

## Bulls Markets: Chicago's Basketball Business and the New Inequality

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Bulls Markets: Chicago's Basketball Business and the New Inequality**, by Sean Dinces, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018, ix + 304 pp., \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 9780226583211

Among the most rewarding vantage points from which scholars of the US have examined the intersection of sport and society has been that of the facilities where competitions have been played. This 'stadium framework' has positioned sports within the structures of power and politics – recovering alliances between owners and civic officials, mapping facilities' footprints in a changing urban landscape, and tracing their often-deleterious effects on the kaleidoscopic communities around them. Crucially, and especially for scholars of the contemporary era, it has also granted access to a rich catalogue of sources. Exemplary of such work is Bruce Kuklick's graceful account of Philadelphia's Shibe Park, as much a 'story of urban America' as one of baseball.<sup>1</sup> A flush of recent books have offered similar perspectives, including Sean Dinces' *Bulls Markets*, which focuses on the United Center, a multipurpose arena that opened in 1994 on the western flank of Chicago's downtown.

*Bulls Markets* is, first and foremost, an important work of urban studies. Comprising six chapters, and four appendices, it vividly unpicks the role that stadium-led urban development has played, and been supposed to play, in creating America's postindustrial cities. Figures such as Jerry Reinsdorf, a lawyer and developer, and, from 1985, principal owner of the NBA's Chicago Bulls, were typical of a new wave of 'urban capitalists' who emerged in the late twentieth-century. Wielding 'disproportionate political influence' (176), they opened new, more profitable stadiums that claimed downtowns for elites, and, in the case of the Bulls, made Chicago 'a new capital of leisure' (15). Dinces regards these trends as part of a 'New Gilded Age' in US politics and society, emphatic that 'teams like the Bulls did not act apart from the normal structures of capitalism' (188–89). As those structures – of law, political decision-making, community planning, and the like – tacked ever more closely with corporate interests, team owners helped to transform cities into what one group of Chicago residents presciently feared were 'playgrounds for outsiders' (89).

At this book's core are the negotiations around and consequences of the decision to demolish the Chicago Stadium and replace it with the United Center. Scholars of US sport have long understood the bloated dependency of US professional sporting infrastructure on public funds, at least in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> *Bulls Markets* updates our understanding of this political economy. By the mid-1990s, as public opposition reversed the trend, two thirds of NBA arenas were ostensibly paid for by private sources, including the United Center, at an estimated cost of \$175 million. But as Dinces argues, this arena, like many, nevertheless benefited from 'schemes largely hidden from public view' (219).

He is meticulous in bringing the fruits of these schemes to light. He calculates that Reinsdorf and Bill Wirtz, owner of the NHL's Blackhawks and co-owner of the United Center, saved a staggering \$147 million between 1997 and 2011 through lower property assessments on their facility, and the avoidance of ancillary costs. He is no less forensic in revealing *how* these benefits were achieved, bringing to light the thickening 'webs of donations and favours' (176) that aligned stadium backers and their allies in corporate real estate, with the city's and county's political fraternity. These are instructive historical

discoveries, and they should make us skeptical of those who now claim that America's current wave of (soccer) stadiums are similarly being built with only 'modest public support'.<sup>3</sup>


The United Center, like the Chicago Stadium it replaced, was built in Chicago's Near West Side, an area whipsawed by the structural transformations of the US economy. Yet, as Dinces' multilayered account conveys, team owners did not have a clear path to the turf they coveted. He traces the organizing work of community groups and religious organizations, which pushed back, and, in some instances, won crucial concessions, and he recovers a sense of the degree to which the stadium's backers worked to erase poor people from their facility's horizons. He does all of this by making stellar use of municipal collections and the private papers of planners, which, in the absence of team archives, have frequently been valuable surrogates for scholars of US sports. What Dinces captures, with subtlety and skill, is both the actual influence that the 'urban sports business' (144) exerted over recent phases of urban development, and the sector's exaggerated claims in accounts of neighborhood revitalization. He tracks, for example, the belief that stadiums could be what one influential architect called a 'missing piece' of downtown revival – a signal to other investors of an area's upward trajectory. This was an idea that gained ground in the 1990s, and it is one Dinces eviscerates. In a multitude of ways the United Center diminished the quality of life for those who lived in the arena's shadow – stifling any informal economy for working-class vendors in surrounding blocks its sprawling (and lucrative) parking lots making the neighborhood less walkable, and impeding further development.

Although the United Center is jointly owned, almost all of this study focuses on the Bulls – an understandable decision given the team's unparalleled success and the NBA's cultural cachet during the 1990s. Yet this decision also limits the work in ways that impinge on its argument. The move to the United Center made both the Bulls and the Blackhawks more profitable, with total venue revenue tripling (from \$10 million to an average of \$34 million per year), but two thirds of that revenue accrued through Wirtz's Blackhawks.

Much of Dinces' argument turns on the way in which professional basketball was transformed 'into a luxury product' (48), designed to appeal 'to corporate executives and the professional class' (48–49). But how this happened is not exactly clear. Dinces is superb in outlining the cosmetic changes that executives made to their arenas – adding luxury boxes and premium seating, improving concessions, and offering 'souvenir boutiques and swanky lounges' (64). But who were these new fans? And why, starting in the late twentieth century, did America's "wheeler-dealers" (62) start to take an interest in live sports, and, in the context of this study, in the NBA? These are hard questions to address, and in some ways they point up the limits of the stadium framework, which has foregrounded the political economy of sports infrastructure while saying little about the cultural labor that team executives, league officials, and what Dona Schwartz called a 'new cadre of professional consultants' did to remake live sports events.<sup>4</sup> To examine the alternative styles of support that were crafted to draw in wealthier and casual fans, scholars will likely need new sources, and, possibly, new tools, including ethnographic methods, as Daniel Rosensweig and the British sociologist Anthony King have shown so effectively.<sup>5</sup> If our grasp of these topics remains partial at present, Dinces' book nevertheless reminds us why they are so urgent, powerfully framing the study of sports as a subject of concern for all interested in the remaking of American society and politics at the turn of the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. Bruce Kuklick, *To Every Thing A Season: Shibe Park and Urban Philadelphia, 1909–1976* (Princeton, NJ, 1991), 6; Other recent treatments of US stadiums include Robert Trumpbour and Kenneth Womack, *The Eighth Wonder of the World: The Life of Houston's Iconic Astrodome* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); Jerald Podair, *City of Dreams: Dodger Stadium and the Birth of Modern Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Benjamin Lisle, *Modern Coliseum: Stadiums and American Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). On France, see Robert W. Lewis, *The Stadium Century: Sport, Spectatorship, and Mass Society in Modern France* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2016).
2. Glen Gendzel, 'Competitive Boosterism: How Milwaukee Lost the Braves,' *Business History Review* 69, no. 4 (Winter, 1995): 530–66.
3. Keith Schneider, 'As Major League Soccer Expands, Teams are Getting New Homes,' *New York Times*, June 30, 2020.
4. Dona Schwartz, 'Superbowl XXVI: Reflections on the Manufacture of Appearance,' *Visual Sociology* 8, no. 1 (1993): 23–33, at 23.
5. Daniel Rosensweig, *Retro Ball Parks: Instant History, Baseball, and the New American City* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005); Anthony King, *The End of the Terraces: The Transformation of English Football in the 1990s* (Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press, 1998).

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