

The Impact of Two Baseball Stadiums on Their Cities—Homerun or Strikeout? A Case Study of Dodger Stadium & Coors Field

Jack Balaguer
Fairview High School
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Jack Balaguer is a junior at Fairview High School in Boulder, Colorado where he plays for the varsity baseball team. He has been playing baseball since he was four years old. His interest in the sport prompted him to study the effect of introducing baseball stadiums in urban communities.

*"If you build it, they will come."*¹

-Field of Dreams, 1989

Building it, however, raises questions, such as: Where? And, who is there now? When a Major League Baseball team moves to a city—bringing with it a chance to root for and watch a hometown team for the first time—it creates a frenzy of anticipation, but also necessitates an enormous amount of preparation. Early in the process of preparing for a new baseball team, a city must determine where to locate its baseball stadium.

Through case studies of Dodger Stadium (1962), constructed for a relocating team, and Coors Field (1995), built for a new expansion team, this paper examines the impact of two baseball stadiums located in urban areas. It explores the triumphs and tragedies they brought to the cities of Los Angeles and Denver respectively. Built over thirty years apart, there were different approaches and considerations pertaining to urban redevelopment, community revitalization, and population displacement when the stadiums were constructed. Both stadiums were constructed in the western United States, in depressed, older urban locations, and with dreams and designs that would lead to urban revitalization. The different situations, considerations, and approaches related to planning, locating, and building each stadium, along with contrasting results, demonstrate how the baseball stadium location process was influenced by matters as reenergized downtown areas and revitalized central business districts, community concerns over population displacement and the quality of life issues, investment in the future of each city and their

respective urban redevelopment efforts, and perhaps stadium design. The developers of Dodger Stadium insensitively imposed their vision for a stadium and their plan for the improvement of the Chavez Ravine area of Los Angeles. They did not seek community input, and forced change on the residents, including removing people from their homes. The result was a bitter tragedy for the residents of that community. The developers of Coors Field were more sensitive to the community in their approach. They chose an area where fewer people lived and sought and respected input from the community. There were numerous meetings of community members that informed the developers of the residents' concerns and offered guidelines from surrounding districts for the use of the stadium. Coors Field is widely regarded as a successful urban stadium project. Overall, these two stadiums have left a lasting impact on the people, the businesses, the urban environments, and futures of their respective cities.

New baseball stadiums are often located in low-income areas of cities for several reasons: cheap land, more empty space, and most importantly, the potential to revitalize the area surrounding it. A stadium possesses a unique ability to bring new life and development to an area. A study conducted by Trulia, a real estate company, in 2016, suggests that a baseball stadium can dramatically increase surrounding residential prices.² The revitalization of Denver's "LoDo" downtown district, which occurred around Coors Field in the 1990s and 2000s, exemplifies the transformative effect of baseball stadiums. However, stadiums, and the revitalization accompanying them, do not come without

substantial downsides. What may, at first, seem to be vacant lots, run-down neighborhoods, or battered storefronts are often an integral part of a community, and the building of a stadium can result in the destruction of these communities. This, in turn, can lead to displacement of people or even entire neighborhoods. Such was the case of Chavez Ravine with the construction of Dodger Stadium in the early 1960s. Many families were forced through eminent domain to move to make room for the construction of the stadium—to this day some still feel they were wronged.³ The effects of gentrification related to sports stadium development in low-income urban areas demonstrate triumph through increased economic benefits associated with the presence of a stadium and development of the area (such as real estate and infrastructure), but can also lead to tragedy through the displacement of residents from their homes and communities, as well as negative impacts and stresses on communities immediately surrounding the ballpark. Increased cost of living in the area, efforts to clear low-income neighborhoods to make room for construction of new developments, often result in displacement of residents.

Context

On May 28, 1957, National Baseball League owners voted to allow the Brooklyn Dodgers to move across the country to Los Angeles, California.⁴ In luring the Dodgers to Los Angeles, the city offered the team land to build a new stadium.⁵ Eventually, the city selected Chavez Ravine, located near the downtown area, as the site for the stadium, hoping the venue would attract businesses and consumers, and thereby revitalize Los Angeles's struggling center. Chavez Ravine, however, was not empty. It was home to a thriving, mostly Latino, community.⁶ Further, parts of Chavez Ravine were slated for a public housing project to which many of the Chavez Ravine residents were promised preferential rights.⁷ The stadium was given priority over this project. With the use of Chavez Ravine for the stadium, the housing project was never constructed.

In 1958 there was spirited debate over the proposed stadium. Eventually, in a citywide referendum on June 3, 1958, Los Angeles citizens voted in favor of locating the stadium in Chavez Ravine by a margin of 25,000 of the roughly 677,000 votes cast.⁸ Opponents of the stadium

argued that handing the Dodgers the 315 acre Chavez Ravine was a misuse of public land.⁹ Stadium proponents countered that the direct economic benefits, as well as the likely revitalization of downtown Los Angeles, made the land transfer acceptable. There were two legal challenges to the contract transferring Chavez Ravine to the Dodgers. Both succeeded at trial but lost on appeal.¹⁰

In May 1959, forced evictions of Chavez Ravine residents began, as the city moved to demolish houses in the area to prepare for construction of the new stadium. This process generated significant negative public sentiment, as photographs showing people being pulled from their homes and arrested caught many people's attention and sympathy.¹¹

More than thirty years later and over 1,000 miles away, another new stadium was on the horizon in Denver, Colorado. On August 8th, 1985, a new Major League Baseball Basic Agreement allowed the National League to expand by two teams. Despite the city not yet having been awarded a franchise, on August 14th, 1990, Denver voters approved a 0.1 percent sales tax to fund a baseball stadium, should Denver be awarded the team.¹² The site of 20th St. and Blake St., in the heart of a depressed warehouse district commonly known as "Lower Downtown" or "LoDo," was selected by the Denver Metropolitan Major League Baseball Stadium District as the site for the potential stadium on March 13, 1991. On July 5th, 1991, Major League Baseball owners awarded an expansion franchise to Denver.¹³

Triumph

Both Coors Field and Dodger Stadium aesthetically and economically improved their neighborhoods and revitalized surrounding areas. By the late 1950s, downtown Los Angeles had faced decades of economic decline. It had fallen from being home to ninety percent of retail trade in the city in 1920 to only seventeen percent by 1950.¹⁴ In the 1950s, Bunker Hill, a large residential neighborhood near downtown Los Angeles, was declared a slum under the Housing Act of 1949.¹⁵ By the 1950s, Los Angeles considered Chavez Ravine "blighted."¹⁶ When Dodger Stadium was proposed, Chavez Ravine was made up of mostly publicly owned land, acquired through eminent domain from the previous owners—residents of a long-standing traditional Mexican American community.¹⁷

In the years following Dodger Stadium's construction, downtown Los Angeles rapidly grew into what it is today: a thriving, modern city. Bunker Hill is an excellent example of the revitalization seen in Los Angeles following Dodger Stadium's construction. As explained by Jerald Podair in *City of Dreams: Dodger Stadium and the Birth of Modern Los Angeles*, "The Bunker Hill area is a hive of luxury apartments, stylish stores, and expensive restaurants."¹⁸ Podair later elaborates:

The planning and construction of Dodger Stadium set Los Angeles on a course of modernization and growth in which downtown would matter as a site and symbol of civic, social, and cultural ingathering and unity.¹⁹

In the late 1980s, Lower Downtown Denver was largely empty, occupied by remnants of a mostly abandoned warehouse district. In the words of Brett Kenschaft, a bartender in a LoDo sports bar called Jackson's, LoDo was "very barren" prior to the construction of Coors Field.²⁰ In *The Infrastructure of Play: Building the Tourist City*, Dennis Judd refers to pre-Coors Field LoDo as "Denver's historical Tenderloin, replete with brothels, saloons, and gambling halls."²¹ Randy Nichols, a real estate developer who has worked in Denver for 30 years, gave a striking description of the time: "Downtown in the early '80s was a wasteland. It was where you went to work and then as soon as work was off, you left."²² According to Edward T. McMahon, a researcher working at the nonprofit organization Urban Land



Satellite imagery of Lower Downtown Denver in 1993 during construction of Coors Field



Satellite imagery of Lower Downtown Denver in 2015.

Institute, "In the late 1980s, Denver's Lower Downtown was boarded up and blighted, largely bypassed by the downtown construction boom [to the south and west of LoDo]; it was the city's skid row."²³ LoDo dramatically changed following the construction of Coors Field. Explaining the placement of Coors Field in LoDo in an interview with Colorado Public Radio's Vic Vela, Federico Peña, the mayor of Denver from 1983 to 1991, stated "The baseball stadium belonged in the inner city, not in the suburbs... And putting it in LoDo was brilliant on the part of so many people because it stimulated lower downtown." New businesses, restaurants, and nightclubs flooded into the area. One such business was Jackson's, which opened 1995, Coors Field's inaugural year.²⁴ Housing near Coors Field doubled in 1995, showing the immediate impact of the stadium on revitalization efforts. In all, in the years immediately following Coors Field's opening, it injected \$195 million per annum into the surrounding economy.²⁵ In addition to its immediate impact, analysts point to Coors Field as the beginning of a more complete economic transformation of all of LoDo, as well as the rest of downtown Denver. Randy Nichols states:

I give Coors Field most of the credit for that just because they [sic] were the initial catalyst that got the whole thing started... So Coors Field comes in, and there were something like 45 bars and restaurants that opened within six months before and after Coors Field's opening. The city had terrific foresight in how it designed the field to be real neighborhood-friendly.²⁶

Tragedy for One; Triumph for Another

Both Coors Field and Dodger Stadium also had negative effects on the communities where they were constructed. In Los Angeles, Dodger Stadium's development caused tremendous suffering to the community of Chavez Ravine. The fight against Dodger Stadium was so fierce it became known as "The Battle of Chavez Ravine." For the most part, the negative stories and impacts of Dodger Stadium can be split into three groups. The first was individuals and families who lost money as a result of the city's initial attempt to clear neighborhoods for public housing. Second were those who lost their homes and property under Los Angeles's widespread use of eminent domain to force land forfeitures. While, by law, eminent domain requires compensation, the city of Los Angeles paid dramatically less than fair market value for properties it seized.²⁷ Finally, locating Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine prevented the community there from gaining what may have been to them a more valuable resource - the promised public housing project.



This photograph shows a Chavez Ravine woman, Aurora Vargas, being carried from her home against her will by police.

In the ten year lead up to the stadium's construction, thousands of homes were razed - both to clear the area for stadium construction and as part of sweeping urban revitalization efforts. In Bunker Hill alone, 7,310 homes and buildings were demolished as part of the Bunker Hill Urban Redevelopment Project.²⁸ The efforts to clear Chavez Ravine were responsible for the destruction of three distinct neighborhoods: Palo Verde, La Loma, and Bishop, displacing over 1,000 families.²⁹ In the end, between Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine, Dodger Stadium displaced

approximately 12,000 low-income residents.³⁰ The impact was so profound that many of those displaced are still resentful toward the city. Vicente Montalvo, whose grandparents were displaced, remembered the injustice and his grandfather's bitterness towards the team: "They really thought that they had a piece of the American Dream, and what they really found out, is that it was an illusion for them." His grandfather told him, "what they were given was peanuts." After they lost their home in Chavez Ravine, his grandparents never again owned their own home. Montalvo says: "You know, Grandpa... every time we passed that darn gate... would spit on the floor and... give them the bird."³¹

In Denver, developers actively engaged the community during the stadium development process, and Coors Field did not face the same level of community opposition as Dodger Stadium. Coors Field is largely considered a success and is credited with igniting a broader revitalization of Lower Downtown Denver. However, LoDo is by no means perfect now, and some of the issues seen in LoDo can be traced to the stadium. In the years since Coors Field was built, as new construction and revitalization swept through the area, homelessness has become egregious to the north of the stadium. Homelessness presents two different issues in the area. First, some individuals believe the tax dollars used to build Coors Field could have been better spent to help the homeless in the area.³² Second, the homeless population in the area might be holding back further development of the locale, as companies hesitate to locate themselves near an area overwhelmed with homelessness.³³ Another issue faced by LoDo is rapid expansion outpacing aging infrastructure.³⁴ This has led to extensive issues with transportation, and causes LoDo to act as a choke point, slowing access to much of Denver - one cause of the city's long commute times.

Conclusion

Triumphs and tragedies are seen through case studies of Coors Field and Dodger Stadium. While baseball stadiums provide an immense boost to a neighborhood, they also often bring a multitude of problems, ranging from the displacement of low-income residents to negative effects on transportation due to outdated infrastructure. They can also precipitate a wide range of benefits, including their ability to quickly bring revitalized life

to depressed areas of cities. As Professor Jeffrey Garmany of King's College in London explains:

What's interesting to think about here are not necessarily... ballparks, or urban development—is it a good or a bad process... there are always going to be some winners and losers... there are always going to be triumphs and tragedies....³⁵

This pattern of triumph and tragedy is evident in both stadiums. Even Coors Field, widely regarded as an extremely successful revitalization project, had some negative impacts. Increasing prices surrounding the stadium precludes lower income residents from living there. Homelessness is a constant concern for LoDo businesses. The infrastructure is not built for the demands of the expanded population. Despite the efforts of the Coors Field developers, the result is not without flaws. As Garmany explains, what can be done is to attempt to minimize the damage caused by urban gentrification.

... hopefully what they [urban developers] are trying to do, is to minimize the tragedy, to... learn from cases where the outcomes were really bad so that... you continually learn from these processes rather than repeating them.³⁶

In Los Angeles, the motif of triumph and tragedy is even more clear. Many individuals lost their homes, their money, their community—their way of life. Historian and renowned author Jerald E. Podair describes this balance between triumph and tragedy in the context of Chavez Ravine, stating, “Dodger Stadium, looming above downtown, marks the spot where modern Los Angeles began. Its legacy is a city of contested visions and dreams, past, present, and future.”³⁷

The case studies of Dodger Stadium and Coors Field demonstrate that baseball stadiums placed in urban areas can be a great triumph - for the economy, for growth, for infrastructure, for real estate, and for people's enjoyment. However, there are tradeoffs, and sometimes even tragedies that flow from stadium development, as the demolition of Chavez Ravine shows. These negative effects can be minimized, but not eliminated completely.