied far more real estate in the ballpark than corporate advertisements.

To be sure, fan expressiveness was facilitated by the minimalism of midcentury stadium design. Critics of stadium architecture of the era have forgotten that the modernist structures that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s were once seen as aesthetically pleasing. “Beautiful” was the operative word to describe all of the new stadiums that opened during those two decades. They were praised by boosters, journalists, and fans for their modernist conveniences. Wider seats, spaciousness, better concessions, and accessibility were all attributes of these stadiums and arenas. The Oakland Coliseum, a building that has been widely ridiculed over the past few decades, was once considered “[a] spectacular ornament to the community,” as *San Francisco Examiner* columnist Prescott Sullivan gushed when the Coliseum opened in 1966. “Huge and circular, it looked so nice we couldn’t take our eyes off of it.” *Oakland Tribune* columnist Ed Levitt praised the Coliseum as a “concrete Goddess” that was the “Miss America of all sports palaces. Each inch of her vast body was excitingly fresh and wholesome and suddenly we were overcome with a tingling sensation of pride.”<sup>13</sup> Similar characterizations are clear in the press coverage of all news stadiums during the era.<sup>14</sup>

The positive assessments of the midcentury stadium and arena are indicative of a prevailing social urbanist sensibility in which utility and convenience were prioritized over architectural flourishes. The sparing usage of ballpark advertisements, even as stadiums and arenas were entangled in commercialism, illustrates the social urbanist aesthetics of the period. Indeed, the stadiums and arenas of the 1960s and 1970s, including baseball stadiums, displayed minimal corporate advertising. Since the vast majority of facilities were conceived as public monuments, stadium and arena managers were reluctant to allow an excessive number of corporate billboards at the ballpark. Advertisements remained relegated to scoreboards. The ad-free walls often served as blank canvases that fans could adorn with homemade signs and banners, with and without the encouragement of team management. Years later, they would be replaced by ubiquitous corporate billboards.

For all of the public culture that was evident in the American stadium during the 1970s, it is also clear that the seeds of the hypercommodified twenty-first-century stadium were also planted during the same decade. Indeed, it was in this period when the National Football League began to flex its muscles to command publicly financed, single-tenant facilities in

<sup>13</sup>Prescott Sullivan, “A Boon for One and All!” *San Francisco Examiner*, Sept. 19, 1966, 57; Ed Levitt, “Concrete Goddess,” *Oakland Tribune*, Sept. 11, 1966, 35.

<sup>14</sup>Leonard Koppett, “Pirates Open Their New Park, but Reds Celebrate 3-2 Victory,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1970, 38; Roy Blount, Jr., “Curtain Up on a Mod New Act,” *Sports Illustrated*, Apr. 19, 1971, 33.

Dallas, Kansas City, New Jersey, and elsewhere. Other professional leagues followed suit. Today, stadiums command ever-larger amounts of public subsidies.

Uncovering the history of the stadium of the 1970s—its function, uses, and even its design—is important as the sports industry and its apologists have transformed stadiums into centerpieces of massive real estate developments that have become engines of new forms of displacement and colonization.

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