The Construction of Detroit's Little Caesar's Arena: Exploring Discourses of Image, Status, and Quality of Life

Daniel Mason, University of Alberta
Stacy-Lynn Sant, University of Michigan

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As cities have moved away from traditional industries and relied more heavily on consumption-based economies (Judd, 2002), city leaders have become more entrepreneurial (Harvey, 1989) and have come to focus on growth opportunities in the service sectors of their respective economies. This has put more emphasis on experiential amenities designed to attract both tourists and locals alike (Hannigan, 2005), creating an increased emphasis on building museums, convention centres, and major sports facilities in North American cities. As this has occurred, cities have also sought to differentiate themselves by highlighting their uniqueness to compete in a symbolic place economy. Within this context, arguments have emerged as to why cities might invest in sports facilities or host major sporting events and/or franchises (Buist & Mason, 2010; Sapotichne, 2012). However, independent scholarly research has questioned the economic returns of investing public money in sports infrastructure (Baade & Dye, 1988; Coates & Humphreys, 2000; Rosentraub, 1997; Siegfried & Zimbalist, 2000), and whether the intangible benefits of the facilities and the teams that play there confer are enough to justify any subsidies (Johnson et al., 2001; Johnson & Whitehead, 2000).

Meanwhile, other research has sought to place facilities within a much broader urban infrastructure development context (Clark, 2004; Rosentraub, 2009). This latter research has found that, notwithstanding their possible economic and tourism benefits, sports teams and facilities may also confer some value to citizens when embedded in a much larger development strategy that views the presence of a sports facility and franchise as one part (often an anchor) of a broad selection of amenities that a city possesses. This logic then views infrastructure as one part of a bundle of amenities that a city possesses that makes it an attractive place to live in, work, or visit. Thus, by contributing to the broader quality of life of citizens, the arena serves as a leveragable asset to the city, and can contribute to the attraction and retention of human capital (Rosentraub, 2009). In the end, this might provide the best justification for subsidizing sports facilities for teams. In practice, however, evidence of this actually occurring is mixed, at best, where some cities have had to take on even more significant financial burdens where surrounding infrastructure development has not occurred (Long, 2012).

This study seeks to take this literature one step further by examining arenas within broader development strategies seeking to improve quality of life in cities, by examining the case of Detroit’s Little Caesar’s Arena (which opened in 2017). There are several key assumptions that undergird this research. First, we assume that, given the lack of measurable economic benefits of hosting a large arena and major league team, cities must value the arena in other terms, including its role in broader urban development initiatives (Misener & Mason, 2008). Second, these initiatives are undertaken due to a competition (real or perceived) that cities have with other cities in attracting and retaining different forms of capital (Mason, et al., 2015). Third, evidence of this competition will manifest itself in the discourse surrounding the efficacy of the use of public funds to fund sports facilities (Buist & Mason, 2010; Mason, 2010; Mason et al., 2015). Fourth, it is the arena’s role in improving quality of life that is a key, at this serves as a status signal that cities view as necessary in establishing a city’s position within a hierarchy of cities.

This study is currently ongoing. To this point, a total of 290 articles have been collected from Wayne County’s three highest circulating news publications (Detroit News, Crain’s, Michigan Chronicle) from between 2006 and 2016. Articles will be coded for basic characteristics including: newspaper source, date, staff reporter, article type, and key players/actors. Framing and reasoning devices related to the status and quality of life will be examined, with keywords, metaphors, catchphrases, and problem definition/s related to each identified. These devices will be used to construct a signature frame matrix (Gamson & Lasch, 1983) which will allow us to sort the idea elements and identify the frames most salient in the print material.
Results of this study will add to our understanding of arena construction in several novel ways. It focuses on how arena developments are undertaken within a broader context of urban development by examining how arenas contribute to the status of cities and the quality of life of residents. At the same time, it furthers our understanding of how proponents devise arguments to justify the construction of major league venues in postindustrial cities.