

The soccer stadium as a disciplinary space

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Introduction

“A relatively ancient activity of the privileged children of the British establishment became universal. We have, therefore, in every continent, from Rio de Janeiro to Dakar, from Melbourne to Hamburg, the huge forms of stadiums, attended by multitudes of thirty to one hundred and twenty thousand people from all around the metropolis”

(Armand Fremont 1980: 139-140).

Brazil is known throughout the world as a soccer super-power, home to Pelé and the biggest stadiums in the world (1). Geographic objects strategically disseminated by dictatorial regimes in medium and large cities, they function as monuments that celebrate the prestige and power of the game. Stadiums are durable objects of significant material resources, centrally located and whose immense visibility is contrasted by an unjustifiable absence in urban studies (Canter 1989: 20-21).

The objective of this study is to reflect on these modern giants which are the most visible material expression of the magnitude and ubiquity of soccer that developed and changed across the span of the twentieth century. Our proposition is to produce an investigation in regard to the collective transformations that are occurring in these spaces. For many years, stadiums were appropriated as spaces of cultural expression, a place of festival, in the Lefebvrian (1991) sense. In the last two decades, a progressive group of

diverse interventions, in architecture and rules of usage, are effecting a significant augmentation of control over bodies, rites, and collective manifestations in stadiums space.

In this sense, stadiums are becoming spaces of increasing discipline, in a process that we analyze in terms of the theoretical methodology of Michel Foucault related to the molecular-level control of power, over the space of bodies, of gestures and the distribution of individuals in the interior of institutional spaces (Foucault 1982). We suggest that stadiums should be considered in the same category as other disciplinary spaces in daily life such as schools, hospitals and prisons.

This article is divided in two parts. In the first, we look to familiarize the reader with a rare object of academic study by providing a panoramic vision of the historical genesis of stadiums. In the second part, we present the changes in spatial form, interpreting, in them a Foucauldian vein, as an increasing strategy of implementation of techniques of control and discipline, a deductive analysis, evaluating the further exercise of institutional power inside the stadiums, the impacts of these new configurations, and the changing culture and use of these spaces.

I. Genesis and evolution of stadiums

“Have you ever entered an empty stadium? Try it. Stop in the middle of the field and listen. There is nothing less empty than an empty stadium. There is nothing more silent than the bleachers without people.”

(Eduardo Galeano 1995:20)

Stadiums are accumulated memory, collected life. They are giant temples of concrete, in which Freud detected a sacred dimension. The circular formation of large arenas evokes the eternal return of time, an idea easily associated with the cycles of

sporting “seasons”. A Mecca of profane chants, upon entering into this space the individual lives in a time-world different than that on the outside (Morris 1981).

The evocation of the stadium as a potentially sacred space is a recurrent theme in sport literature. Morris (1981) treats the soccer stadium as a temple, where the scene fulfills an important function, where even the large floodlights can be compared to primitive totemic forms. These are spaces that express power, that reflect a concentration of power and give form to the realization of power.

The geographer John Bale (1984) applied the principles of topophilia to study the human experience inside large stadiums and other sporting venues. To attend a sporting event in a full and vibrating stadium can be a uniquely powerful experience. Stadiums themselves are carriers of memory and important symbolic connotations. As Costa (1987) recognized, these “new institutional spaces” are capable of mobilizing an entire nation and every individual in its own way. The author, who studied soccer stadiums in Portugal, suggested that stadiums function as an ephemeral space of social communion, similar to the role performed by the space of the church in small villages. We can put stadiums, in a certain way, in the same collection of modern industrial spaces as schools, hospitals and prisons, whose architecture, tactics of control and political anatomy Foucault (1982) enumerated.

To occupy this place in collective and individual experience, the stadium inscribed a particular trajectory in occidental civilization over the last one hundred and fifty years. The remote origins of the modern stadium are found in Ancient Greece and Imperial Rome. Rome opened the Coliseum, a monumental structure with a capacity of 50,000 spectators, a central space of social reproduction in the center of the imperial capital. The public rituals that were held there regularly consisted of a festive moment offered by the

government for the masses. Today we can still see the vestiges of the stadiums and similar structures in the diverse cities that were conquered or founded by the Roman Empire. By examining the colossal size, privileged location and the carnage and punishments realized there we can understand the Coliseum as space for the concentration, expression and exercise of power.

With the decline of empire and the advent of the Middle Ages, the cities lost their force, and the stadiums along with ritualized social life, began to disappear. However, ludic activities continued to be performed, eventually turning into competitions and became the precursors of modern sports (Guttman 1978; Dunning and Sheard 1979).

In the second half of the eighteenth century, English public schools began to practice vigorous sporting activities as a means of instilling a particular ideology in their pupils. These games frequently required more muscular force than the traditionally valued abilities of skill and equilibrium. These games were the modified remnants of traditional games such as folk football. The elite began to practice sports that were different from those they considered properly noble, such as fencing, horsemanship, golf, hunting, archery, and steeplechase, etc. (Dunning and Sheard 1979: 1-3).

In 1830, physical education was inserted into the English public school system, in the hopes of developing disciplined and healthy bodies. With this, the official incentive to practice popular sports that, submitted to increasing regulation, resulted in the “invention” of diverse sporting modalities that were widely carried on past the pupil’s time at school. Rugby, association football and cricket were the most popular of these games. Between 1820 and 1870, the English public schools functioned as laboratories for the invention of modern sports (Agustin 1995: 20).

In the nineteenth century, the British dominated one-quarter of the planet, which helps to explain the successful diffusion of sports throughout the world. With the advent of professionalization, motivated by private capital interests attentive to the profitability of sporting spectacles, large stadiums began to emerge in urban centers throughout the world.

The ritualization of sporting spectacles, a key component of modern urbanism, was not only the province of the elite. From the 1870s onward, English football and American baseball served as entertainment and diversion for the laboring masses. These entertainments happened in increasingly large stadiums. In 1888, a huge crowd gathered to watch a baseball game between teams from New York and Pittsburgh; many people were denied entry to the stadium. Hundreds of others watched the action by climbing onto the fences surrounding the stadium, forming a human circle around the event. According to Barth (1980: 148), this vibrant multitude “experienced in the ball park the quintessence of urban leisure: watching others do things”. For the author, a student of the emergent urban cultures of the nineteenth century, the formation of large bleacher sections within the stadiums is an element that transcended the specific universe of sports. The stadium, and spectator events, formed part of a social strategy of domination over the free time of the worker. These were ludic moments and spaces, recreated for the urban-industrial environment. As we shall see in the second part of this article, the stadium gradually became removed from a process of social re-creation and entered into the sphere of the consumption of spectacle.

It was in the context of the *Belle Époque*, or period of modernist urbanization projects (Mascarenhas 1999), that stadiums, a material product of socio-economic process, began to acquire a particular effectiveness. A little later, in the ambit of

Nazi and Fascist governments, when sports symbolized national vigor and the capacity of races to assert themselves over others, stadiums began to multiply in urban areas. Mussolini disseminated “communal stadiums” throughout Italy. These neo-classical structures were symbols of a new regime and a powerful reminder of the past glories of the Roman Empire. Later, the military regime in Brazil (especially between 1968 and 1980) took upon them the task of building stadiums of immense dimensions throughout the country.

Because of the large size of stadiums, excessive media coverage, and government subsidy, for decades soccer attracted large numbers of spectators in Brazil and became the principal source of popular diversion. In the stadiums, frequently filled to capacity, the public developed their own rituals, carnivalesque behaviors, chants, and slogans; they became the scenes of ritualized festivals that in Brazil, in recent years, are undergoing increasing regulation, surveillance, and control (Bromberger 2001).

II. The new political anatomy in the stadiums

After a trajectory of constant expansion in spectator numbers and physical size, stadiums around the world have seen a significant reduction in their capacity in the last twenty years. The introduction of sponsorship by large companies and the multiplicity of media broadcasting the events have radically modified the soccer-economy, in which the receipts of ticket sales no longer constitute the principal source of revenues for clubs and federations. Stadiums filled to capacity become less necessary, not only because of the new sources of revenue, but also because large crowds put at risk the very product that is being

sold: conflicts between fans are a threat to the physical safety of the players, making them valuable millionaire stars of the new football economy.

England can be considered the foundational paradigm for the process of modification that stadiums have undergone in recent history. Because soccer was consolidated as a professional sport in the early years of the twentieth century, the English developed a large quantity of stadiums during this time. The majority of stadiums in England that operated in the late twentieth century were built thereupon World War One. These stadiums, of modest size and inserted into dense urban zones, became obsolete objects in the new impresarial world of soccer. In one of his books, the famous English author Nick Hornby relates his experience in one of these stadiums that reveals a certain culture of soccer associated with the types of stadiums that have become obsolete:

“When I was fifteen I could no longer, if I wanted to maintain my self-esteem, delay my transfer from my school colleagues to the North End...where the most eloquent Arsenal fans stood. I carefully planned my debut...the rites of passage...all the things that would supposedly transform me – my first kiss, the loss of virginity, the first drink, experimenting with drugs – simply happened. The moment when I crossed the turnstile of the North End is the only moment in which I remember having consciously felt something change within me....After an initial panic, I began to love the movement, the way I was thrown toward the pitch...” (Hornby 2000:74)

This typical experience of the 1970s can no longer repeat itself. Following the tragedy in the Hillsborough Stadium in 1989 where ninety-five people died, and culminating with a series of stadium disasters throughout Britain and Europe, the British government decided to enact radical reforms in their traditional and romantic arenas, following the polemic propositions of the Taylor Report (Lemoine 1998; Hornby 2000; Giulianotti 2000). All of the places in the stadium now needed to have individual seats for spectators, imposing upon them a completely different attitude and comportment:

conditioned, surveyed, and restricting individual and collective movement. We return to Hornby (2000: 75-76) to describe what the stadium used to be like:

“Consequently, of course it is sad: the football fans are still capable of creating a new and vibrant environment, but it will never again recreate the old feeling, that encouraged vast numbers in a context where these people could unite in a singular and immense reactive corpus...The big clubs appear to be tired of their fans, and from a certain perspective, who can blame them?...middle class families – the new target public – are not only going to behave well, they will pay much more to do so.”

The agitated, noisy, vibrant and threatening collective body of which Hornby speaks was imprisoned and could not survive the modern “all-seater stadium”. Every person in their place, immobile; every seat occupied by a docile body in a congealed space. This new spatial ordering “permits at the same time a characterization of the individual as individual, and the ordering of a given multitude. This is the primary condition for the control and use of a collection of distinct elements: a base for a micro-physics of power that we can label ‘cellular’ “(Foucault 1993: 136). We can also speak of spectator-cells, atomized masses, and consumers instead of fans, controlled by economy, police, and space within the stadium. As Gaffney and Bale (2004) assert, the construction of space profoundly affects the ways in which spectators feel and relate with the spectacle. A scene of low interaction between people, very far from the ambience of festival and much more predictable than what Hornby described.

This prison-model of the stadium diffused throughout the world in the 1990s. At the end of the century, FIFA imposed severe norms for international matches under its auspice. These included but were not limited to: all-seater stadiums, a minimum number of parking spaces, luxury boxes, and sophisticated media and communications infrastructure. The clubs accepted these new regulations, and the new consumers, although much more

“behaved”, shelled out more money for tickets and passively consumed more products within the stadium itself.

In Brazil, these measures are being adopted very slowly. The Supporter’s Law, implemented in 2003, calls for severe punishment in the case of transgressive behavior in stadiums; people can be banned from stadiums for long periods of time. In the internal architectural framework, many stadiums possess a popular section at the side of the field where the fans can, for a moderate price and greater physical privation, attend matches with regularity. There the spectator is a participant: their yell carries onto the field of play, as well as the objects that they sometimes throw. There is an intense interlocution, the same as in the small stadiums of the early twentieth century, and something that is lost in the large modern arena that distances the fan from the player.

In the Maracanã, this sector is called the “geral”, and the few times when access is permitted, the area is very restricted. It is alleged that it is the focus of confusion, of dangerous classes that detest the new order. In April 2005, the “geral” was eliminated in favor of seating. It lived on for many years as an interest for television because it was there that poor individuals were disposed to act out whatever bizarre fantasy so as to merit a few seconds of televised fame. This augmented the televised spectacle, presenting the humility and stereotypic characteristics of “the common man”.

At the beginning of 2004, the Beira-Rio, the principal stadium of Porto Alegre, one of the largest in Brazil, closed its “geral”. The local press related the event as an unfortunate necessity and the “end to romanticism in football” in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

A new culture of soccer that Giulianotti (2002) defines as realm of the post-spectator (or the post-modern spectator, with more money and less identification and

passion for the club, a mere consumer of spectacle), is expanding globally. Stadiums are reducing their capacity and elevating the cost of tickets. This is equivalent to a new form of social exclusion, much like other forms of exclusion that happened in stadiums in regards to blacks in the United States and Brazil in the early to mid twentieth centuries.

On the flip side of popular culture, Brazil celebrates its new stadiums as paradigms of modernity. Beneath the impious ruins of the old and sympathetic stadium Joaquim Americo (inaug. 1924), the city of Curitiba erected the Arena da Baixada in 2000. The stadium stands as a symbol of city-marketing and of a progressive and ordered urban environment. A comfortable, elite stadium with restaurants, stores and ample parking, the stadium functions as a site of consumption par-excellence. Equally, the industrial city of Volta Redonda in Rio de Janeiro State inaugurated in 2004 the Stadium of the Citizen, also in the place of a pre-existing stadium. A symbol of the local business community, the new stadium privileges security: there are forty strategically situated cameras, fourteen mobile and twenty-six fixed, in order to monitor and control the behavior of the fans.

In Europe, as a form of controlling hooliganism, the vigilance scheme of the stadiums extends to the entire city, controlling the external fluxes of the fans. The face of each individual is scanned as they enter the stadium and is rapidly compared with a computer data base of known hooligans. When they have transgressed the limits imposed by the political apparatus of the state, or of the specific spatial ordering of the stadium, the limits are re-established with force of arms, an incrementalisation of vigilance and architectural changes or re-enforcement.

Inside the stadium, the panoptic mechanism is realized in an intense and hierarchical form. The diverse camera angles capture every movement of the athletes, equally when they are not participating in the game. The same applies to the coaches and

referees. Media and fans dominate the visual field. The police forces, for their part, dominate the behavior of the fans. Media personnel have their own spaces, places, and times in which they perform and are controlled by a rigid security system. In synthesis, the sporting event and the stadium acquire a high degree of pre-visibility, are submitted to innumerable rules, a concert of efficient gestures, techniques and movements, and is a thoroughly realized disciplinary space.

Final considerations

Stadiums are undergoing significant changes on a worldwide basis. The sense of festival, of social encounter, of work (in the Lefebvrian sense), of a unique time and place filled with a particular language and a spontaneous product of popular culture, is disappearing. This new stadium model has lost many of its particularities that were collectively and historically constructed. The place has lost its soul, as the geographer Yi-fu Tuan would say. The contract with television establishes rigid movements, times and spaces. The new stadium is assimilated with other corporate and predictable spaces in society: the shopping mall, a movie theatre, a living room; domains of individualism and passivity that are of great interest to capital, and in which are inscribed the micro-physics of power.

The changes are presided over by the formulation of new tastes and discourses, but there is never the construction of power without the construction of knowledge. A science of concise crowd management has been applied and perfected. Something that is considered “natural”, “necessary”, and “beneficiary”, is not necessarily so in the common sense. Before one could enter into the stadium hours before the start of a game, and stay

there until the end of the game. Today, these times are controlled and shortened. Space has also been reduced: smaller stadiums with less chance for the freedom of movement and association in the interior.

Finally, we believe that this new order, this new political anatomy of stadium, will not be universally disseminated. Neither will it be completely accepted by those who frequent the stadium. There are transgressive fans and the organized fan groups with the potential to challenge the strategies of control, generating constant conflicts with the newly constructed order. Above all there will continue to be the small and/or old stadiums, those in which the soccer millionaires never go to. These pertain to another circuit, marginal, more informal, where the architecture and spatial order are much more flexible. Here the traditional culture of soccer persists, with its particular language, its intense interlocution between the spectator and those who are on the field of play. These are stadiums that continue to express a regional culture, that interdigitates with the culture in which it is inserted. A different geography.

These are only preliminary reflections, whose principal merit is to place soccer stadiums as objects of Foucauldian reflection in geographic terms. As Foucault himself reflected: “Geography should be very central to the ideas that I occupy myself with” (1982: 165)

Note:

(1) According to FIFA, Brazil possessed five of the ten largest stadiums in the world in 1990 (Murray, 1994: 193). In 1978 the proportion was even larger, with seven stadiums in this select group (Mason, 1995: 64). This was a reflection of the stadium construction boom encouraged by the political regime beginning in 1964.

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