# TOWARD A THANATOLOGY OF OLYMPIC STADIUMS

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Abstract - The sociology of sport has over a 30-year history of developing a deeper understanding of urban life by conceptualizing the ways in which sport, both as a dominant cultural form, and as the infrastructure that houses it, is connected to the construct of community and identity. Olympic stadiums, for example, are projected as symbols of global urban status, focal points for local collective identity, and as verification of urban regeneration success –that is, in a sense, as the concrete embodiment of the Olympic Dream. So, what happens when an Olympic stadium is abandoned or destroyed? What happens when an Olympic stadium dies? The purpose of this essay is to provoke thought about the role and meaning of Olympic stadium death. We draw upon media studies, gerontological, and thanatological literature to explore how former Olympic stadiums are presented in global media reports. Our discussion is prompted by our exploratory research examining local newspaper discourse surrounding the destruction of 15 major US sport stadiums since 2000. Situated in the notion that cultural objects have a biography of a life span much as individuals do, we ultimately call for a thanatology of sports stadiums.

Keywords: Stadium; Demolition; Death; Narrative; Icon.

## PARA UMA TANATOLOGIA DOS ESTÁDIOS OLÍMPICOS

Resumo - A sociologia do esporte tem uma história de mais de 30 anos de desenvolvimento de uma compreensão mais profunda da vida urbana, conceitualizando as formas em que o esporte, tanto como uma forma cultural dominante como uma infraestrutura que a abriga e está conectado à construção da comunidade e da identidade. Os estádios olímpicos, por exemplo, são projetados como símbolos do *status* urbano global, pontos focais para a identidade coletiva local e como verificação do sucesso da regeneração urbana, isto é, em certo sentido, como a concretização do sonho olímpico. Então, o que acontece quando um estádio olímpico é abandonado ou destruído? O que acontece quando um estádio olímpico morre? O objetivo deste ensaio é provocar o pensamento sobre o papel e o significado da morte do estádio olímpico. Recorremos a estudos de mídia, literatura gerontológica e não-estatística para explorar como os estádios olímpicos são apresentados nos relatórios da mídia global. Nossa discussão é impulsionada por nossa pesquisa exploratória que examina o discurso do jornal local em torno da destruição de 15 principais estádios esportivos dos EUA desde 2000. Situado na noção de que os objetos culturais têm uma biografia de vida, tanto quanto os indivíduos fazem, nós, em última instância, pedimos uma tanatologia dos estádios esportivos.

Palavras-chave: Estádio; Demolição; Morte; Narrativa; Ícone.

## PARA UNA TANATOLOGÍA DE LOS ESTADIOS OLÍMPICOS

Resumen - La sociología del deporte tiene una historia de más de 30 años de desarrollo de una comprensión más profunda de la vida urbana, conceptualizando las formas en que el deporte, tanto como una forma cultural dominante como una infraestructura que la alberga y está conectada a la construcción de la comunidad y de la identidad. Los estadios olímpicos, por ejemplo, están diseñados como símbolos del *status* urbano global, puntos focales para la identidad colectiva local y como verificación del éxito de la regeneración urbana, es decir, en cierto sentido, como la concreción del sueño olímpico. Entonces, ¿qué pasa cuando un estadio olímpico es abandonado o destruido? ¿Qué sucede cuando un estadio olímpico muere? El objetivo de este ensayo es provocar el pensamiento sobre el papel y el significado de la muerte del estadio olímpico. Hemos recurrido a estudios de medios, literatura gerontológica y no estadística para explorar cómo los estadios olímpicos se presentan en los informes de los medios globales. Nuestra discusión es impulsada por nuestra investigación exploratoria que examina el discurso del periódico local en torno a la destrucción de 15 principales estadios de deportes de EEUU desde 2000. Situado en la noción de que los objetos culturales tienen una biografía de vida, tanto como los individuos hacen, en última instancia, pedimos una tanatología de los estadios deportivos.

Palabras clave: Estadio; Demolición; Muerte; Narrativa; Icono.

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## Introduction

Our exploratory research contributes to an emergent conversation focusing on endings rather than beginnings. Scholars seem predisposed toward origin stories, how one becomes an elite athlete or fangirl or start-up mogul, with failures and cessations under-explored in comparison. Only recently have studies of artistic emergence been joined by those on creative decline[1], theories of new organizational forms been modified by those on industry collapse[2], becoming-a-celebrity stories been bridged by studies of diminishing fame[3], and analyses of TV pilots been refined by those on series finales and textual "death"[4]. The first author of this manuscript has long focused on stadium construction, which contributes to our collective interest in stadium demolition. Our work thus adds to this scholarly re-orientation through an analysis of discourses on the endings of major sport stadiums and is situated at the intersections of sport studies, iconicity research, and media/cultural studies? Scholars have long argued that Olympic stadiums are framed to represent urban global status, territorial ambition, collective identity, community conscience, and collective achievement – a concrete embodiment of the Olympic Dream, if you will. What happens when those dreams end, are abandoned, or demolished? How is the end perceived in this context? What local and global discourse surrounds the stadium after the dream is over, and why might that matter to Olympic sport scholars? Below we summarize sensitizing literatures for our project, followed by a discussion of our pilot research design and core findings. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

## Sensitizing Literatures

We highlight three literatures that frame our research project, each has addressed endings in different ways. The first literature explores relationships between sport and mortality. While many academic fields overlook endings, as noted above, sport studies scholars have been interested in sport and death for decades[*]. For example, inspired by Durkheimian theories of social integration, scholars have examined the death-boost effect in baseball (MLB) hall-of-fame selections (positive collective memories of a deceased player are found to "boost his chances for consecration as a

[*] Our brief discussion here cannot do justice to death-related issues in sport and its study, including debates over traumatic brain injury, spectator safety, sport "delebrities," and "sudden death" mechanisms to resolve ties in US sport.

baseball legend (p. 83)"[5], the suicide-dip surrounding holidays and major ceremonies (national US suicide rates decline during the World Series and Super Bowl Sunday[6]), and the impact of sport teams' geographic relocation on local mortality (suicide rates increased in three US cities undergoing relocation but homicide rates did not[7]). Most relevant for our purposes is Schimmel's[8] (1995) study of the Baltimore Colts' franchise relocation and the metaphors of divorce and death used to describe the end of the 31-year-old relationship or "love affair" between the team and the local community. This relocation also generated the first ever litigation against the NFL alleging that relocation causes depression, distress, and "severe physical and emotional disability (p. 112)"[8] among season ticket-holders[9]. How do these discourses of loss, death, and grief compare to those in other sport and/or real-world contexts?

Second, our project is framed by renewed interest in icons and iconicity[10]. The concept of icon has been associated with religious meanings for centuries but "over the course of the twentieth century, the term has expanded beyond religion and toward art, communication and culture (p. 4)"[10]. Rooted in research traditions of Charles Pierce, Emile Durkheim and others, the study of icons today reflects the mid-1980s material turn in the social sciences that focused on objects, their biographies, and the social and material practices in which they are embedded. The term icon is now used to refer to a wide variety of persons, events, and objects including buildings such as sport stadiums and the urban spaces they inhabit. Our approach is centered in Kopytoff's[11] insight from this materialist turn: that we can ask the same questions about the biographies of things as we do the biographies of people.

> What has been its career thus far, and what do people consider an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life," and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (p. 66-67)

Rather than public vs. private financing, citizen displacement, infrastructure condition, or security preparedness – the expectable scholarly foci of the beginning and

middle of most stadiums' lives – we're interested in what characterizes a stadium's end-stage and final demise.

Finally, we respond to Bairner's[12] call to action in which he reviewed challenges sport sociologists face from the natural sciences, from mainstream sociology, and challenges "which we have set ourselves (p. 102)". One of the challenges from within the sociology of sport is to converse more with other core disciplines as well as with interdisciplinary fields such as leisure and cultural studies. Our project engages with media/cultural studies research on textual or narrative death, particularly Harrington's[4] investigation of US serial television in which she conceptualized an *ars moriendi* for the object or "thing" of TV shows. Emerging in the 15th century as part of the Church's efforts to better educate priests and laypersons, the *ars moriendi* was instructional material informing the dying what to expect, offering guidance to those attending the death, and prescribing prayers, actions, and attitudes that would lead to a 'good death' and salvation[13]. Drawing on religious traditions surrounding repentance, forgiveness, and the afterlife, the *ars moriendi* emphasized the active role of the dying in determining their destiny (heaven or hell) and a necessary coherence between life and death. Following Kopytoff[11] and Harrington[4], our research explores the endings of sport stadiums given their expectable biography or life trajectory. Recognizing that stadium destruction is both the end of a cultural object and the end of a narrative, how is the "final act" perceived in this context and why might that matter to sport studies scholars?

**Pilot Study: US Stadium Death**

Our exploratory, qualitative research project involved analysis of journalistic (local newspaper) discourses of stadium destruction surrounding fifteen major US sport stadiums that have met their demise since 2000: Seattle's Kingdome (March 2000)[†], Milwaukee's County Stadium (February 2001), Foxboro's (MA) Foxboro Stadium (March 2002), Denver's Mile High Stadium (March 2002), Chicago's Soldier Field (January 2002), Cincinnati's Cinergy Field (December 2002), St. Louis' Busch Stadium (December 2005), Stanford's (CA) Stanford Stadium (November 2005), Detroit's Tiger Stadium (June 2008-September 2009), New York's Shea Stadium (February 2009), Philadelphia's Vets Stadium (February 2009), Dallas' Texas Stadium (April 2010), East

[†] The date refers to date of destruction or date range of abandonment and decline.

Rutherford's (NJ) Giants Stadium (August 2010), New York's original Yankee Stadium (April 2012), and Omaha's (NE) Rosenblatt Stadium (July 2012)[‡]. Using the LexisNexis database and Google search engine, we conducted an online search of news coverage to better understand how the demise of each stadium was framed locally.

Data were collected for each stadium for the time period of eight months prior through one month past each stadium's destruction. Our search prioritized local news coverage, focusing on lead and feature articles exclusively related to the stadium's finality. We paired search terms such as "demolition," and "destruction" with the name of each stadium. Additional searches utilizing key terms such as "implosion" and "dismantling" were then conducted to provide further depth regarding the discourse of demise for each of these historic and iconic stadiums. Reactions from the community were identified through keyword searches linking "demolition" and "[the name of each of the 15 stadiums]," with "spectators," "fans," and "community." A total of 74 useable (first-run feature) articles were identified and coded.

A data file was constructed for each stadium. Unit of analysis was the article. The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach and a constant comparative method[14]. This analysis led to the identification of hidden themes as elements within the news content[15]. The third author conducted initial coding of each article, identifying core themes related to decline, destruction, and beginnings/endings. Coding was non-discrete; a single article might include multiple themes. The first author then independently verified and refined the core themes in the dataset. Below we explore the framing of stadium destructions including perceptions and experiences regarding the differences between good and bad stadium endings.

## Findings

We report two main findings: first, that stadium destruction is surrounded by a discourse of death; and second, that sport fans, athletes, journalists, and others draw distinctions between "good" and "bad" death in this context. The *ars moriendi* emphasizes the significance of life/death coherence, the importance of exiting the world as one entered it. From a thanatological perspective a good death is the culmination of a good life: "Have your dying be a courtly death, among the best things you ever did (p.

[‡] The Pontiac (MI) Silverdome is slated for destruction sometime in 2017.

274)"[16§]. Coherence permits a personal or object biography to come full circle and carry the meaning(s) of life's origins through the final act of death. This coherence honors the person or object, facilitates the grief of survivors, and enables continuity between this life and the (potential) next one. In the TV series context examined by Harrington[4], the challenge for creative staff in crafting a finale is to "think of every angle every fan has and try to shine a light in that part of the story […] You simply try to finish the story that was started" (Kelly Souders, co-executive producer of Smallville; quoted in Harrington[4], p. 582) in a cohesive and meaningful way – while keeping in mind that the death is attended (watched) by millions of people with deeply passionate opinions about how those endings should unfold. For example, fans' efforts to save Detroit's Tiger Stadium existed for decades before its eventual destruction in 2009 and inspired the probably-first-ever group hug of a building.

> Every time I come down here I want to cry. The good people of Michigan love and respect this place. It's a part of their life, like going to school or graduating or getting married. Granted it's silly to get emotional about a building. But Tiger Stadium is different. It's evolved into more than just a pile of steel and cement – to a degree it's undergone anthropomorphism. That's why thousands of baseball fans gave the stadium a big hug yesterday. They gave it a hug just like they were hugging their kid, or their dog, or their grandfather. Except, of course, they couldn't reach all the way around, so they had to hold hands to encircle the grand structure[17].

Without question, a bad stadium death is a slow stadium death. According to demolitions expert Mark Loizeaux – who likens himself to a "structural euthanist" rather than a "traveling executioner"[18] – "It's better for people if a beloved building goes out with a bang, rather than having them watch it get bludgeoned to death over a matter of months (p. 24)"[19]. Elaborates journalist John Branch[20]:

§ Schneidman[16] summarizes the ten criteria for a good (human) death as follows: the death is natural, occurs late in life, is expected, is prepared for, is honorable, is accepted by the dying, is "civilized," is generative, is rueful, and is free from physical pain (p. 245).

> [Referring to the Giants Stadium] John Mara (team president) went to the stadium to say goodbye. Massive mechanical claws had been picking at the old stadium for weeks, like vultures on a carcass. "Every day you come in, there's another section down. We've had to watch this agonizing destruction piece by piece." It's like walking away from the family house, "except they don't rip down the house when you move out of it."

In an article titled "Let Rosenblatt Rest in Peace," ESPN staff writer Mitch Sherman[21] laments: "It's like saying farewell to a beloved friend at a funeral, coming to grips with the loss, then getting called back two years later to exhume the corpse for one more glance." Busch Stadium, still standing weeks after its supposed wrecking-ball-date, became:

> The story and the stadium that just won't die [. . .] How many times are we going to gather around this old cement and steel edifice and pay homage to an old ballpark that just doesn't seem to want to go away amicably?[22]

In a piece titled "Stadium Looks Set to Go Out Not With Bang, But a Whimper," journalist Bryan Burwell[22] offers counsel to fans.

> So here's my bit of advice for everyone who seems mesmerized by the hidden magic or charms of this building: let it go. Stop coming here on these emotionally draining pilgrimages, because Busch is not going to go away in a spectacular cloud of dust. This is going to be a slow agonizing death, like an annoying, endless water torture.

If a bad human death is the over-medicalized, over-institutionalized, and under-attended version characteristic of the mid-20th century (US context) that robbed the individual of his or her autonomy, overlooked quality of life, and violated Shneidman's[16] criteria (see endnote §), a bad stadium death is characterized by steady deterioration, isolation from public visitation, and loved ones' inability to influence the

course of action. This rejection of a slow death might seem to contradict norms of coherence – since stadiums aren't designed, financed, or constructed overnight, a gradual decline might seem fitting. However, our data suggests that the life of the stadium begins not at the groundbreaking ceremony but on its opening day (we realize this risk initiating debates about when human life begins, which we will studiously avoid). As such, the celebratory spectacle of its opening must be matched by an equally spectacular finale.

Implosion! In their recent and wonderful book re-imagining architecture's agency, Cairns and Jacobs[23] draw on theories of waste and value to explore building deaths and the capacity of architecture to make worlds differently. Of the fifteen stadiums we analyzed, four experienced planned implosion: Kingdome (Seattle), Cinergy Field (Cincinnati), Vets Stadium (Philadelphia), and Texas Stadium (Dallas). While from a corporate perspective the choice of implosion saves time and money and ensures public safety[19], from the public's perspective it's a more honorific send-off. In an article on Seattle's Kingdome titled "Kingdome, Kaboom!" a fan says, "It just happened so fast. Everyone started clapping. They were just gasping and yelling and clapping"[24]. Seattle residents held parties all over the city, including "a flotilla of boats in Puget Sound, downtime high-rises, hillsides and the Space Needle"[25]. The implosion of Vets stadium in Philadelphia was described by one journalist as "as artful as a Grucci fireworks show: section after section collapsed inward in synchronized order – like fans executing a wave (p. 2)"[26]. Much as 21st century (US) funerals have transitioned away from rituals of mourning toward celebrations of life, the best stadium deaths are understood to be the ones publicly and collectively feted.

Returning to a television context, media scholars propose a taxonomy of endings that include: (1) stoppage (an abrupt unplanned cancellation of a show); (2) wrap-up (an ending neither fully arbitrary nor completely planned; typically, a season ending unexpectedly serves as a series finale); (3) conclusion (final episode crafted by producers to be the end); or (4) finale ("a conclusion with a going-away party" marked by heightened emotion and deliberate hype)[26]. Implosions allows for stadium deaths to be parties-with-tears, a public message of "thank you," "you did well," "we'll miss you," and "goodbye." In the run-up to the live broadcast implosion of Texas Stadium, journalist Jeff Mosier writes, "Something happens to a place after 37 years. It begins to

breathe, and tell stories, and, in an expanse of concrete and flying buttresses of steel, inspire awe" (Dallas Morning News, 4-1-2010). The formal send-off was deemed "The Last Tailgate Party" and as "the dynamite boomed and the stadium began to tumble, tears filled the eyes of owner and GM [Jerry] Jones, as it did with this daughter, and granddaughter" (ibid). One former Cowboys cheerleader who witnessed the event said:

> It was much more emotional than I expected. I'm so glad that I had my family out there to hold my hand through it. I didn't think I would be that much of a basket case about it. It was like saying goodbye to an old friend[27].

Grief experts suggest that knowing of and planning for a loved one's death in advance allows for a healthier and more adaptive grieving process. While the concept of anticipatory grief remains contested by social scientists[28], it offers suggestive insight to how we might interpret the pain, remembrance, and joy surrounding stadium destruction.

**Olympic Stadium Death: Future Research**

As noted earlier, the *ars moriendi* emphasizes the significance of the life/death coherence, that is, the importance of exiting the world as one entered it. Countering the commonly heard narrative that stadium destruction is a necessary cost of progress, one of the core themes in local US newspaper coverage is that a stadium's death should honor the grandiosity of its premiere (Opening Day), the glory of its years, and the larger narrative that surrounds it. Object agency as suggested by Kopytoff[11] is reflected by journalists, fans, team owners, and others of the "life" of stadiums and their seeming "right" to a good death. What are the implications, then, for Olympic stadiums?

Few Olympic stadiums have been purposely destroyed, none in recent times: White City Stadium (1908 London); the original Wembley Stadium (1948 London); Grenoble (1968 Games); and , Albertville (1992 Games). Some have been successfully repurposed, Atlanta (1996), Sydney (2000), and Vancouver (2010) are all examples. However, a simple Google search pulls up lists of sites with associated photos of empty and abandoned Olympic stadiums and infrastructure from all parts of the Olympic-globe. The narratives included on these sites suggest the neglect as somehow shameful

or wasteful. What is less clear is how local media frame the slow death of Olympic stadia in different parts of the world. We suggest there are numerous opportunities for further research. For example, have we identified a narrative that is unique to North American stadiums, or limited to English language reports? We imagine excellent opportunities, therefore, for collaborative research across geographies, contexts, and languages. If Olympic stadium death is not framed as emotionally as is that of US major sports stadiums, is it because Olympic stadiums are not "loved" in the first place? Perhaps they are reminders of expense, forced housing evictions (to assemble the land necessary for construction) and social conflict. Perhaps, in this context, a good death is not deserved. Or perhaps Olympic stadiums' "premieres" and the time/lifespan of the Games is too short for public attachment or positive sentiment. If so, the absence of attachment perhaps means there is no need to grieve the end and neglect of the stadium remains a mere fascination and/or a monument to government waste.

## Conclusion

The sociology of sport has over a 30-year history of analyzing how public and private elites use stadium construction to reclaim the built environment in ways that bias financial capital, service sector capital, and affluent populations. A parallel and equally significant contribution of this literature has been to provide a deeper understanding of urban life by conceptualizing the ways in which sport as a dominant cultural form, as well as the infrastructure that houses it, is connected to the construct of community. This insightful analysis helps us to more fully understand how sport is a significant and meaningful ingredient in city life, both to elites who manipulate it and to the people for whom it authentically matters.

Our aim with this brief research note is for scholars' 30-year focus on stadium beginnings to be joined by studies of their various ends – the beginning of the end, if you will. In addition to the specific questions regarding local Olympic stadiums, as noted above, there are broader social scientific issues that could be explored. Areas for research include, but are not limited to: (a) research on collective memory and the monumentalization of sporting space[12]; (b) sport memorabilia and collecting (one can buy a seat from a demolished stadium as a remembrance, for example); (c) cycles of life and death in sport as old stadiums are replaced by 21st-century "terrorist-ready" arenas[8];

and (d) sport tourism and "dark" tourism (visits to death-related sites)[29]. As sport studies scholars and the public at large debate the economic rationality, injury/fatality risks, and personal value of investing in elite and Olympic sport, we believe that a re-orientation toward questions of endings and death is timely.

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