The Moral Obligation to Preserve Heritage through Sport and Recreation Facilities

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The preservation of heritage through renovation projects such as the reconstruction, restoration, and rehabilitation of sport and recreation facilities is a recent phenomenon. We are not generally prompted to think of sport and recreation venues as cultural objects to preserve or as hosts to heritage but they are a product of their time and evolved over the decades to meet different political, economic, and social preferences, expectations, and challenges (Seifried, 2010; Seifried & Pastore, 2009). For example, Ramshaw and Gammon (2005) argued “Heritage often seeks to remember, enliven, teach – and even create – personal and collective legacies for contemporary audiences. Its purpose is often to celebrate the achievements, courage and strength of those who have come before” (p. 230). McKercher, Ho, and du Cros (2005) further refined heritage as also including “natural and cultural environments, the encompassing of landscapes, historic places, sites and built environments as well as intangible assets such as collections, past and continuing cultural experiences, knowledge and living experiences” (p. 541). Based on this information, sport and recreation facilities appear to be significant sources of heritage and possibly important social anchors for communities and fan nations (Foster & Hyatt, 2008; Mason, Duquette & Scherer, 2005; Rosentraub & Ilia, 2008; Seifried & Clotpon, 2011).

The aim of this presentation and scholarly analysis is to thoroughly review contemporary philosopher Peter Singer’s (1973, 1993, 2009) perspective on moral obligation and contemporary sport philosophers Bill Morgan (1997, 2004), Heather Reid (2007) and Robert Simon’s (2000) understanding of morality and fairness to highlight their potential perspectives on sport and recreation facility management practices by showing that communities and constituents have a moral obligation to preserve heritage through sport and recreation facilities. Many other Western philosophers have also discussed the function of morality in the context of duty, moral imperatives, and justice to help guide this presentation (Glover, 1975; Hare, 1964, 1972; Kant, 1964; Rawls, 1971; Singer, 1973, 1993, 2009).

Singer, recently named by Time Magazine as one of the most influential people in the world, has famously addressed moral obligations dealing with topics such as death, animal rights, poverty, abortion, suicide, euthanasia, starvation and charity (1973, 1993, 2009). Specifically, Singer’s (1973) simple principle when analyzing moral obligations posited that “If it is in our power to prevent something...bad happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it” (p. 168). He further explained that principle is “uncontroversial” from all perspectives (p. 168).

Interestingly, the preservation of sport and recreation facilities has not been formally or ethically addressed for the sport and recreation management community despite the fact that the preservation of cultural heritage can be accomplished through their venues and may be a necessary activity to discuss in light of recent debates emerging throughout the world on whether to build new or renovate. As a prime example of monumental and heritage conservatism, sport and recreation facilities include everything that Cloonan (2007) suggested defines culture such as artificial and natural treasures, art, and other physical records. Cultural heritage uses rules, regulations, and laws to protect specific items from other legal challenges. Resultantly, we defined and framed preservation as a managerial activity to assure the survival social, political, and cultural records (Cloonan, 2001). Thus, if the Western world holds sport and recreation activities in such high regard, does it not make sense to also hold the sanctuaries in which sport is performed in the same high regard? By maintaining the historical integrity of sport and recreation venues, the facilities in which character has thought to have been built throughout history, we can greatly contribute to preserving the cultural identity and heritage of particular communities, cities, states, nations and empires.

Surely, what people view is unpredictable and open to interpretation across time because during moments of reading the world, opinions are generally subject to influence from a cross section of contemporary political, social, and economic perspectives and traditions. Interestingly, sport and recreation facilities exist as a stable point of return for members of a fan nation and local community and are recognized as a meaningful representation or social anchor of their cultural heritage. Embedded in this view of sport and recreation facilities is their practical function within the community and fan nation and their symbolic meaning as a representative of local architecture,
technological sophistication, and changes related to local and national discourses on sport consumption. Architect and aesthetic historian Lucia Gomes Robles (2010) stated that “An edifice without use becomes a structure deprived of what it really is” (p. 152). The sport and recreation facility throughout its life cycle does not stay identical to original charter but adapts to accommodate the evolving modern landscape and changes to address elements naturally decaying over time. Furnishing, facades, technology, and infrastructure are addressed to maintain the venue and fight off the impact of time and its limitations.

Restoration theorist Paul Eggert (2007) suggested "buildings continue to undergo change in response to people’s needs” (p. 101). However, we argue we have the moral obligation to preserve historic sport and recreation facilities as best we can toward their original purpose. Standardizing what is best or nearest to the original fabric of the building is difficult but necessary (Eggert, 2007). This task is especially challenging for those working on sport and recreation venues because they regularly endured renovation efforts during the pursuit of the almighty dollar. With this frame in mind (i.e., revenue), we will also review what aspect’s of the building and resources to use during preservation will likely guide the process more responsibly during the preservation management process because it’s our moral obligation to the venue, community, and the organization’s fan nation. Through the application of Singer’s (1973, 1993, 2009) understanding of moral obligation, in the future, conservators and curators of sport and recreation venues need to accept the responsibility to avoid catering to illusions of the past. To help connect this philosophical discussion to contemporary examples we will highlight recent renovation and construction activities at Fenway Park, Soldier Field, and other venues.

Finally, this preservation discussion will refer to and include everything within or outside a venue, as part of its footprint. Appropriately, we ask the question if preservation maintains and assures the survival of heritage, are we obligated to preserve sport venues? Furthermore, we ask, if this is true, can moral philosophy be used to direct preservation activities? Ultimately, this presentation will frame the discussion on preservation and its impact on sport management practices within Western philosophy, thought, or ideology. Although there are many other distinct moral and ethical precepts which could direct different decisions related to the preservation of sport facilities as a product of culture, Western definitions were chosen to specifically focus our thinking process on the moral obligation to preserve sport facilities based on my own cultural and intellectual upbringing and the fact that most of the literature cited comes from Western scholars.