Baseball Stadiums’ Effect on Their Cities - Homerun or Strikeout?

A Case Study of Dodger Stadium and Coors Field

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“If you build it, they will come.”

-Field of Dreams, 1989¹

Building it, however, raises many questions, including, “Where?” and “Who’s 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 historical community impact of baseball stadiums in urban areas and explores the triumphs and tragedies they bring with them.

New baseball stadiums are frequently 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 home prices.² The revitalization of Denver’s “LoDo” downtown district, which occurred around Coors Field in the 1990s and 2000s, exemplifies this 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 a vacant lot, run down neighborhood, or battered storefront is often an integral

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¹ Field of Dreams, directed by Phil Alden Robinson, Universal Pictures, 1989.
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 whole neighborhoods. This was the case in 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 - some to this day still feel they were wronged. 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 and negative impacts and stresses on communities immediately surrounding the ballpark. Increased cost of living in the area, as well as 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. In luring the Dodgers to Los Angeles, the city offered the team land to build a new stadium. Eventually, the city selected Chavez Ravine, located near the downtown area, as the site for the stadium, hoping the venue

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5 Baxter, "Orphans of the Ravine,".
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. Further, parts of Chavez Ravine were slated for a public housing project to which many of the Chavez Ravine residents were promised preferential rights. The stadium was given priority over this project. With the use of Chavez Ravine for the stadium, the housing project was never constructed.

Throughout 1958 there was passionate 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 just 25,000 of the roughly 677,000 votes cast. Opponents of the stadium argued that handing the Dodgers the 315 acre Chavez Ravine was a misuse of public land. 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.

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

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generated significant negative public sentiment, as photographs showing people being pulled
from their homes and arrested caught many people’s attention and sympathy.\textsuperscript{11}

More than 30 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.\textsuperscript{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
owners awarded an expansion franchise to Denver.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Triumph}

Both Coors Field and Dodger Stadium physically 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 90 percent of retail trade in
the city in 1920 to only 17 percent in 1950.\textsuperscript{14} In the 1950’s, Bunker Hill, a large residential
neighborhood near downtown Los Angeles, was declared a slum under the Housing Act of 1949.

\textsuperscript{11} Podair, "How the Dodger," The Guardian.
\textsuperscript{12} Major League Baseball, "Rockies Timeline," Colorado Rockies, accessed January 26, 2019,
https://www.mlb.com/rockies/history/timeline.
\textsuperscript{13} Major League Baseball, "Rockies Timeline," Colorado Rockies.
\textsuperscript{14} Podair, "How the Dodger," The Guardian.
In the 1930’s, Los Angeles declared Chavez Ravine, the area where the stadium was ultimately constructed, a slum. 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 community.

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.”

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.”

In the late 1980s, Lower Downtown Denver was largely empty, occupied only 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. 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

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16 Llamoca, "Remembering The Lost."
19 Podair, City of Dreams, 299.
halls.”

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.”

Last, in the words of Edward T. McMahon, a researcher working at the nonprofit organization Urban Land Institute, “In the late 1980s, Denver’s Lower Downtown was boarded up and blighted, largely bypassed by the downtown construction boom; it was the city’s skid row.”

LoDo dramatically changed following the construction of Coors Field [Appendix A]. 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. 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 year into the surrounding economy.

In addition to its immediate impact, many 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:

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“I give Coors Field most of the credit for that just because they 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.”

Tragedy

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 group is 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 [Appendix B]. While, by law, eminent domain requires compensation, the city of Los Angeles paid dramatically less than fair market value for properties it seized. 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.

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

26 Taylor, "Accounting for Sports."
Hill Urban Redevelopment Project. The efforts to clear Chavez Ravine were responsible for the destruction of 3 distinct neighborhoods: Palo Verde, La Loma and Bishop, displacing over 1,000 families. In the end, between Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine, Dodger Stadium displaced approximately 12,000 low-income residents. The impact was so profound that many of those displaced still hold a grudge against 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.”

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 through the area, homelessness has become an increasingly obvious problem in the neighborhood. Homelessness presents two different issues in the area. First, some individuals believe the tax dollars used to build Coors

28 Rosenberg, "Laws That," KCET.
29 Llamoca, "Remembering The Lost."
31 Hinojosa, "The Battle."
Field could have been better used to help the homeless in the area.\(^{32}\) Second, the homeless population in the area may be holding back further development of the area, as companies hesitate to locate themselves near an area plagued with homelessness.\(^{33}\) Another issue faced by LoDo is rapid expansion outpacing aging infrastructure.\(^{34}\) This has lead 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 also bring with them a wide range of benefits, including their ability to quickly bring new life to depressed areas of cities. As explained by Professor Jeffrey Garmany of King’s College in London:

“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…”\(^{35}\)

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\(^{34}\) Calhoun, "Ballpark Neighborhood."

\(^{35}\) Jeff Garmany, e-mail interview by the author, January 21, 2019.
This pattern of triumph and tragedy is evident in both stadiums. Even Coors Field, widely regarded as an extremely successful revitalization project, had negative impacts. Increasing prices surrounding the stadium precludes lower income residents from living there. Homelessness is a constant thorn in the side of 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 Professor Garmany explains, all that 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.”

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. 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.”

The case studies of Coors Field and Dodger Stadium demonstrate that baseball stadiums placed in urban areas can be a great triumph - for the economy, for growth, for infrastructure, for real estate. However, there are always trade offs, and sometimes even tragedies that flow from stadium development. These negative effects can be minimized, but never eliminated completely.

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36 Garmany, e-mail interview by the author.
37 Podair, City of Dreams, 299.
Appendix A

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

Satellite imagery of Lower Downtown Denver in 2015, showing the same area as the photograph above.

This well-known photograph shows a Chavez Ravine women, Aurora Vargas, being carried from her home against her will by police.

Taken immediately after the image above, this photograph shows Aurora Vargas being detained by police after being removed from her Chavez Ravine home.

Aurora Vargas being detained by police after being removed from her Chavez Ravine home. May 9, 1959. Photograph. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/10/31/561246946/
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Aurora Vargas being detained by police after being removed from her Chavez Ravine home.

May 9, 1959. Photograph.


This primary source is a photograph of a Chavez Ravine women being detained after being carried away from her home by police. I used this source to help picture the injustice faced by some Chavez Ravine residents.


This primary source is an introductory fact sheet about The Ballpark Neighborhood Organization. It provided me with valuable information about efforts to "clean up" LoDo.


This primary source is a plan for a neighborhood in LoDo. It helped me understand the revitalization that occurred in Denver following the construction of Coors Field.

This primary source is the mission statement of The Ballpark Neighborhood Organization. It provided me with valuable information about residents in LoDo's sentiment toward the stadium, as information about the neighborhood surrounding Coors Field.


This primary source is a photograph of a Chavez Ravine women being carried away from her home by police. I used this source to help illustrate the tragedies faced by residents of Chavez Ravine in my paper.


This primary source is a series of documents regarding the preservation of historic buildings in LoDo. This source helped me understand the care taken with the construction of Coors Field to minimize the negative impacts of the stadium.

This primary source is a set of documents relating to the development of a coffee shop in LoDo in the years immediately following the construction of Coors Field. It provided me with information about economic impacts of the stadium.


This primary source is a satellite photograph of the area around Coors Field in June 1993. I used this source with a corresponding image from 2015 to show the change in Denver with the construction of Coors Field.


This primary source is a satellite photograph of the area around Coors Field in October 2015. I used this source with a corresponding image from 1993 to show the change in Denver with the construction of Coors Field.

This primary source is a newspaper article from the New York Times in 1957. It discusses the process of the Dodgers leaving New York and going to Los Angeles. It provided me with background information, as well as specific dates of occurrences.


This primary source is a report from a real estate company, discussing the phenomenon of increased home prices near baseball stadiums. This source helped me understand the impact stadiums could have on surrounding neighborhoods.

**Secondary Sources**


This source is a newspaper article from the Los Angeles Times. It discusses many personal stories of families from Chavez Ravine and the conflict between Chavez Ravine residents and the city of Los Angeles. It helped me understand the residents perspective in Chavez Ravine and the debates over the location of Dodger Stadium.

This source is a Denver news station report about the progress made in Lower Downtown revitalization efforts, but also discusses the problems present in LoDo. This helped me understand some of the negative side of Coors Field's development.


This source is an article from a small Denver area newspaper which discusses some issues with LoDo. I used this source to gain new perspective on the Coors Field construction project, and to understand some Denver residents complaints about the stadium.


This source is a book written to discuss the complex intricacies of the history of Los Angeles. This source helped me understand the general context of the Los Angeles side of my paper, as well as providing details regarding the evictions in Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine.

This source is a movie, produced predominantly for entertainment. I used it for the well-known quote which opens my paper.

Garmany, Jeff. E-mail interview by the author. January 21, 2019.

This source is an email interview with Jeff Garmany, a professor at King's College in London.

Dr. Garmany has worked in areas very similar to my project, and was hugely helpful in advancing my understanding of the multiple perspectives in both stadiums, as well as answering specific questions regarding the downtown revitalization projects in Los Angeles and Denver.


https://www.npr.org/2019/01/18/686596229/the-battle-over-chavez-ravine.

This source is a podcast about one individual family's experience in Chavez Ravine when the stadium was built. It was useful both in the general information it provided about the sequence of events in Los Angeles, and in the vivid story it told of the Montalvo family.


This source is an article about stadium development, and what has been done well and poorly in different projects. It provided me with information about what made Coors Field a successful project, and with specific data supporting Coors Field's success.


This source is a book written about cities around the world and their efforts to attract tourists and residents to live in them. This source provided me with valuable information about Lower Downtown Denver before Coors Field.


This source is a book written about stadium development in the modern era. It provided me with valuable background information and general knowledge about my topic.


This source is an NPR article about the events surrounding Chavez Ravine and Dodger Stadium. I used this source to better understand the extended conflict surrounding the area.
https://www.mlb.com/rockies/history/timeline.

This source is a timeline of the Colorado Rockies' history. I used this source to understand the order of events during which Denver was awarded a franchise and selected LoDo as the site for the stadium.


This source is an article which discusses Coors Field as a downtown revitalization effort. I used this source mainly to better understand what LoDo was like before Coors Field.


This source is the Los Angeles Times obituary for Walter O'Malley, the owner of the Dodgers when they moved to Los Angeles. I used this source to better understand public sentiment toward the Dodgers while they were settling into Los Angeles and Dodger Stadium.
Murray, Jon. "LoDo: A renaissance owed to Coors Field, urban pioneers and smart politics."


This source is a Denver Post article about the transformation of LoDo. I used this source for general information as well as images.


This source is a scholarly article about the city of Denver and its economic growth since the 1990s. I used this source as background information and to better understand some of the positive impacts of stadium development.


This source is a scholarly journal discussing location choice of professional sports stadiums within cities. I used this source for background research to better understand my topic.


This source is a book written about the history of Los Angeles. I used this book extensively to better understand many aspects of the implementation of Dodger Stadium.

This source is an article from the Guardian. I used this source for background information and specific details relating to Dodger Stadium and Chavez Ravine.


This source is a news article discussing the history of Chavez Ravine as well as Bunker Hill. I used this source for background information as well as specific details regarding the Bunker Hill Redevelopment Project.

http://www.cobizmag.com/Articles/Accounting-for-sports/.

This source is a news article from the Colorado Biz, a Colorado based economic magazine. I used this source for information about what LoDo was like before Coors Field.

This source is a scholarly journal discussing the effectiveness of stadiums as an urban redevelopment tool. I used this source for background information.


This source is a Colorado Public Radio news story about the history of the Rockies and Coors Field. I used it for general information as well as specific quotes and details regarding the transformation of LoDo.


This source is a scholarly journal which examines the effects of sports stadiums on housing. I used this source for background information.