Supercharging the Mallpark: Battery Atlanta and the Future of Baseball Stadium Development

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In November 2013, the Atlanta Braves became the first Major League Baseball team since 1972 to relocate away from downtown when the team announced a $672 million stadium deal to move to suburban Cobb County. In so doing, the Braves abandoned the 18-year old Turner Field, which was originally built for the 1996 Summer Olympics. Within this agreement, the Braves received $320 million in public subsidies to build SunTrust Park and committed to serving as lead developer on a $400 million mixed-use development project that will open with the stadium in 2017. This development, called The Battery Atlanta, features high-end retail stores, chef-driven restaurants, a 4,000 person capacity theater, a 16-floor hotel, 550 residential units, and a nine-story office building.

As we examine in this presentation, SunTrust Park and Battery Atlanta are substantively different from the typical deal for public subsidies between local governments and professional sports franchises. Contracts have usually been limited to particulars of the stadium or arena, while redevelopment – ostensibly the legitimation for the allocation of public resources to these projects – has been “left to the workings of the free market” (Chapin, 2002, p. 569). Independent economists generally have assessed this approach to be a failure as they have failed to identify economic or redevelopment benefits attributable to stadiums (Coates & Humphreys, 2008).

Recognizing the failure of subsidies to produce their intended benefits, a few local governments have required teams to invest in ancillary projects around the stadium or provided them with land and incentives towards land development. These projects have mixed results. In San Diego, John Moores was required to invest $450 million in the East Village neighborhood around Petco Park. While some researchers cite this approach to have been a success (see Chapin, 2002; Rosentraub, 2009), others have criticized the deal for utilizing substantial public resources for primarily private gain (Erie, Kogan, & MacKenzie, 2010). In St. Louis, the owners of the Cardinals were provided with development rights for the ten acres occupied by the previous Busch Stadium. Despite the new Busch Stadium opening in 2006, the first phase of Ballpark Village only opened in 2014, much of the site remains vacant, and the Cardinals are silent regarding future development although their initial plans were much more extensive than what has been built.

Within the SunTrust Park project, the Braves have been the prime mover and committed to opening Battery Atlanta simultaneously with the stadium. Towards accomplishing this goal that has not been achieved in other cities, the Braves are the lead developers and have contracted with several architects and firms (eg., Populous for the stadium; Jerde Placemaking as master land planner) with experience producing and delivering these types of projects. Moreover, the Braves are owned by Liberty Media, which has extensive real estate assets, considerable financial resources, and commercial development experience.

To engage in a qualitative analysis of the SunTrust Park and the Battery Atlanta project, we have conducted interviews with key stakeholders, performed site visits, and reviewed a wide range of public policy documents and media reports. In our presentation, we will discuss the particulars of the project, and, by examining Battery Atlanta within the context of other stadium deals, we ask whether Atlanta is a unique case or represents a harbinger for the future of stadium development.