

WHITE PAPER / SPORTS FACILITY DESIGN-BUILD

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF FANDOM

BY Erica Muhlenbruch, Jeff Sittner AND Peter Sorckoff

In the 150-year history of U.S. sports architecture, the built environment has morphed to accommodate the safety, finance and media requirements of modernity. But is a vital component of sports commercial success being left out of the architectural equation?



Fans motivate and cheer on their team, but they also drive revenue. Without the spending power of avid supporters, collegiate and professional athletics would quickly become unprofitable. That's why, when a new stadium or athletic venue is in development, the fan experience — more specifically, fandom, a heightened psychosocial state that sports' profitability depends upon — should be the first factor that plays into the decisions around design.

## DEEP PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS SERVED BY SPORTS

Fandom can be defined as a relationship that meets three fundamental human needs in forming a healthy mental state: identity creation, group affiliation and self-care. It's easy to see how sports are useful to individuals who have a biological drive to assert their existence in this world. The three human needs have a special relationship with sports.

### IDENTITY CREATION

As infants become more self-aware, they seek to define themselves as individuals. Throughout our lives, we seek validation of that individualism through friendship groups, popular culture, movies, music and a host of other interests that may fade over time.

Sports seem to be among the few aspects of our formative years that have longevity, possibly because they are typically rooted in a sense of place. Sports provide a living history that we can use to express where we come from and why that is important.

### GROUP AFFILIATION

Religion, politics, ethnicity — these powerful anchors of identity manifest themselves through personalities, rituals and institutions. Sports are a vector for these deep-seated, generational ties: Think Notre Dame football, the U.S. hockey team of 1980 and historically Black colleges.

People crave a sense of belonging and community, and at the same time, strive to be distinct individuals. It is an irony of human interaction that joining a group can actually help us to assert individuality. We define ourselves as much by what we are not, as by what we are. Even so, legacy communities, such as religion, are themselves competing

with communities of gender, sexuality, lifestyle and others, so sports cannot take any fan for granted.

### SELF-CARE

Self-care is typically thought of as participating in activities that include meditating on a yoga mat, allowing day-to-day worries to unravel and dissipate. Yet, in sports, antagonism toward other fans or opposing players, agonizing tension, deep disappointment and exaggerated elation are all legitimate forms of self-care.

There is a cathartic element to fandom in sports that differs markedly from individualized self-care in hobbies and pastimes, or even participation in sports at a community level. The self-care we derive from major sporting events is a collective experience where fans are able to unwind and feel more complete as their emotional world is shared by thousands of other people.

## BUILDING ON THE PAST, NOT FOR IT

Most stadiums in existence today still draw on traditional aspects of the past. Those stadium projects were seen in terms of economies of scale and not design. They could be nondescript then, because the stadium's primary function was simply to allow fans to watch sports.

As creating a unique experience became a focus in other industries, the sports world was forced to catch up because fans expected more from the venue and what it offered to augment watching the game. The food story evolved from hot dogs, chips, popcorn, draft beer and fountain soda to gluten-free food and beverage options, sushi, farm-to-fork bites, craft brews and spirits, wine and dessert carts. Venues had to change, and the experiential arms race began.

Technology has accelerated that further, as consumer tastes change more often and new products and concepts come to market faster. The infrastructure of a venue must find ways to keep up.

## STRENGTHENING BONDS

For many teams, fans are so passionate that they will travel long distances to attend each game, dedicating a whole day or even weekend to highly ritualized activities,

like tailgating, fan festivities, visiting local establishments and beyond. These are not consumers of entertainment — they could watch the game on a screen somewhere, and typically for free. These are fans in the state of mind that we call fandom, connecting with their most fundamental instincts around identity, validation and self-preservation.

In some ways it may seem they cannot live without their team. But, by the same token, the entertainment value of the game won't live without them either. These are the people who start the chants, cheer the loudest and flood social media with all things related to sports. They are the reason sponsors and brand partners want to align with a team; they bring added value in terms of passion, presences and unpredictability in a world that tends toward uniformity.

The inseparable bond between fandom and the team is crucial to profitability. The fan base is integral to the entire experience, as much as the videoboards and mascots. Designing stadiums in a way that puts the loudest fans at the center of the action allows for a thrilling live experience and atmosphere. This fandom is the oxygen of a truly successful stadium experience.

## THE FANDOM ECOSYSTEM

A fandom approach to stadium design recognizes the complex interplay among avid fans, teams and entertainment consumers. The ecosystem is symbiotic, with consumers feeding on the atmosphere generated by the fans, and the fans enjoying the benefits of a fully developed consumer franchise. The architecture of fandom must be able to prioritize it without excluding sports entertainment consumers.

By blending different perspectives, personalities and tastes in a single stadium using distinctive “neighborhoods,” fans and sports consumers have more opportunity to find their place within the ecosystem. It's hard to imagine anyone leaving home to go to the stadium if there are no passionate fans to create tension and atmosphere. Similarly, a franchise will struggle to survive without casual consumers of entertainment. The relationship is mutually beneficial, and the architecture of the future must reflect that, binding fan to team, and team to consumer.

Fandom first helps us to imagine alternatives to today's stadium designs by focusing on human experience. To adhere human experience to stadium design, several factors can be considered:

- Concessions, restaurants and retail
- Luxury suites
- Parking, traffic flow and transit
- Preferred stadium routes
- Technologies that enhance fan engagement
- Videoboards, lighting and sound

## CONCLUSION

Understanding the psychosocial needs of individuals must happen long before first sketches of a stadium are made. With an integrated design-build partner, a wide range of professionals, from architects to construction managers, can help move the project forward with insights into behavior, driven by data. By merging the business needs of the project with the fundamental needs of fans, profitability is inextricably linked to the long-term health of fandom in the stadium.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**ERICA MUHLENBRUCH** is a sports and performance architectural designer at Burns & McDonnell. With 20 years of experience, her projects have included everything from corporate offices, bars and restaurants to player, public and premium amenities in sport facilities, including stadiums. She positions interiors as integral to the success of every project. Her keen sensitivity to human nature allows her to imagine spaces that reinvent experiences.

**JEFF SITTNER** leads development for sports, performance and entertainment at Burns & McDonnell. With nearly 30 years of experience, he has extensive knowledge in all phases of the architectural process, including expansion, renovation and creative visioning of professional sports venues and large-scale developments. Jeff believes that well-designed architecture can bring prosperity, harmony and joy to communities, breaking down economic, social and cultural barriers.

**PETER SORCKOFF** is the CEO and founder of Seer World. He has more than 20 years of marketing and branding experience, serving major brands in the NBA, MLB, NHL and among sports franchises around the world. Understanding people, their motivations and the human experience is a central theme throughout Peter's development as a professional and a leader.

## ABOUT BURNS & McDONNELL



Burns & McDonnell is a family of companies bringing together an unmatched team of engineers, construction professionals, architects, planners, technologists and scientists to design and build our critical infrastructure. With an integrated construction and design mindset, we offer full-service capabilities with offices, globally. Founded in 1898, Burns & McDonnell is a 100% employee-owned company and proud to be on *Fortune's* list of 100 Best Companies to Work For. For more information, visit [burnsmcd.com](https://burnsmcd.com).