

# The View from the Blimp - Urban Image and the Telegenic Iconography of Sports Venues

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## Abstract:

The public investment in sports venues is a defining characteristic of post Second World War, American urbanism. Those who have committed capital to these constructions endeavor to ensure that these locales are profitable. These investments often with state and civic subsidy, are now a strident component of inter-urban competition for consumption dollars. Indeed, the competition between cities for sports franchises and other capitalist enterprises exacerbates the tenuousness of “place” in “placeless” times.

For Lewis Mumford, the significant stage on which we enact and re-enact our cultural dramas is “the city.” The affiliation, between a sports franchise that represents a city in its team name and the city itself, has been opportunistic for both entities. However, over recent decades, this relationship has engendered extensive debate regarding whether the economic opportunities for each are equitable and justifiable.

This paper considers how professional sport edifices have been deployed as icons of urban regeneration in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century and will highlight how that “regenerative potential” has come to be underwritten by the televised sports broadcast. Proceeding from this encapsulation, it will examine the role of sports, and its televised representation in the competition between US cities for economic and cultural investment. Specific emphasis will be placed on a commonplace, but often overlooked, televisual trope: the aerial view from the blimp. Seen as complicit with the investments and social constructions of sports franchises and the larger economic canvas on which they operate, this paper will then consider the instrumentality of the blimp in promulgating the economic imperatives that underlie contemporary sport. Finally, it asserts that this obliges us to reflect on the notion of seeing and vision as susceptible to manipulations which, in this particular case, are central to the deliberate rendering of urban “place” as artificial “landscape”.

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## Introduction

The public investment in sports venues is a defining characteristic of post-Second World War, American urbanism. Those who have committed capital to these constructions endeavor to ensure that these locales are profitable. These investments often with state and civic subsidy, are now a strident component of inter-urban competition for consumption dollars. Indeed, the competition between cities for sports franchises and other capitalist enterprises exacerbates the tenuousness of “place” in “placeless” times. For Lewis Mumford, the significant stage on which we enact and re-enact our cultural dramas is “the city.” The affiliation, between a sports franchise that represents a city in its team name and the city itself, has been opportunistic for both entities. However, over recent decades, this relationship has engendered extensive debate regarding whether the economic opportunities for each are equitable and justifiable.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will consider how professional sport edifices have been deployed as icons of urban regeneration in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century and will highlight how that “regenerative potential” has come to be underwritten by the televised sports broadcast. Proceeding from this encapsulation, it will examine the role of sports, and its televised representation in the competition between US cities for economic and cultural investment. Specific emphasis will be placed on a commonplace, but often overlooked, televisual trope: the aerial view from the blimp. Seen as complicit with the investments and social constructions of sports franchises and the larger economic canvas on which they operate, this paper will then consider the instrumentality of the blimp in promulgating the economic imperatives that underlie contemporary sport. Finally, it asserts that this obliges us to reflect on the notion of seeing and vision as susceptible to manipulations which, in this particular case, are central to the deliberate rendering of urban “place” as artificial “landscape”.

## Professional Sports and US Urbanism

Several decades after sports became professionalized in the twentieth century: the United States witnessed multiple migrations of professional sports teams: Brooklyn to Los Angeles Dodgers (1957), New York to San Francisco Giants (1957), Boston to Milwaukee Braves (1953) to Atlanta Braves (1966), and Philadelphia to Kansas City Athletics (1955) to Oakland Athletics (1968). The Baltimore Orioles are almost unique among baseball relocations by not retaining the name of, or any vestige of their origins as the St. Louis Browns (1953). Basketball has similar histories: Los Angeles possesses no “lake” which may validate its team’s name of the Lakers. The Lakers originally belonged to Minneapolis, but relocated to southern California in 1960. Other migrant teams include: Chicago Packers to Baltimore Bullets (1963), then Washington Bullets (1973), then Washington Wizards (1997); New Orleans to Utah Jazz (1979); and most recently the Seattle Supersonics to Oklahoma City Thunder (2008). There are also examples in professional football. One is the Chicago to St. Louis Cardinals (1960) to Arizona Cardinals (1988) being just one amongst an extensive tally of sports migrations.<sup>2</sup>

The inter-urban competition for sports franchises continues today and these inter-urban antagonisms reveal how these professional athletic organizations and activities have facile commitments to place. Sport franchises are committed to fusing “place” and “market.” However, if a team’s “place” and “market” fail to be coterminous, that is profitable, the migrations listed above demonstrate that “place” will be sacrificed for a stronger “market.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, while it is common for sports coverage to show us repeated images of the city in which the stadium is placed, the business of both the game and the team may arguably be “placeless.” As David Harvey puts it:

“Those who reside in a place (or who hold the fixed assets in place) become acutely aware that they are in competition with other places for highly mobile capital. The particular mix of physical and social infrastructures, of labor qualities, of social and political regulation, of cultural and social life on offer (all of which are open to construction) can be more or less attractive to, for example, external capital.... People in places therefore try to differentiate their place from other places and become more competitive (and perhaps antagonistic and exclusionary with respect to each other) in order to capture or retain capital investment.... the selling of place using all the artifices of advertising and image construction that can be mustered, has become of considerable importance.”<sup>4</sup>

The relation between “place” and “market” however is far more complicated than any simplistic observation that labels sports enterprises as “placeless.” No doubt, “place” has significance in these corporate sport enterprises. A team name cannot be cited without invoking the city that possesses that franchise. To talk of the Forty-Niners is to connote the city of San Francisco; the

Browns, Cleveland; the Spurs, San Antonio; et cetera. The city possessing a sports franchise contributes to both the uniqueness of that franchise and the uniqueness of the venue of that franchise. The image of both the team and the community can be mutually enhanced.<sup>5</sup> The TV coverage of the sports event is uniquely invested into this synergy – we are presented with images of the kayakers in China Basin, awaiting home run balls next to AT&T Park of the San Francisco Giants. Also photogenic is the B&O Warehouse that is the eastern wall of the space of the Oriole Park at Camden Yards, Baltimore. Wrigley Field of Chicago has its ivy-covered outfield walls, adjacent rooftop bleachers and the entire neighborhood of Wrigleyville, easily accessed by the elevated mass transit of the city. Boston’s Fenway Park has its Green Monster of left field. All these idiosyncrasies are explored and exploited in TV coverage which regularly uses airship shots of the stadium and its surroundings and helps link place with franchise. Rosentraub, Swindell, and Przybliski suggest:

“... sports investments are rarely presented to a community as an isolated expenditure. Rather, investments in sports are generally portrayed as part of an overall economic development strategy. While such a strategy in any community might not be written and might even lack specific details, investments in sports are usually described (or sold) by enumerating the assumed positive effects and contributions to a community’s image. Many people argue that the existence of a team yields a major league image for a city which will generate economic development. ... the investment in sports is portrayed as necessary to a community’s efforts for economic development.”<sup>6</sup>

Sports accommodations are now conceived as architectural symbols with tourist appeal and are frequently located and designed into the urban fabric to facilitate contextual synergy. This development is distinct from “facilities of the previous generation, which were located near interstate exchanges to facilitate a quicker exit after the game.”<sup>7</sup> These older venues are more of a challenge for the televised presentation of *place*. Dodger Stadium sits amidst acres of parking. Green space wraps around this blacktop domain for about 270 degrees, in which sits the banal structures of the LA Police Academy and the Barlow Respiratory Hospital. Also nearby are the Mission San Conrado Church and the Elysian Reservoir, beyond all of which is the sprawl that is Los Angeles. Evidently, the assemblage is not tele-photogenic enough and the airship cameras of standard TV coverage often rotate toward the Pacific Ocean and the towers of the central business district. Metlife Stadium, the only NFL stadium shared by two teams, the New York Giants and New York Jets, is situated in the Hackensack Meadowlands of New Jersey, an extensive and damaged ecosystem of wetlands that stretch along the Hackensack and Passaic Rivers. Metlife Stadium was the site of the 2014 Super Bowl XLVIII, co-hosted by New Jersey and New York. The Super Bowl is the ultimate media sports event and both States vied for attention. In Manhattan, from

34th to 47th streets, Broadway was converted into Super Bowl Boulevard from January 29 to February 1, allowing the public to participate in various NFL-related activities.<sup>8</sup> The telecast of the spectacle included many scans from above but Metlife Stadium – sitting amidst an asphalt platform of parking, adjacent to a seasonally-closed horse racing track in an impaired wetland invaded by the light industrial and commercial backyards of East Rutherford, the latter hidden by the darkness of a January night – was no match for the “lights of Broadway,” which preoccupied the wandering gaze of the TV airship.

As already stated, TV regularly portrays the sports venue in its urban or suburban context. However, context is social, political and economic and not just physical. The aerial camera severely edits the social and political, but transmits the economic because first, the image is that of sunken capital, the constructed urban or suburban environment and second, the image is an almost requisite parcel of the lucrative television broadcasts. However, within that image the social and political are carried implicitly. What is implicit is the social and political status of the event and of the location. Status resides in the urban competition as not all cities have professional sports teams (nor world-class museums, orchestras and concert halls, universities, research centers, command and control business headquarters, etc.).

Herein status is urban lore, urban infrastructure and an architecture that is self-promoting and theatrical. Status is relative and has to be appreciated within a matrix of comparative prestige. The airship is aloft to show location – the “place” to be – even if, on occasion, the transmission shows little else of the metropolitan realm of the venue. The status of time and location is established by the presence of the broadcasting dirigible camera and the specificity of this space is represented as distinct among all urban spaces across the nation. The ultimate potential of the sports venue and the spectacle within it cannot be realized without television and, more specifically, the televised images of “place.”

## **Corporate Sports and the Architecture of “Place”**

American cities in the mid-twentieth century reflected a society recently victorious from the Second World War, a society singularly prominent in the global economy and, moreover, a society confident of their secured future. In the 1960s and 1970s many cities embraced a future-oriented, “modern” architecture of multi-sport stadia to rejuvenate their central business districts. Many cities economized by having both their baseball and football teams share the same facility. The architectural responses to this combination of programmatic requirements of distinctively different sports led to stadia that were less than satisfactory to either sport, and almost indistinguishable from each other – even though miles apart

Among these multi-purpose facilities are Shea Stadium in New York (constructed in 1964, demolished 2008), St. Louis’ Busch Memorial Stadium

(1966, demolished 2005),<sup>9</sup> Atlanta–Fulton County Stadium in Atlanta (1966, demolished 1997),<sup>10</sup> Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego (1967, still in use, although the Padres moved out in 2003), Cincinnati’s Riverfront Stadium (1970, demolished 2002),<sup>11</sup> Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh (1970, demolished 2001), Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia (1971, demolished 2004) and Seattle’s Kingdome (1976, demolished 2000).<sup>12</sup> Seattle and King County will finally retire the bonds used to build and repair the Kingdome in 2016, 16 years after its demolition.<sup>13</sup>

A kindred football-baseball facility still in use, but now solely committed to soccer, is Robert F. Kennedy Stadium in Washington, DC (1961). RFK was the mid-century prototype for circular two-sport stadia, but was predated by the dual sport venues of Cleveland Municipal Stadium (1932), Baltimore’s Memorial Stadium (1950), and Bloomington, Minnesota’s Metropolitan Stadium (1956); all three now demolished.<sup>14</sup> These mid-century stadia were arenas of civic engagement and pride, with community identity and support. They were “places” to legions of fans, yet were erased. The residue of these stadia are memories, the physical trace of which is comparable to that left by a tent.

Sports locales of the next generation were venues constructed to the specifics of a single sport. The stalwarts of the first generation of civic sports arenas, Chicago’s Wrigley Field (1914) and Boston’s Fenway Park (1912) were models for these new and nostalgic designs. These pristine constructions were sentimental, heralding a mythical past now valued more than any vision of the future – suggestive of an insecurity regarding a present that, for many, proved to be far less than the promise of past futures. As constructed investments, the past sold better than the future.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1980s, Baltimore built a stadium, singularly dedicated to baseball, in Camden Yards, a former rail yard and a central location that, once renovated, extended the vitality of the tourist Inner Harbor toward the city’s entertainment district. The park was a “retro-style” design that emulated the comfort and intimacy of the above historic parks while incorporating revenue-adding amenities such as luxury suites of seats.

Furthermore, Camden Yards was assembled of erstwhile vacant or under-used properties that, once developed, consequently reinforced the value and infrastructure of downtown properties. Camden Yards, among other projects across the nation, heralded a new regime of center-city reinvestment and redevelopment and thus reinforced the power of those with financial interests in downtown property.<sup>16</sup> It was one of an entourage of new ballparks that were constructed amid frenzied competition between cities to rebuild themselves as consumption centers through which ballparks and stadia became coveted constructions of urban status redefinition. Festival marketplaces, museums, aquariums, science centers, concert halls, even casinos were among other similar trophies of urban promotion. These trophies were polished and parochial enclaves within the metropolitan realm.

Designers of urban projects, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, seemed intent on arranging and detailing ornamental places of the city until an archipelago

of well-designed fragments sparkled as sequins in the urban fabric. In these compositional nodes, they called on history or local and regional traditions to specify, through design codes and regulations, the ambience and styles of particular places until an aestheticized aggregate prevailed. But the resulting matrix of places encourages partial, piecemeal vision, pushing interstitial spaces out of its view. The deindustrialized and deterritorialized, displaced and disadvantaged have no seat in this constructed array. As spectators or designers of these city scenes we have allowed our visual imaginations to project this matrix with its apparent intervals and disconnected places onto a seemingly unified image of the city. As Christine Boyer relates:

“In this illusionary totalized view, it is paradoxically the question of linkages and totality that matrices suppress: those that question how the past, the present, and the future are related; those that examine contemporary inversions that privatize public space and publicize private space; or those that might admit the maligned but necessary idea of community, of public space, of a collective project to bind us together in harmony.”<sup>17</sup>

What Boyer described are the paradoxes of a “seemingly unified image of the city” and its heterogeneous, complex and messy reality – a reality blurred by the sports franchise and, as will now be examined, its televised presentations.

## **The View From Aloft: Urban “Place” and Urban “Spaces”**

The presence of the overhead TV camera, colloquially known as the blimp, is but one of the myriad traces that bind one urban space with countless other urban spaces. Indeed the blimp is a rebuking specter asserting that “what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself.”<sup>18</sup> The blimp, like a tourist, not of the “place,” becomes momentarily a component of that “place.” According to Doreen Massey:

“Importantly, [*place*] includes relations which stretch beyond – the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that ‘beyond.’ Places viewed this way are open and porous.”<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere, she states:

“Each geographical ‘place’ in the world is being realigned in relation to the new global realities, their roles within the wider whole are being reassigned, their

boundaries dissolve as they are increasingly crossed by everything from investment flows, to cultural influences, to satellite TV networks. Even the geographical scales become less easy to separate – rather they constitute each other: the global the local, and vice versa.”<sup>20</sup>

These arguments on place are all relevant to multiple cases in the US within the past few decades, the cities of Seattle, Dallas, Los Angeles, Memphis, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., Indianapolis, Phoenix, Detroit, Oklahoma City, and Columbus, Ohio all have constructed new sports arenas with the specific intent to revive downtown districts.<sup>21</sup> Since the suburban expansion and white flight of the post-Second World War era, the central areas of many of these US cities have been denigrated as “unsafe.” Among the responses of those in power, sports venues were constructed as one among many constructions to re-image city centers as realms of consumption. As with many of these other constructions, museums, art galleries etc., stadia, arenas and ballparks were deployed to restore the historic synergy between business, recreation, tourism and the vast amount of capital invested in city center infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> They are huge and extensive expenditures often requiring, or only occurring with, a public subsidy.

Although now a standard model, urban revitalization primed by public financing of sports venues is a questionable enterprise.<sup>23</sup> These venues have sporadic use relative to the immense cost of construction and management. Stadiums dedicated singularly to professional football typically may host only ten games a season. Other events are sought for the rest of the year to facilitate amortizing the cost. Also questionable is the premise that urban revitalization can be fomented by the construction of venues that are quite often not good urban buildings. Stadia, ballparks and other sports centers are typically closed and inward oriented. Sport spaces are seldom effective and appropriate urban spaces that ennoble and facilitate the daily lives of citizens. Nevertheless, in the duration of a broadcast, on televisions across the country, these urban spaces lacking urbanity are absolved of their urban failings by the image of their context and the flow of humanity through the entrance gates. The camera aloft in the blimp supplies a visual balm captured by Umberto Eco:

“Everything is integrated in a now homogenous urban landscape, because real cities redeem, in their context, even what is architectonically ugly . . . In fact, a good urban context and the history it represents teach, with a sense of humor, even kitsch how to live, and thus exorcise it.”<sup>24</sup>

Cleveland’s Progressive Field (formerly Jacob’s Field) the home of Cleveland’s professional baseball team sits across a plaza from Quicken Loans Arena, the home of the Cavaliers, Cleveland’s franchise of the National Basketball Association. Together the two venues comprise The Gateway Sports and Entertainment Complex. The plaza is vacuous except on game day when tens

of thousands stream through it for either baseball or basketball. Otherwise the plaza is ghostly, bereft of activity as the two sport buildings are not centrally located within the daily activities of downtown Cleveland. The Gateway Complex forms an edge to center-city Cleveland and an appropriate wall to the spaghetti of lanes and ramps that comprise the intersection of two major highways, Interstates 90 and 77. As an urban design the Complex constitutes a formal edge for the central core facing the interstates and trumpets the vehicular arrival to Cleveland, an attribute revealed by the images from the blimp. These sport settings are also located above a bend in the Cuyahoga River as it snakes through the area of the City known as The Flats. The Flats were Cleveland's industrial lake port facilities, presently much diminished. Progressive Field and Quicken Loans Arena leave much to be desired as neighbors to The Flats. They actually form an impediment to any elegant procession from center-city Cleveland and the Gateway Complex to potential adjacent open-space development and use of the urban river basin. These conditions and predicaments are not so easy to discern from the blimp.

The rationalization for public subsidy to sport franchises by civic construction of facilities is that the investment will foment greater economic development and the benefits would trickle down to those in need. The record, however, is otherwise. Andrew Smith argues: "economic development has led to a polarization of wealth, rather than a narrowing of the gap between rich and poor."<sup>25</sup> Public funds are directed to support already highly profitable sports franchises, diverting resources from dealing with serious conditions of poverty and disadvantage. A purported exception to this is AT&T Park. When opened on March 31, 2000, AT&T Park was the first Major League ballpark designed and constructed without public funds since the completion of Dodger Stadium in 1962. However, the franchise did receive a ten-million dollar tax abatement from the city and an eighty million dollar improvement to the transit infrastructure serving the Ballpark.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Dodger Stadium may have built with private funding, but the land was purchased and cleared with federal finances, a 300-acre assemblage of land valued, at the time, between two and six million dollars given to the Dodger National League Baseball Club.<sup>27</sup>

Cities and states have repeatedly made these investments but still, to have a financial return it is no longer sufficient to sell tickets. The amortization will occur only through the sale of the media rights.<sup>28</sup> In considering the urban and economic effects of sports franchises on cities then, it is obvious that the role of the televised event, as a vehicle for its commercial profitability becomes a key question. This has been well documented on multiple levels, and, in its most basic formulation, the entire enterprise of commercial sports would be different and the issue of "place" would take on very different forms without the televised event and the revenue it brings. However, in its present form, it is arguable that the televised image of the sport event underpins its economic profitability generally. Furthermore, the televised images of the sports venue, inclusive of both building and urban locale, underpin the

city-wide profitability associated with being the “place” of the sporting event. Within this context the blimp has become a key consideration, though largely unnoticed.

All this begets the question: What is the essential instrumentality of the blimp providing aerial views of the ballpark or stadium in American sport broadcasts? What is the role and economic value of these blimp macro-views? They add little to watching the sport. Lazing a blimp overhead for the duration of the broadcast has enormous costs. Direct TV’s operating budget for its advertising blimp extends into seven figures just for one year.<sup>29</sup> Yet this expense appears integral to the broadcast of the event and underwrites, almost incidentally, the capital investment that is the sports venue.

The contractual economics of the blimp are straightforward. Only one blimp is present at any singular event. Companies pay for the exclusive air rights to a sporting event. This purchase typically stipulates that in exchange for one air to ground shot of the event, the blimp’s company will get one ground to air promotional shot from the network. If the nature of the sport demands frequent overhead views then the customary *quid pro quo* is one shot of the blimp per hour in exchange for blimp to event coverage.<sup>30</sup> Historically the blimp was emblazoned with the logo of its owner-company and historically that company was Goodyear. Today several companies (Metlife, DirectTV, General Motors, Sanyo and others) deploy blimps and nearly all of them are rigged with spectacular, dynamically lighted, advertising screens on their flanks.

The blimp reveals what is distinctive of these venues: their exteriors and context. Their interiors are generic, often specified into uniformity by the regulations of the sport being played. If a sport contest is to be exceptional as an event – as a spectacle – then the space and the locale must be also exceptional. The architectural skin distinguishes one venue from another, as does the context in which the structure is positioned. The blimp promulgates these distinctions and contributes to the spectacle. The airship is an agent of the global production of locality, but “locality is an inherently fragile, social achievement,”<sup>31</sup> a construction that can be dissolved, replaced, even usurped.

The mediated view from aloft relates little of the dynamics of local “growth machine” politics that promote and sustain urban, economic development. Similar to sports competition, urban competition produces winners and losers; both inter-city and infra-city. There is a hierarchy of cities, each with varying status and amidst each city there exists uneven development. The vision from the blimp is edited; it will not reveal the poverty or unequal opportunities and disparate environments within the city. Likewise the telecast from the interior game will not scrutinize the minimum wages of the personnel facilitating the security and comfort of the fans. Seemingly contradictory, deploying the blimp is simultaneously instrumental and tangential to the economics of sports.

## The View from Aloft and the Scene on the Ground: Vision as a Social Mediation

The prerequisite to critically assessing the view from the blimp is to demonstrate how the act of seeing is problematic; how vision is a mode of thinking, and that representations are not to be equated with reality. To do this, an immediate and suspect binary must be addressed and dismissed: the parallax revelations from the visualization of the city from a distant promontory, and the inhabitation of the city with the on-the-ground, quotidian practices and tactics of urban life. While the first yields a “view,” an exterior perspective devoid of any recognition of particularities, the second eludes this “objectivity” of vision. Everyday life is engaged, differentiating, and specifically located, while visualizing requires an exclusive, exterior and aloof vantage location. Furthermore, neither looking down on the city nor walking in the city generates “objective” and mutually verifying pictures of reality. As de Certeau asserts, reality does not speak directly or unmediated through any representation.<sup>32</sup> Yes, the urban environment exists, but the aerial representation, though verifiable, is not reality. The representations from the blimp are illusory totalizations. They reveal as much about ourselves as subjects as about the city below. The view from above is not simply an image but a compendium of social relationships mediated by the image and the spectacle is a graphic fantasia of infinite intentions and elucidations. An almost subliminal and dialectical rapport exists within “the triad of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived.”<sup>33</sup>

The telecast from the blimp is an exemplar of the modernist model of vision which is another suspect binary – the distinction between subject and object. We subjects see from the blimp – transcendent – viewing the city as holistic, comprised of seemingly ordained circuits of activity. The object – the city – is rendered as inert, but the view is not neutral or innocent. Our view from the dirigible transforms each of us into a flâneur, or perhaps more accurately, a voyeur. Flâneur, voyeur, or both, the vision of either cannot be considered “objective” perception. The voyeuristic view from the blimp provides the obvious example of “vision” – gratification without proximity.

What is implicit of all conceptions of “vision” are subjects who arrange objects, locales and entities into images, and these subjects are constituted by looking. Indeed, all representations can be defined this way, as social products, and the images of this aerial platform’s broadcast are not as much reproductions of the city, as they are fulfillments of ourselves as subjects, of our perceptions, our beliefs, our unconscious fantasies and hence, our self-image. How Walter Benjamin described Charles Dickens also describes us: “... Dickens did not stamp these places on his mind; he stamped his mind on these places.”<sup>34</sup>

What is telecast from the airship then, is a representation of urban space. Representational space, as Henri Lefebvre observed, “overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may

be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs.”<sup>35</sup> David Nye argues it this way:

“Central to this ... was the emerging dominance of the notion of the city as an abstract object to be managed and controlled. The ... perspectives of aerial photography and the perspective views of cities increasingly available from rising buildings, in turn, further contributed to the view that the spreading industrial city-region was a recognizable entity that needed to be managed as a unitary whole. In the US, panoramic, electrically lit views from skyscrapers ... served to ‘miniaturize the city, making it into a pattern’. Thus ‘the vast region from the top of the skyscraper appears intelligible, offering itself for decipherment like a huge hieroglyph’. ... ‘attention was displaced from human beings and the apparent pettiness of their lives. Lifted up into the sky, the visitor was invited to see the city as a vast map and to call into existence a new relationship between the self and this concrete abstraction.’”<sup>36</sup>

Returning to Lefebvre, we could state that the spaces of social life are social products. This statement has the hollow ring of truism, of course, but it reminds us how solid, how concrete, how sheerly *objective* the effects of social action – cities, streets, buildings – can be. Lefebvre’s argument points to how these practical spaces are overlaid by the work of thought; suggesting that urban forms are made not only of materials and things but out of meanings, language, and symbols. It can be relatively easy to knock down a building, but it is much harder to demolish a space which is composed around memory, experience or imagination. There is no such thing, in a social sense, as empty space. Space is always and only produced as a complex of relationships and separations, presences and absences,<sup>37</sup> none of which are captured in TV coverage of sports venues and their urban settings.

### **The View from Aloft: The City as “Landscape”**

The aerial view of the city through any commercialized medium, such as the blimp, exemplifies the discrepancy between Lefebvre’s space “as a complex of relationships” and a representational space as a coherent system of non-verbal symbols and signs. The blimp partakes in the construction of an urban myth that presents the sports stadium as an integral component of an urban landscape. It is however, false. The blimp hovers above, nose into the wind above the televised event. Yet the view from afar is not critical; it is not an examination of the terrain or the social dynamics of the observed city. These visual mediations obscure the city while portraying the city. Indeed, in many ways the view from the blimp can be described as a “landscape.” Truly, any view from above fulfills the definition of a “landscape” which “refers to a portion of the earth’s surface that can be viewed from one spot, or a focus on the material topography of a portion of land (that which can be seen)

with the notion of vision (the way it is seen). Landscape is an intensely visual idea and in most definitions the viewer is outside of it.”<sup>38</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche argues:

“A landscape ... is an object framed for, and therefore inseparable from, a viewer. If the image of the city is indissolubly bound up with vision and therefore with the subjectivity of the viewers and if, as the metaphor of voyeurism makes clear, vision is mediated by fantasy and implies relations of power ... , then urban analyses can no longer ignore what are in fact the constitutive elements of images and landscapes – or they can ignore these issues only by relegating them to a nonpolitical arena.”<sup>39</sup>

The landscape images promulgated from and by the blimp, framed for and inseparable from the viewer, are acritical presentations of terrain, seemingly devoid of life. However, they are images that have to be considered “politically.”

Arguably, the distant view from aloft amounts to more than a landscape and evokes a “pastoral” – a physical realm seemingly without contradictions. In this light they are evocations that reinforce the mythology of sports, whose realms are designated with the Elysian labels of “parks,” “playing fields”, and “courts” – cloistered realms of competition very often located within the “gritty” city or else hermetically defined at an urban or suburban edge. It is for this reason that the blimp may transmit the image of Dodger Stadium, but that representation is bereft of any substance of its locale, Chávez Ravine, or of its former constituent communities – primarily Mexican-American and predominately poor – of La Loma, Palo Verde and Bishop.<sup>40</sup> However, the “pastoral” of Dodger Stadium was not established by the blimp, but rather by the violence of urban renewal. As such, the view from the blimp simply propagates an externally formed urban myth. This “pastoral” then, is simply an imposed edifice supplanting the erased or ignored environment of social relations of place.

“Place” is of course a word of common usage, often employed without recognizing or addressing the fusion of the physical realm (both “natural” and “cultural”) with the dynamics and processes of meaning construction and the practices of power in, and regarding, space. All of which define or impact the identities of, or the relations between, social groups located in space. It is thus tempting to label the landscape proxy of the blimp as generic urban “space” and not specific “place.” However, this distinction constitutes another binary that fails to be critical and appreciate that any understanding of the physical realm of the city must begin with the recognition of the simultaneity of spatial homogenization and spatial difference.

Football is played on identical gridirons; likewise basketball courts are specified without variation. The outfields of baseball may deviate within prescribed limits, but the base-running in every ballpark is dimensionally alike. Uniform layouts provide a consistent environment by which to appreciate

unique athletic achievement and the distinctive operations of team play. By contrast, the architectural shroud that contains these competitive realms is designed to be unique and self-advertising and the urban context is seen to be equally idiosyncratic. This, in this context, space and place are actually different folds in the same cloth of time. Each melds one into the other and can coexist simultaneously and/or supplant each other in dialectic inversion, depending on circumstance or the distinct outlook or beliefs of the observer or spatial participants. Urban renewal may have cleared the space/place of Chávez Ravine and replaced it with the space/place of Dodger Stadium, but the former endures. Lefebvre again:

“It is no longer a matter of the space of this or the space of that: rather, it is space in its totality or global aspect that needs not only to be subjected to analytic scrutiny (a procedure which is liable to furnish merely an infinite series of fragments and cross-sections subordinate to the analytic project), but also to be engendered by and within theoretical understanding... The historical and its consequences, the ‘diachronic’, the ‘etymology’ of locations in the sense of what happened at a particular spot or place and thereby changed it – all of this becomes inscribed in space. The past leaves its traces; time has its own script. Yet this space is always, now and formerly, a present space, given as an immediate whole, complete with its associations and connections in their actuality. Thus production process and product present themselves as two inseparable aspects, not as two separable ideas.”<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

The blimp may appear to be a trivial instrument with which to examine the relations of sport events and urban development and its blurring of space and place, and indeed space and time, but every construction whose image is transmitted by the airship is a lesson in cultural urbanism and a potential cauldron of symbolic interactions. Equally significant is that the images from the dirigible provide opportunities to analyze not only the urban terrain, but the scrutiny itself, or lack thereof. As identified by Andrew Smith, “Just as events are not staged at random moments of time, they are not staged randomly in space.”<sup>42</sup> The significance of space and time and its portrayal is critical and, however marginal the images from a blimp may be in the constellation of urban representations, they offer an opportunity to understand spatial differentiation, uneven development and urban, geographic change and the representation of “place” versus the constituent, multivalent and dynamic constituents of “place.” In the context of the sports stadia and their urban impact, they offer a concentrated opportunity.

The aerial image gives weight to the mythology of sports: not just teams of athletes are competing, but cities are competing. The representations from the blimp sanction the forces that most fundamentally control, transform and shape our cities. Media representations are fundamental to the dramatic shift

in the role of sport in society which were once a diversion, but are now economic spectacles of consumption. As John Nauright puts it: "... sports events and teams have become vehicles to promote strategies of growth, investment, capital accumulation, global and regional positioning for further capital accumulation ..."<sup>43</sup>

The blimp lingers above architectural constructions that were integral to reforming cities into landscapes of consumption, landscapes to be consumed by the eye. The broadcast from the blimp advertises the city itself as consumable and each consummation of the sport and of the city is a revenue stream that is not as philanthropic as the images from the blimp are panoramic. If we favor representations that characterize *place* as universally accessible and innocent of inequity, then our responsibility may well be to further spatial justice and redress the disproportions ignored by the celestial images of our shared, urban environments.

## Notes

- 1 Joanna Cagan and Neil deMause, *Field of Schemes: How the Great Stadium Swindle Turns Public Money into Private Profit* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1998).
- 2 For a complete listing and discussion see: Frank P. Jozsa and John J. Guthrie, *Relocating Teams and Expanding Leagues in Professional Sports: How the Major Leagues Respond to Market Conditions* (Westport: Quorum Books, 2000).
- 3 It is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze the term *market*, an idiom almost mythical in its common usage and lack of specificity. For an introductory understanding of the complexity and contradictions of *market* regarding sports venues and local political economies see: Veronica Z. Kalich, "A public choice perspective on the subsidization of private industry: A case study of three cities and three stadiums," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 20, no. 2 (1998): 199–219. See also: Frank P. Jozsa and John J. Guthrie, *Relocating Teams ...* op. cit.; a particularly apt passage is on page 3:

"In a free, competitive market, a franchise owner's decision to relocate his or her team is a business strategy. The owner hopes to maximize total profits, or the value of the franchise, by relocating to an available site having a higher drawing potential in terms of several factors. These include an area's population, its population growth and wealth, and the local and regional markets for radio and television. So if an owner fails to maximize profits at a current site, he or she stands to increase the value of the franchise by moving the team to a more lucrative location. The other owners of the league should approve the move if it is in their best interest. That is, if the relocation increases the value of their respective franchises, owners should approve the relocation."

- 4 David Harvey, *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 297–298.
- 5 John L. Crompton, "Public subsidies to professional team sports in the USA,"

- Sport in the City: The Role of Sport in Economic and Social Regeneration*, ed. Chris Gratton and Ian P. Henry (New York: Routledge, 2001), 25–28.
- 6 Mark S. Rosentraub, David Swindell, Michael Przybliski and Daniel R. Mullins (1994) “Sport and downtown development strategy: If you build it, will jobs come?” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 16, no. 3, 223.
  - 7 Charles Santo, “The economic impact of sports stadiums: recasting the analysis in context,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 27, no. 2, 178.
  - 8 NFL “Super Bowl Boulevard Engineered By GMC,” *NFL.com*, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://www.nfl.com/superbowl/48/events/boulevard>
  - 9 Tim O’Neil, “In 1966, new Busch Stadium was a tub-thumping civic cause,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, Last modified, May 11, 2013, accessed Feb 2, 2015, [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/look-back/a-look-back-in-new-busch-stadium-was-a-tub/article\\_7d21a83c-b411-5e1f-ac4c-7f9b2f3c3228.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/look-back/a-look-back-in-new-busch-stadium-was-a-tub/article_7d21a83c-b411-5e1f-ac4c-7f9b2f3c3228.html)
  - 10 Kenneth R. Fenster, “Atlanta–Fulton County Stadium,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/sports-outdoor-recreation/atlanta%E2%80%993fulton-county-stadium>
  - 11 Ball Parks of Baseball “Riverfront Stadium,” *ballparksofbaseball.com*, accessed February 2, 2015.: <http://www.ballparksofbaseball.com/past/RiverfrontStadium.htm>
  - 12 “King County, Department of Stadium Administration, Domed Stadium, Pioneer Square, Seattle, WA,” *Pacific Coast Architecture Database (PCAD)*, accessed February 2, 2015, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/architect/structures/5365/>.
  - 13 Ken Belson, “As stadiums vanish, their debt lives on,” *The New York Times*, Last modified September 7, 2010, accessed February 2, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/08/sports/08stadium.html?ref=general&src=me&pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/08/sports/08stadium.html?ref=general&src=me&pagewanted=all&_r=0)
  - 14 Ball Parks of Baseball “Cleveland Municipal Stadium,” *ballparksofbaseball.com*, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://www.ballparksofbaseball.com/past/ClevelandMunicipal.htm>; Ball Parks of Baseball “Memorial Stadium,” *ballparksofbaseball.com*, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://www.ballparksofbaseball.com/past/MemorialStadium.htm>; Ball Parks of Baseball “Metropolitan Stadium,” *ballparksofbaseball.com*, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://www.ballparksofbaseball.com/past/MetropolitanStadium.htm>
  - 15 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Past: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 20.
  - 16 Tracy H. Newsome and Jonathan C. Comer, “Changing Intra-Urban Location Patterns of Major League Sports Facilities,” *Professional Geographer* 52, no. 1 (February, 2000), 105–120. See also: Jozsa and Guthrie, *Relocating Teams*, 162–166.
  - 17 M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 2–3.
  - 18 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5.
  - 19 *Ibid.*, 5.
  - 20 *Ibid.*, 161.

- 21 Robyne S. Turner and Mark S. Rosentraub, "Tourism, Sports and the Centrality of Cities," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 24, no. 5 (2002): 487–492; Ziona Austrian and Mark S. Rosentraub, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 24, no. 5 (2002): 549–563.
- 22 Michael Silk and John Amis, "Sport Tourism, Cityscapes and Cultural Politics," *Sport in Society*, 8, no. 2 (2005): 280–301.
- 23 See: Robert A. Baade and Richard F. Dye "Sports stadiums and area development: a critical review," *Economic Development Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1988), 265–275; Mark S. Rosentraub and David Swindell, "Just say no? The economic and political realities of a small city's investment in minor league baseball," *Economic Development Quarterly*, 5, no. 2 (1991), 152–167; Charles C. Euchner, *Playing the Field: Why Sports Teams Move and Cities Fight to Keep Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
- 24 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 28–29.
- 25 Andrew Smith, *Events and Urban Regeneration: The Strategic Use of Events to Revitalise Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 61.
- 26 Jon Gordon, "In San Francisco, the Giants Went Private for Their Stadium," *Minnesota Public Radio*, accessed February 4, 2015: [http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2004/05/14\\_gordonj\\_sanfranpark/](http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2004/05/14_gordonj_sanfranpark/); Associated Press, "Privately built Pacific Bell Park a curse to other teams," *Lawrence Journal-World Com.* accessed February 4, 2015: [http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2002/oct/22/privately\\_built\\_pacific/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2002/oct/22/privately_built_pacific/).
- 27 Gladwin Hill, "Dodgers leading in vote on site; Baseball club holds edge in Chavez Ravine test," *The New York Times*, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://time.smachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1958/06/04/issue.html>, accessed February 4, 2015.
- 28 Smith, *Events and Urban Regeneration*, 56.
- 29 Darren Rovell, "The Business of Blimps (And How I Got A Ride In One)," *CNBC.com*, accessed May 20, 2014, <http://www.cnb.com/id/26526789>
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large; Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996), 179, 188.
- 32 Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92. Cited in Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 210–211.
- 33 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 39.
- 34 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 438.
- 35 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.
- 36 David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994) 105; quoted in Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 47.
- 37 Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory* (Malden: Polity Press, 2005), 3.
- 38 Tim Cresswell, *Place; a Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 10.
- 39 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*, 213.

- 40 Glen Creason “CityDig: The Utopia of Elysian Park before Dodger Stadium,” *Los Angeles Magazine*, accessed February 4, 2015: <http://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/citydig-the-utopia-of-elysian-park-before-dodger-stadium/>
- 41 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 36.
- 42 Andrew Smith, *Events and Urban Regeneration: The Strategic Use of Events to Revitalise Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 36.
- 43 John Nauright, “Conclusion: the political economy of sport in the twentieth-first century,” *The Political Economy of Sport* ed. John Nauright and Kimberly S. Schimmel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 209.

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