



Review

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Dinces, Sean. 2018. *Bulls Markets: Chicago's Basketball Business and the New Inequality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 336 pp. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-226-58321-1

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Most large American cities have experienced “stadium politics” at least once over the past forty years. The stories are familiar and are a variation on a theme. A professional sports team wants to have a new state-of-the-art facility and it threatens to move away to another city unless the local state contributes millions of dollars and/or land and/or tax concessions to subsidize construction. The purported economic benefit from the new construction, hotel, restaurant, and sales tax revenue from the hordes of fans who will flood the area to attend the sporting events is the selling point, as is the less tangible benefit of becoming or remaining a “major league city”—a place consequential enough to have a professional franchise in whichever sport is in question. The questions, for scholars, policymakers, and citizens, are whether such public subsidies are good policy, whether they do induce the kind of fiscal and economic benefits promised, and whether the distribution of costs and benefits in such deals are equitable across groups and places.

In *Bulls Markets: Chicago's Basketball Business and the New Inequality*, Sean Dinces has produced a well-written, highly readable account of Chicago's recent episode of stadium politics, the development of the United Center on the city's near west side. In the end, his findings are congruent with the growing consensus in the literature that heavily publicly subsidized sports facilities are “poor engines of economic growth” (p. 3) and therefore not a recommended use of public resources. The book, however, is much more than that. Dinces has well-placed this particular case within the larger trajectory of twenty-first century American urbanism, notably the increasingly gaudy yet gruesome inequality characterizing the social and economic landscape of American cities, the growing obsequiousness of local politicians and policymaking to the demands of capital, from the granting of exclusive rights and regressive tax considerations on one hand to the unquestioned acceptance of neoliberal understandings of the preconditions to urban vitality on the other. Dinces has produced a story of stadium politics for the current age, or what he calls in the book a “New Gilded Age” of inequality. The story is a tour of “exclusionary capitalism”—a tale of ever-more refined methods of concentrating wealth and protecting the financial assets of the few while simultaneously displacing the urban marginals.

The book relates the story of how the owners of the Chicago Bulls basketball team, in collaboration with the owners of the city's professional hockey franchise, leveraged public sector support to build a new stadium, the United Center, on the city's low-income west side. The new stadium was situated across the street from the aging Chicago Stadium which was demolished when the United Center was completed in 1994. Dinces examines the motivations and actions of the principal players, from the team owners to community activists attempting to revitalize this part of Chicago. He examines the claims for revitalization made regarding the impact of the United Center including the conventional feeling within the City of Chicago since construction of the stadium that this particular real estate deal was different from others in that tangible community benefits had been negotiated and delivered on. Dinces also presents detailed evidence to the contrary; rather than being an economic anchor for the neighborhood, the United Center has been a self-contained profit generator for its owner, bestowing few, if any, spillover benefits to the surrounding community.

Part of the idiosyncratic nature of this story is Dinces' claim that whatever positive impact produced by the team came not from any intrinsic value of the new stadium or the economic activity it generated, but rather from the competitive success of the basketball team itself. The popularity of the team, led by the most famous and greatest basketball player in the world at the time, and the team's wave of championships (six in eight years) is, argues Dinces, more responsible for any positive economic impact than the actual stadium itself. This “accidental” type of benefit is, of course, not something that elected officials can count upon when making policy decisions about subsidizing sports facilities.

Dinces provides a careful examination of the changes that took place in the neighborhood containing the United Center, focusing on the racial change that occurred and the community development that did not. He attributes much of the neighborhood impact of the stadium to the question of urban design. Although community activists had hoped for a denser urban fabric to help rebuild the neighborhood, the United Center was set in the middle of vast parking lots that undermined any hope of a vibrant community feel and suffocated any potential for neighborhood-level commercial and social

activity. The design of the Center did, however, help to maximize the parking receipts going directly into the coffers of the Bulls' ownership.

The same chapter on economic impacts also demonstrates how the Bulls' ownership prevailed upon local politicians to give the team essentially monopoly control of concessions outside of the arena by passing an anti-vendor ordinance tailored to the stadium and its surroundings. As the stadium itself monopolizes the land, so too have the stadium's owners monopolized the commerce associated with the events that take place within. The expulsion of small-time peanut and souvenir vendors from the area outside the stadium achieved through public policy pursued at the behest of the millionaire owners is but another repugnant example of what Dinces calls exclusionary capitalism. Connecting the particulars of the Chicago story to this larger reality of American urban growth is the great strength of the book.

Dinces effectively connects the details of the Bulls and their new stadium to growing inequality in American metropolitan areas and in American life more generally. The high price of sports entertainment, he argues, is simply another aspect of growing inequality and local economies that are built around the needs, desires, and financial capabilities of the wealthy. Attending sporting events, such as Bulls games (or games of the city's professional hockey team), is increasingly an event for wealthy and upper-class consumers, and increasingly out of reach for blue-collar fans—certainly so for lower-income households. To demonstrate, Dinces reports data on ticket prices, showing the skyrocketing and budget-busting trend in prices over the years. He argues that these price increases were not driven by the astronomical salaries of the players, as is often assumed or argued, but

were instead made possible by the growing income gap and the rise of incomes at the top that could sustain the conversion of a ticket to a sporting event into a luxury item. Luxury box seats, much-coveted court-side seats, indeed almost any seat at all became high-priced, status goods facilitating contemporary patterns of conspicuous consumption among the wealthy.

Dinces also reveals the connection between the development of the new stadium and the battle over the Henry Horner Homes Annex, hundred plus units of public housing located on a parcel immediately adjacent to the stadium. The Annex was part of the larger Horner complex, a 1,600-unit public housing development, most of which was located two blocks to the north of the stadium. Dinces reviews the evidence that Bulls' ownership wanted that housing demolished in the same way that the Chicago Housing Authority was planning to tear down the larger complex.

Finally, Dinces devotes a chapter to the team's persistent pursuit of tax breaks and shelters that would produce yet more value from the development and further beggar the local public sector in the process. As with the other elements of the story, the author convincingly connects this story to the larger narrative of neoliberal restructuring of tax brackets, the reduction in corporate tax liability, and the greater exploitation of public services by capital unwilling to pay for it.

In the end, the book serves well as a case study of American urban redevelopment, the myths around the alleged trickle down and secondary benefits of corporate subsidies, and the impoverishment, literal and figurative, of the public sector as it attempts to manage land and real estate policy. It is suitable for advanced courses in urban studies, planning, and community development.