

Sports facilities as urban amenities: media discourse and North American arena development projects

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Aim of paper

Sports facilities, such as stadiums and arenas, often serve as anchors for urban development and revitalization strategies (Chapin, 2004; Rosentraub, 2010, Siegfried & Zimbalist, 2000). These venues are constructed amenities, similar to convention centres, museums, hotels and restaurants, which proponents argue can be leveraged to attract new residents, tourists, and firms, improve quality of life or improve the image of a city. The aim of this paper is to examine how proposed sports infrastructure development projects are tied to discourses of amenities and civic competition, by analyzing media coverage surrounding the construction of six professional hockey arenas in North America.

Theoretical background

A shift in the urban growth paradigm has emphasized consumption and amenities as the drivers of dynamic urban areas (c.f. Clark, 2000; Judd & Feinstein, 1999; Strom 2002; Zukin 1982). Amenity theory argues that amenities, including natural and constructed features, may influence individuals' and firms' decisions to locate or relocate, and thus drive population growth or decline (Clark, 2004). For this reason, scholars have argued that for cities to grow and compete globally for mobile forms of capital, entertainment and sport facilities are essential components of a city's amenity mix (Rosentraub, 2010). Public debate over the merits of these projects often occurs through local media coverage, as proponents of development projects argue for the need for specific infrastructure. The media gain influence by determining what issues, views, and readers to pay attention to, and who is important; therefore the media have the ability to set public agendas as "the news not only tells us what to think about, it also tells us how to think about it" (McCombs, 1992, p. 820). At the same time, local media such as newspapers are embedded in local coalitions that favor civic growth strategies (Logan & Molotch, 1987). Given the importance of the media in shaping public opinion, an appropriate starting point is to examine how sport anchored developments are articulated in local media coverage in terms of their value as amenities. More specifically, three questions are explored - Q1: What is the value of a sport facility as an amenity to a city? Q2: How do the arguments for the value of the facility manifest and who is making these arguments? Q3: How are sport facilities being packaged with other existing or proposed civic amenities by development proponents?

Methodology

The research strategy employed a qualitative, multiple case study approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009) examining six North American cities. Three of the cities constructed arenas for professional hockey teams between 1998 and 2015, and the remaining three cities are currently in the process of constructing an arena. Newspaper sources were collected using web databases and search engines, compiled in a Word document and manually im-puted into ATLAS.ti 7 to

manage the data set. Content analysis (Holsti, 1969) of the data set was conducted in two phases. The first phase took a deductive approach to answer Q1, in which codes were derived from the amenity theory literature. The second phase of coding used an emergent approach to coding, which allowed for the inductive identification of themes to determine the situational context for Q2 and to identify if and how the bundling of amenities is occurring for Q3.

Results, discussion and implications

The current research is ongoing, which precludes the opportunity to discuss findings. However, there are several key issues that the results will address. The attraction and retention of capital remains a key concern for policy makers. As a result, the provision of amenities is a critical component of policies aimed at attracting human capital, as ef-forts to improve quality of life are recognized not just for consumption, but for economic development purposes. Thus, the increasing focus on amenities as drivers of growth (Clark, 2004) suggests that there should be a focus on positioning the arena as an amenity that can be leveraged to drive urban development and compliment cultural and entertainment offerings, with growing discourse in the newly proposed projects as opposed to the completed facilities. Our analysis of discourse will make a practical contribution to the literature by allowing for a greater un-derstanding of the rhetorical strategies employed by project proponents and how the value of the facility is couched in terms of its value as a civic amenity, and how these projects continue to garner support in their respective com-munities. In doing so, we anticipate contributing to the growing body of academic literature which indicates a grow-ing emphasis on human capital arguments as opposed to traditional justifications that link sport facilities to eco-nomic benefits.

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