Understanding Wrigley Field’s Transformation: Community and Narratives of Nostalgia

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Wrigley Field’s image as a site of baseball’s golden era has been established as a centerpiece which bonds the Chicago Cubs and a wide range of stakeholders (Twietmeyer, 2008). While the characteristic of changelessness seems quintessential to its identity, Wrigley is going through significant changes led by a full-fledged renovation plan – the “1060 Project” (Sullivan, 2013). Accordingly, it will not only acquire new modern expressions for Wrigley and its surrounding neighborhood, but also transform the flow and distribution of crowds, traffic, as well as commerce (Sullivan, 2013). To understand such transformation perceived by individual community members raises critical yet often undermined questions in sport. With this in mind, our study examines community residents’ perceptions of Wrigley renovation by focusing on the discourse of nostalgia. The purpose is to provide an in-depth account of individual citizens’ negotiation of significant identity change undergone by the sport stadium and its related community fabric.

Literature Review
The concept of nostalgia carries significance in a variety of fields, which has been employed to study organizational behaviors during restructuring (Strangleman, 1999), and community relations as a result of political changes (Bonnett & Alexander, 2012; Radstone, 2010), among others. In the scholarship of sport management, nostalgia is approached as an incentive for fans to attend games, preserve sport facilities, etc. (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005; Seifried & Meyer, 2010). Notably, the dialectic relationship between the past and the present composes an essential analytical inquiry. Firstly, by characterizing time and place in the past as “lost,” nostalgia reflects critiques and discomfort of the present, offering a preferred escape (Seifried & Meyer, 2010). Secondly, members of communities and organizations are often found to cling to images of the past, thus refusing changes to the present. In so doing, both the past and the present are often re-constructed - idealized or rubbedished - through context, events, and abundant socio-cultural materials (Strangleman, 1999). In this study, while the renovation sharply identifies as well as contrasts Wrigley’s past and future, an investigation of individuals’ perceptions allows us to understand how nostalgia is asserted or resisted, thus illuminating deeply-seated connections between the sport franchise, stadium, and a community of stakeholders.

Method
In this study, a photo-elicitation approach - utilizing photo as a “medium of communication between the researcher and the participants as well as their respective communities” (Caldarola, 1995, p. 41) - was employed for the interview. Photo-elicitation highlights the assumption that “when we look at something, we do not just experience it with our eyes, rather its apprehension conjures up a whole host of thoughts within our own personal, social and cultural worlds” (Warren, 2002, p.95). By using visual images to elicit interview narratives, it provides an interactive process that involves mutual participation of both the observer and the observed (Collier, 1986). In the case of Wrigley renovation, the project sparked a lot of interest and debates, where a few residents in the surrounding community engaged in a pictorial documentation on personal blogs starting in 2013. These individuals were later contacted and five agreed to participate in the interview. Before the interviews, the photos taken by each individual were compared and analyzed by the researchers based on their content, context, and sentiment (Warren, 2002). One semi-structured individualized interview guide was created for each participant. After the interviews were collected and transcribed, they were investigated through a narrative analysis.

Analysis and Implications
The analysis revealed interwoven accounts of embracing and rejecting nostalgia from community residents’ perceptions. To begin, nostalgia was located in a profound loss for the rhythm of everyday life intimately connected to baseball operation. For instance, one interviewee recalled that after the Spring Training, the streets nearby the
stadium would be flooded with players’ personal stuffs such as “duffle bags and bikes and vacuum cleaners,” a scene highlighting the old days where “the players were easy to access and…living in the neighborhood was fun.” The spatial changes brought by the renovation however meant the existing fabric of community would be susceptible to changes. Interestingly, while some photos seemed to focus on an overall chaotic scene of demolition, the elicited narratives were led to an almost unnoticeable feature and its particular meaning to the interviewee – the press box behind the bleachers, a scuffed wall, or an obstructive pole that was “exactly poetic about Wrigley.” By taking photos to capture the features that would soon disappear, the ongoing changes were actively resisted while the moments which intimately and privately connected the individuals and the sporting space were commemorated.

Furthermore, nostalgia also emerged from a loss of individual agency in approaching the community due to the forthcoming socio-economic changes. Wrigley Field was extremely accessible in the past, as described by an interviewee “everybody else I know is at work, and I could jump on the Ashland bus and I could be down here in 15 min tops. And I could buy an $8 ticket and walk into the bleachers in the outfield.” The depiction was characterized by a powerful sense of freedom and hence, a widely available belongingness for individual citizens. However, the goal of modernization indicated a foreseeing process of gentrification, presumably at the cost of individual freedom in navigating the community landscape. In response, nostalgia emerged as the narratives dwelled on shops and small businesses surrounding the stadium - their mundane existence had in various ways become important linkages for the community fabric. In particular, one interviewee’s photos captured an individual dressed in a bear costume carrying a lunch box while walking around shaking hands with people. While it seemed a typical representation of the youthful and carefree character of Wrigleyville community, the interviewee highlighted that the scene was later intervened by the sport franchise due to resemblance of the team’s mascot. If the roaming bear was a symbol for how the space was inhabited, experienced, and imagined by the individuals with freedom, then the loss of it was made as a melancholic response connected to the future of renovation, as the interviewee sought to address in the same context that “we would all have to dress in certain ways and walk on certain path and make room for more luxurious condos…be strangers to ourselves.”

Meanwhile, parallel to the development of nostalgia, a strong theme that rejected the past and saw the future to be embraced was also identified. In those accounts, the old Wrigley was typically depicted as backward, as it was not able to lead the Cubs to catch up with the other MLB teams. Instead, the present of Wrigley, which was captured by pictures showing massive destructions, was frequently depicted as progress. Nostalgia in this sense was identified as both pride and shame. It provides implications for sport franchises and facilities during times of transformation, by particularly directing discussions to the meanings that the local community and fans create out of the changes.