The Fates of Former Major League Sports Facilities

Judith Long, University of Michigan

Governance/Policy - Policy (Professional Sport) Saturday, June 3, 2017
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 1:55 PM
Abstract 2017-350 Room: Columbia

Since 1990, over 100 new major league sports facilities have been built across the US and Canada. Most large cities have grappled with the planning issues that accompany these large-scale and specialized developments. In turn, many city planners have engaged in debates over the principles of planning for sports-led development districts, the role of public funding in project delivery, the negotiation of community benefits agreements, and so forth (Long 2012, Zimbalist and Long 2006, Long 2005).

Less well understood is the fate of the more than 60 former facilities left in the wake of this sports construction boom. Stories about specific facilities have occasionally emerged, though mainly as cautionary tales. The Pontiac Silverdome, home of the NFL Detroit Lions from 1975 to 2002, made national news as it sat vacant for years and was finally sold by the City of Pontiac for $583,000 in 2009—a bargain by any reckoning. A similar situation has been unfolding in Houston, where debates over the future of the iconic Astrodome have fueled numerous planning and historic preservation visions—most recently, a ULI panel recommended a concept anchored by a large park—but implementation plans have been derailed by cost.

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between the fate of former major league sports facilities and the land use planning decisions that shaped their outcomes. This is an important topic because the redevelopment of former ballparks, stadiums, and arenas offer lessons about the challenges and opportunities of transforming these sites. Moreover, since current planning initiatives centered on major league sports facilities pay little attention to the use of the site 30 years in the future (which is the average length of a major league facility lease), then it is reasonable to anticipate difficulties transitioning these sites for more traditional land uses and patterns of development when the time comes. Thus, this case serves to inform our understanding of how decisions made in the near-term to accommodate large-scale and specialized developments may turn out to compromise subsequent long-range redevelopment efforts.

In response to these issues, this paper begins by enumerating and classifying redevelopment outcomes for former major league facilities, giving context to a phenomenon that is not widely understood beyond the most high-profile cases, such as the Silverdome and the Astrodome. My data set includes captures the current use of all facilities replaced by the round of new facility construction between 1990 and 2015, which includes over 60 venues in total. Four categories emerge: 1) facilities that are in still use for sports-oriented uses, 2) facilities that have been adapted for other uses, such as entertainment, 3) facilities that have been demolished and their sites redeveloped, and 4) facilities or sites that remain vacant.

Building on the narrative revealed through examining the full set of redevelopment outcomes, I describe in detail one particularly illustrative example from each category. Next, for each example I identify a set of planning decisions—including facility type, ownership structure, location, land use and site planning principles—that have shaped the present day use of these sites. Based on this evidence, I argue that host cities need to pay more attention to long-range issues of disposition and redevelopment when planning for major league sports facilities, adapting the lifecycle approach used in real estate asset management. I conclude by offering a set of recommendations for major league host cities as they plan for post-major league phase of large-scale sports facilities.