Bundling Urban Amenities and Building Strategic Capacity: The Case of the Columbus Arena District

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Cities are made up of different facilities, services, and conveniences – commonly referred to as amenities – which provide living conditions for urban inhabitants (Ullman, 1954). Clark (2015) argued that amenities benefit firms and citizens by improving the local environment and establishing local distinctiveness. He contended that amenity theory explains why human capital clusters in particular areas by arguing that talented individuals and firms are attracted to the amenities a region provides. In turn, Clark (2015) showed how amenities affect population growth and urban innovation and described two distinct types: constructed and natural. Constructed amenities include libraries, museums, opera houses, juice bars or even bicycle events, while natural physical amenities might be climate, humidity, water access, temperature and overall natural attractiveness.

One prominent approach to building amenities in US cities involves sports franchises, where cities strategically incorporate arenas into larger urban development projects. Rosentraub (2009) found that some cities have been more successful than others in developing arena-anchored projects. The Columbus Arena District and Nationwide Arena – home of the Columbus Blue Jackets of the National Hockey League – is one notable example. The current study employs a case study approach (Yin, 2003) to explore how the Columbus Arena District is viewed as an amenity by prominent local stakeholders. To do so, thirteen in-person semi-structured interviews were undertaken with facility managers, city officials, urban planners, journalists and sports leaders. The data collected were analyzed by incorporating both deductive and inductive approaches to coding (Mayring, 2000; Denis et al. 2001), with deductive categories developed based on Clark’s (2015) amenity theory.

This study is ongoing; however, preliminary results from this study suggest two major findings. First, interviewees place more value on the bundling of natural and constructed amenities of Columbus, rather than placing value on the individual components of the Arena District, such as the arena or team. Second, respondents consistently articulated a process whereby a public-private alliance identifies ongoing opportunities to pursue different kinds of amenities, described as “The Columbus Way” (Rivkin, 2015). We feel that these findings have important practical and theoretical implications. Civic leaders should focus more on how discrete amenities like sports facilities are integrated into broader development projects in order to assess their worthiness and possible investment. From an amenity theory perspective, this underscores that it will be the combinations of amenities (both natural and constructed), and how they are bundled together, that will give the greatest possible value to cities. In addition, it appears that some cities have developed a greater capacity to leverage amenities and pursue new ones as part of an overall civic strategy; this means that other cities that lack this capacity may not realize the same kinds of benefits even though they employ strategies using the same kinds of constructed amenities (like sports arenas).