

Get Lost In The Garden Of Eden: Exploring The Pulling Power Of New Zealand's National Sports Stadium.

Wright, Richard Keith; Eyal, Yuval

Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

E-mail: richard.wright@aut.ac.nz

Aim of the research

This paper focuses on the ongoing attempts to turn Auckland's Eden Park, New Zealand's premier sports stadium, into both an iconic brand and a revenue-generating local visitor attraction. The aim was to critically assess the perceived push factors and pulling power of a community-owned venue that, despite a long history of hosting major events and many thousands of sports fans, continues to divide opinion in terms of its availability, accessibility and affordability. The long-term future and feasibility of embracing the principles and practices of edutainment within Eden Park was also assessed and compared that witnessed within other sporting stadia, domestically and internationally.

Theoretical background

In terms of tangible sports event legacies, the stadium remains one of the most discussed and disputed consequences for the local host community to manage once their guests have all headed home. In 1989, Sports Geographer John Bale expanded upon Tuan's concept of "topophilia" to emphasise the emotional and physical impression left by stadiums and urban 'sportscares', citing that all venues have the potential to develop "a sufficient mystique" which, given time, may enable them to become "visitor attractions in their own right" (1989: p. 120). More recently, sports historian Jason Wood (2010: p. 198) revisited Bale's work, adding the "surviving historic grounds, and the sites of former stadiums, have the potential therefore to recapture place, memory and meaning, to create new interest in history and heritage and to generate new tourism markets and destinations". The subject of heritage sports tourism, and more specifically stadia-based tourism, has grown in popularity over the past decade, having once been referred to as the sleeping giant of a global billion dollar industry (Gammon & Fear, 2005; Wright, 2012). The concept of edutainment continues to divide opinion, within the industry and academy, but has proven history of both pushing and pulling people into places where they can be simultaneously educated and entertained (Wright, 2016).

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The expectations, perceptions and actions of those directly responsible for managing, maintaining and marketing Eden Park were captured via semi-structured interview. These were then compared to those operating within the sport, event and tourism industry, including those directly responsible for promoting Auckland and New Zealand to sport event tourists. A mixture of thematic and narrative analysis was employed to extract the most noteworthy comments/conclusions from the qualitative data collected.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

The findings identify how expectations and perceptions differ between those operating within Auckland's closely aligned sport, event and tourism sectors, especially with regarding the potential pulling power of a modern sports stadium that sits empty for the majority of the year. The authenticity of the edutainment product/package provided was also discussed, with some doubting that the demand for stadium tours existed in Auckland or New Zealand, especially amongst the local community or the domestic urban (event) tourism market. The importance of sports organisations and stadium owners establishing effective working relationships and engaging in regular professional communication with both their neighbouring business community and those specifically employed within the local tourism and hospitality sector was also identified. Examples from iconic venues located in North America, Europe and Australia were provided to demonstrate the potential profits attached to both building local attachment and offering an attractive product for sporting pilgrims to consume at their leisure. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations to assist sport event tourism marketers and sports facility managers seeking to maximise the long-term returns from hosting short-term/one-off major sporting fixtures.

References

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