Economic Development in Tampa Bay through the "Unifying Language" of Sports

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Introduction

Increasing attention by social geographers has focused on the role of ideology in the social production of space (Gregory, 1978; Harvey, 1985; Soja, 1989). If ideology has a role to play, perhaps it is best described as representing a filter or lens through which ideas are mediated in the course of human activity. Following Hodder (1984) and Isaac (1987), we can regard ideology as more than a simple twisting of knowledge; indeed, ideology serves as a resource that can be drawn upon to influence the meaning of human activity. The result is that a body of knowledge can be wielded much as any other resource, in turn giving some persons more or less power to influence the social production of space.

Despite the critical attention given by geographers, there has been no widespread agreement regarding how to study the effects of ideology, let alone how to interpret them. One avenue which may prove promising is to focus on an ideology that has surfaced to define values and meanings within the popular culture of America, and which in turn is intertwined in the construction of local geographies. A prime candidate for this focus is the ideology of sports (Sage, 1990). Following Lipsyte (1975), we can treat sports as a "unifying language" in American popular culture, one which resonates across many dimensions of American society, touching a broad spectrum of the population. It becomes spatially manifest when it enters the discourse used to promote economic development of

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localities, its language being drawn upon as a resource to lend weight to arguments for investing in sports culture.

Sports-led economic development has increasingly become an issue confronted by localities experiencing growing pains (Abbott, 1987; Logan and Molotch, 1987). In city after city, calculating a way to profit from sports and turn those profits into economic growth for localities has generated a growth industry of its own (Davis, 1990; Wendel, 1988). The ideology that sports represents appears as a theme in public debates and private decision-making over land use management, fiscal policy, and long-range economic planning whenever a local government considers investing in or subsidizing the culture of sports. In some instances, the decision to invest in a built environment for sports may be hailed as a cornerstone that will lead a city to regional or national prominence. Building arenas, granting tax concessions to franchises, developing infrastructure to support athletic facilities, and making other commitments to sports culture each cost money. Yet it is often claimed that these are instrumental to bringing long-term benefits to a community, benefits which are both tangible and intangible. This paper explores how this claim has influenced the cultural landscape of Florida.

The fast-growing urban areas of Florida are not the only landscapes that show the effects of sports ideology. They do typify those places in the United States, however, where the social production of space clearly is the product of ideologies that guide economic development. Significantly, the ideology of sports has played a leading role in that development, both in Florida and elsewhere. This paper proceeds by expanding on the theme of sports as an ideology that has emerged to become a "unifying language" within the popular culture of America, and goes on to discuss how this ideology has played into issues of economic development in Florida's Tampa Bay area.

Ideology in American Sports Culture

The literature of American popular culture has identified competitive sports as a leading expression of cultural values and representation of the American spirit (for example, see Eitzen and Sage, 1986; Lipsyte, 1975; Sage, 1990). Sports is also recognized as contributing significantly to the

national economy; Sports inc. magazine calculated the "gross national sports product" for 1987 as $50.2 billion, or approximately one percent of the nation's GNP. That is more money than the annual expenditure on oil and coal in the United States (Hofmann and Greenberg, 1989). With that much capital in circulation, sports is not only an important part of the nation's economy, but can be promoted as important for the American way of life, as well.

Despite this prominence, or perhaps because of it, one common theme in the popular culture literature has identified a myth about sports in America (Izenberg, 1977). This myth intricately invokes an ideological language and way of thinking that pervades popular culture. It creates a belief that, as Robert Lipsyte puts it, through sports

> rich and poor, black and white, educated and unskilled, we will all find a unifying language. The melting pot may be a myth, but we will all come together in the ball park (Lipsyte, 1975: ix).

This "unifying language" is embroiled in creating an infrastructure for perpetuating sports culture by blending together elements of religious ceremony and cultural identity with patriotism and even nationalism to instill a reverence for the winner-take-all achievements of athletes (Izenberg, 1977; Novak, 1988). It is an ideology which Lipsyte insists has been used to create an infrastructure of what he calls "Sports-World." Lipsyte describes this as a sweaty Oz you'll never find in a geography book, but since the end of the Civil War it has been promoted and sold to us like Rancho real estate, an ultimate sanctuary, a university for the body, a community for the spirit, a place to hide that glows with that time of innocence when we believed that rules and boundaries were honored, that good triumphed over evil, and that the loose ends of experience could be caught and bound and delivered in an explanation as final and as comforting as a goodnight kiss (Lipsyte, 1975: x).

It is this promotion and sale of sports culture—by industry, by the military, by government, and especially by the media—that allows the ideology of sports to penetrate deeply into popular culture. Through this "unifying language," the ideology of sports becomes woven into the

very fabric of an American way of life, giving a boost to the creation of local geographies as a resource for economic development.

Local Boosterism and Sports Promotion

> 'We play ball with business."
>
> —on the cover of a promotional brochure from Arlington, TX

In recent decades, students of urban studies have called attention to a re-emergence of local area boosterism. (Abbott, 1987; Bernard and Rice, 1983; Burd, 1977). Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the boom towns of Florida and other Sun Belt states. John Logan and Harvey Molotch set the tone in their book, *Urban Fortunes*, expressing the conventional view that

> professional sports [are a] clear asset to localities for the strong image they present and tourist traffic they attract (Logan and Molotch, 1987: 79).

Here we see the two strongest arguments often used to defend sports-led economic development: its image-building for a locality and its potential to increase local area tourism.

Image-building provides visibility to the outside world for a locality, and can in turn stimulate added investments in the local area by injecting new capital from outside the region. As Logan and Molotch (1987) suggest, the presence of high-visibility sports is thought to confer this image on a locality. Simultaneously, the image-building potential of sports is thought to promote renewed confidence among local capital interests and encourage them to maintain or increase investments in the locality.

The upshot is the creation of a local infrastructure and built environment geared to the promotion of sports. All the while, the sports venues and related fanfare attract tourists, generating an important contribution to a locality's economy. What many tourists come to see is the sports palace—the lavish new arena or stadium. Others come as avid fans of particular teams. Still others come simply because the sports myth tells them that they must make the pilgrimage, join with others in the cultural

event, and see first-hand the spectacle of big-time sports. When they come, they bring money and spend it in the local area.

From the perspective of the sports ideology, sports-led economic development is an unqualified success. This can be seen in the language used by proponents of sports-led economic development. However, success is neither unqualified, nor is it guaranteed. What level of impact for a local economy actually results from investments made in sports infrastructure and revenues generated from sports-related tourism varies considerably (Baade and Dye, 1990), but it is thought by many to be sufficient to entice local governments and private commercial interests to organize their efforts for its promotion. During the past decade the sports ideology became bureaucratically institutionalized when a number of local and state governments undertook the creation of public sports commissions. Following the lead of Indianapolis, at least four localities in Florida established local sports commissions: the Jacksonville Sports Development Authority, The Sports Council, a division of the Miami Chamber of Commerce, The Greater Orlando Sports Organizing Committee, and in the Tampa Bay area, the Pinellas Sports Authority (Wendel, 1988). Efforts by sports commissions usually are of two principal kinds: to lure a major-league team to the local area, or to host major annual or occasional events. Football's Super Bowl epitomizes the major annual event; it was estimated to generate a direct positive impact of $100 million to the local economy when Tampa hosted the silver anniversary game in 1991. It is that size of a prize that can mask doubts and trigger a mind-set which causes local area boosters to adopt the sports ideology.

Despite any other social functions that sports has for a locality, "sustaining the growth ideology is clearly one of them" (Logan and Molotch, 1987: 81). In short, boosterism mentality takes the myth of sports—that American values are drawn together in the ballpark—and uses it as a resource to promote a place. The resource is meant to be an asset for advertising that creates a positive image and expands tourist activity (Fleming and Roth, 1991). However, these assets are propped up by the ideology of sports, one which provides the "unifying language" that Lipsyte addressed. It is a language that is well-represented in the

literature used by boosters to promote their localities and in news media coverage of local development initiatives. To see this, we can turn to the Tampa Bay metropolitan area where sports has played a major role in recent development issues.

Sports-Led Development in the Tampa Bay Area

> "A major-league baseball team is one of the greatest blessings any city can have."
>
> —Rick Dodge, Assistant City Manager, City of St. Petersburg (quoted in Christopulos, 1989: 7)

Within Florida, the call for sports-led economic development in recent years has approached the level of sensationalism. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the Tampa Bay metropolitan area. There are two key image-producers in the region's sports world: Tampa Stadium and the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Tampa Stadium has been the site of two Super Bowls, including the 25th anniversary game in January, 1991. The State of Florida became a leading player in the development process by using the "unifying language" of sports to promote that Super Bowl when it issued a specialty license plate which prominently featured the Super Bowl logo. The tourism bureau for nearby St. Petersburg-Pinellas County used a national advertising campaign which stressed the area's proximity to "The Game," although it was played across the Bay in Tampa.

But the lure of attracting a Major League Baseball team was the principal (and elusive) goal for Florida's sports-minded cities (Henderson, 1990). Separate factions in Miami, Orlando, St. Petersburg and Tampa (joining ten other cities across the United States and Canada) actively vied for one of two National League expansions teams that were slated to be awarded in 1991.[2] Civic leaders recognized that the competition was tough:

[2] Miami and Denver ultimately were awarded the two franchises.

> "There's never before been a build-up of intensity like this . . . There's an invisible frenzy going on out there."
>
> —Rick Dodge, Assistant City Manager, City of St. Petersburg (as quoted in *St. Petersburg Times*, 1989).

The City of St. Petersburg made perhaps the boldest move of all, passing a bond issue to construct a domed stadium specifically designed to meet the needs of baseball. Initially representing a $62 million public investment, it has yet to attract a team. Nonetheless, the City's investment assured residents of St. Petersburg that it would remain among the leading contenders for a Major League team.[3]

Local area news coverage fueled booster efforts by maintaining a running commentary on strategies for sports-led economic development. The following excerpt from the *St. Petersburg Times* typifies the public discussion that ensued:

> "In St. Petersburg, they expressed their faith with a gamble . . . and christened their stadium the Florida Suncoast Dome. Critics called it other names. The Doom Dome. The Old Folks Dome. The Tractor Pull Cultural Center . . . Then the Chicago White Sox came to town . . . [and] the snickers about St. Petersburg and its big-league ambitions subsided" (Olinger, 1988: 58).

That was in 1988 when it looked as if the White Sox really would make the move. Negotiations between City officials and owners of the club nearly secured a long-term occupant for the Suncoast Dome. Team owners contended that the existing stadium in Chicago, Comiskey Park,

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[3] Subsequent to acceptance of this paper for publication, the City of St. Petersburg and local boosters repeatedly made (unsuccessful) attempts to woo the Seattle Mariners to the Suncoast Dome during 1992. Just prior to the publication of this paper, the San Francisco Giants, who had earlier announced a move to St. Petersburg, subject to the approval of baseball, were purchased by a San Francisco group, and baseball voted to keep the Giants in San Francisco.

was obsolete. They demanded modifications in the design of Suncoast Dome, already under construction, as a condition for moving to Florida. The State of Florida agreed to help St. Petersburg by providing some funds in an effort to configure the stadium to the requirements of the White Sox. A simultaneous lobby effort was underway in the State of Illinois, however, where boosters for Chicago eventually succeeded in securing state funding to replace aging Comiskey Park with a new ballpark on the southside of Chicago, which opened early in 1991. The resulting setback for local boosters left St. Petersburg with a domed stadium, but without a tenant for baseball.

Another example in which the "unifying language" of sports has led local area development is found in the bidding war among places for baseball's Spring Training. Currently, eighteen teams locate their training camps in Florida during the off-season (Figure 1). A study for the Florida State Department of Commerce found that Spring Training produced a total impact on the State's economy of $294.5 million for 1985, averaging $16.4 million in direct and indirect spending for each team, principally in the form of tourism (Davidson-Peterson Associates, 1987). When local area boosters see such figures, they interpret them to mean that having a Spring Training camp can be worth $16 million for their local economy. The eagerness of cities to lure teams from sites in Arizona or California, or from sites elsewhere in Florida, contributed to a bidding war for teams and the development of new stadiums and their related facilities across Florida during the 1980s. As reported in the *St. Petersburg Times*:

> "The bidding isn't limited to big cities. Small towns, some nonexistent towns that are no more than gleams in developers' eyes, are making pitches for teams" (Lowitt, 1988: 1C).

By the end of 1989, the effect of this bidding war had hit the Tampa Bay area. Previously, four teams had their training camps in the metropolitan area (an additional five teams were located in adjacent counties). Although Pinellas County retained three teams (St. Louis Cardinals and Philadelphia Phillies, each in St. Petersburg; Toronto Blue Jays in Dunedin), Hillsborough County experienced a spatial shift when Tampa

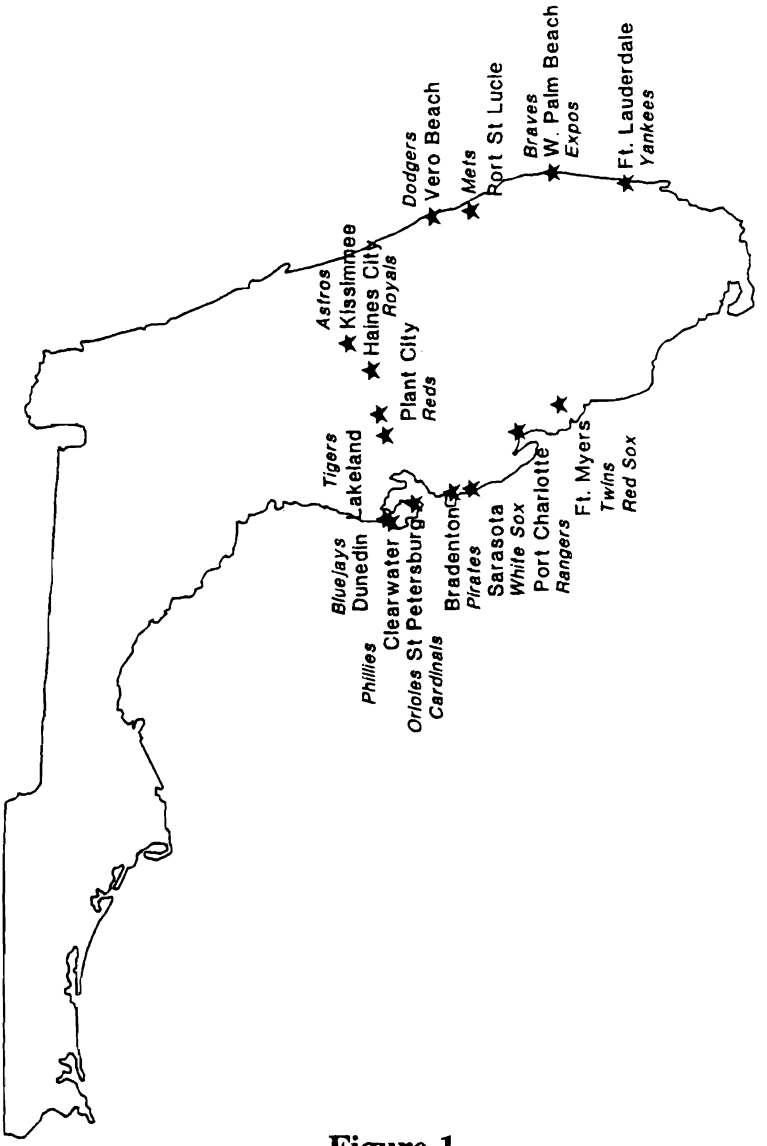

Figure 1

1992 Baseball Spring Training Sites

lost the Cincinnati Reds to tiny Plant City. Meanwhile, the fate of the Blue Jays remained uncertain amid speculation that they, too, would relocate elsewhere, neighboring Citrus County succeeded in making its pitch to lure the Cleveland Indians from their Spring Training camp in Arizona (White, 1990).[4]

But the fact remained that St. Petersburg and Tampa were without a major-league franchise to augment the area's NFL team, and that fact loomed large in the public debate over projections for the area's economy at year's end in 1990 (Roush, 1991). For decades, the leadership of the two cities maintained a civic rivalry that has been linked with an inability to achieve region-wide goals (Eflin and Wysong, 1989). The unwillingness of the two sides to come together to promote what many people in the area felt was a common goal was cited as a factor in the failure of St. Petersburg to lure the White Sox from Chicago in 1988 (Melone, 1990). In the aftermath of that debacle, a step toward unity was initiated when promoters from each side of the Bay joined forces in an effort to bring major-league baseball to the Tampa Bay area (*Tampa Tribune*, 1989, and Balter and Judd, 1991).

Throughout 1990, however, the rivalry was renewed, as promoters from the two cities undertook separate efforts to secure yet another sports team for the area—this time a professional hockey franchise. The National Hockey League had announced that two cities in North America would be selected for expansion teams that would begin play in 1992. Four other cities (Anaheim and Miami in the United States, Hamilton and Ottawa in Canada) undertook campaigns to secure one of the teams; of these, only Ottawa succeeded. Despite the presence of its newly completed stadium (by then reportedly worth $130 million, double its original price tag) and willingness by city officials to provide financial backing, efforts by the City of St. Petersburg were unsuccessful. The Tampa faction, despite having no arena at its disposal and lacking public

[4] The Cleveland Indians were to move to Homestead in south Dade County for Spring training in 1993, although at the time of this writing their move was delayed by Hurricane Andrew. (editor)

funding, successfully mounted its campaign to win a franchise. This included a promise by promoters (led by a group of Japanese investors) to build a new $90 million ice arena by Tampa Stadium. Area boosters greeted the news by emphasizing "the economic and emotional lift the franchise award gives this community" (*Tampa Tribune*, 1990).

Award of the new franchise was announced on December 6, 1990, amid the nation's build-up toward war with Iraq. In reviewing the exclamatory headlines on the front page of the *Tampa Tribune* on the following day, it is revealing to note that while Saddam Hussein received a larger typeface, hockey got top billing. Across the Bay, and despite St. Petersburg's continued series of failed attempts to fill their domed stadium, the news that professional hockey would be coming to Tampa Bay made banner headlines in *The St. Petersburg Times* on a par with Hussein's antics. The front page that morning was dominated by hockey, including a photo of Tampa Mayor Sandy Freedman waving a hockey stick in front of City Hall. Playing on a familiar expression, and mixing sports with power and economics, the headlines read "The Puck Stops Here!" It wasn't baseball, but boosters in the Tampa Bay area felt they had something to cheer about. The sports ideology clearly was a resource at their disposal.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from this view of sports ideology and the promotion of local area growth in Tampa Bay? First, economic development issues clearly can be guided through sports ideology. Economists and political scientists generally differ in their assessments of these tangible benefits for local areas (Abbott, 1987; Baade and Dye, 1988, 1990; Ragas, et.al., 1987). What is important for our present consideration, however, is the intangible character of benefits that arise from the sports ideology: the extent to which the big-league image is appealed to in the rhetoric and ideology used by persons who influence local area development. To evaluate this, two questions must be asked: Do local leaders believe that the presence of sports will generate a big-league image for their locality and translate into positive economic growth? Can they convince the local public to believe the same way, and

thereby rally behind their efforts? In the case of Tampa Bay, an affirmative answer must be given for both questions.

The Tampa-St. Petersburg metropolitan area is one among many urban localities nationwide that are undergoing rapid economic growth and whose leaders plainly seek to promote it. While the emphasis here was on economic development that draws on sports ideology as a resource for economic growth, a similar analysis could focus on direct and indirect impacts of other forms of built-space projects and their related cultures. In so doing, it should be possible to determine if there exists a "unifying language" or ideology that serves as a resource for boosters to draw upon when they promote other expressions of popular culture on the landscape; convention centers, festival markets, performing arts centers, and high-tech transit systems come to mind. Such studies may permit geographers to evaluate claims that similar high-focus development projects help develop a local economy by creating intangible benefits, including a positive image about a locality. Furthermore, such an empirical focus should aid social geographers who are seeking interpretations for the role played by ideology in the social production of space.

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