

“Bringing the World to Los Angeles”: The Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum and the Rise of a Global City

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Why do some Olympic venues have lasting effects on host cities, while others do not? This essay examines the case of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, a stadium that has had a profound impact on the city’s history. Built in the late 1910s in part to attract the summer Olympic Games, the immense 77,000-seat structure is one of the most important venues in the history of modern stadium construction. It is a national and state landmark that has hosted numerous historic cultural and civic mega events, including two Olympic Games (1932 and 1984), two Super Bowls (professional football championship games), Major League Baseball’s World Series, political conventions, such as the 1960 Democratic Convention, religious revivals, including the 1963 Billy Graham Crusade, among many other historic events. Throughout most of its history, the stadium was managed by the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission, a public body that though plagued by many power struggles and corruption scandals, managed to successfully operate the Coliseum for much of its history. Indeed, it is this history of public management and accessibility to Angelenos across the social spectrum that ensured the structure’s lasting impact on Los Angeles’s development as a global city.

Since the Coliseum’s opening in 1923, the stadium has been the home field for nearly every significant Southern California collegiate and professional team. The stadium’s oldest – and lone remaining – tenant is the University of Southern California Trojans (USC) football program. In 2013, USC also assumed primary management responsibilities of the arena. The Coliseum’s single-tier bowl structure has remained largely intact as it was originally designed for most of its history. However, in January 2018, USC began the stadium’s most significant renovation. The entire south side of the stadium has been transformed by the installation of a tiered section of long-desired luxury suites to generate revenues from affluent and corporate spectators. New seats have also been installed throughout the entire facility, reducing the seating capacity to 77,000 seats (Fig. 1). The stadium is also scheduled to once again play a role in the staging of the Olympic Games when they arrive in Los Angeles in 2028. Though the Coliseum is now mostly a football facility, the roots of the stadium’s impact lie within the initial campaign to bring the Olympics to Los Angeles.

In the late 1910s, elite boosters in Los Angeles saw stadium construction as a strategy to enhance the national and international visibility of their city. The stadium they proposed



Fig. 1 Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, 2019, © Kirby Lee Via AP



Fig. 2 The Coliseum before the Olympic torch, 1931,
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to build was designed, stadium promoters liked to proclaim, to “bring the world to Los Angeles.”¹ In many ways, these boosters turned out to be correct. Spearheaded by William May Garland, a real estate baron who was a member of the powerful local elite that wanted to bring the Olympics to Los Angeles. Building a large stadium seemed to be a rather quixotic project for a city whose population was approximately 500,000 during the early 1920s. The 75,000-seat structure opened in July 1923 as a result of this public/private partnership that efficiently constructed a massive building on time and under budget. In 1931, the stadium’s capacity was further expanded to 100,000 financed by bonds issued by the State of California (Fig. 2).²

Garland was determined to use the stadium project to convince the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to award the Olympic Games to a city that was perceived as marginal and too far away from Europe. The resourceful Garland maneuvered his way onto the IOC and he eventually secured the bid to bring the 1932 Olympic Games to Los Angeles. Though the success of the Angeleno Olympic campaign resembles other elite-driven development projects, in the end, the stadium and the Olympics turned out to be a boon to the city and the region as a whole. The costs of building the stadium and hosting the Olympics were paid back in full and the games even produced a small surplus. In subsequent decades, the Coliseum and the concomitant growth of the international sport industry helped make Los Angeles an international sports capital.³

The 1932 Olympics (Xth Olympiad) can be viewed as a success both for the galvanizing influence it had on the international Olympic movement and for the lasting infrastructural and even social impact it had on Los Angeles. Although St. Louis was the first city in the United States to host the Olympics in 1904, the higher participation of nations at the ‘32 Olympics enhanced the popularity of the Olympic movement. The LA Olympic Organizing Committee also in-

troduced new innovations in the organization of the Games, including the Olympic Village concept. The village was a temporary collection of two-story bungalows that were built to house visiting athletes, then torn down and replaced by permanent housing. A permanent structure erected for the ‘32 Games that is still in use today is the swimming facility, now named after the LA ‘84 Foundation and local Olympic leader, John Argue. The Xth Olympiad was also historic because of the many memorable achievements by the athletes themselves. The games featured record-setting performances by American athletes including Mildred “Babe Didrikson,” the pioneering women’s athlete who won two gold medals at the Games, and Eddie Tolan, the African American sprinter who won the 100- and 200-meter relays. The fact that these performances were by US citizens who were experiencing gender and racial marginalization is not insignificant. Indeed, African Americans and women athletes have been central contributors to the Coliseum’s athletic and performative scene throughout the building’s history.

Design and management structure

The Coliseum’s stature is also defined by its unique architecture. Designed by John Parkinson, the architect of many important buildings in Los Angeles in this period, the stadium was anchored into a pre-existing gravel pit in Exposition Park, located just south of the city’s downtown district.⁴ The elliptical-shaped structure was modeled on the Yale Bowl, the bowl-shaped facility in New Haven, Connecticut that influenced stadium designers in this period. The fact that the playing field was set in a gaping hole that was the base of a gravel pit conceals the mammoth size of the structure, an immensity that is evident once spectators walk through the stadium’s tunnels and behold the sight of the stands and the field. Over the years, countless fans and players have underscored the powerful experience of walking through the Coliseum’s dark tunnels, particularly the tunnel that leads athletes from the locker rooms to the field. In his memoir, Dick Enberg, the legendary sportscaster who broadcasted many games at the Coliseum throughout his illustrious career, vividly recalled his game day rituals and the sense of anticipation and excitement that he felt as he prepared to announce a game at the Coliseum: “I couldn’t get to the game soon enough. I’d arrive at the press box early and have a grilled hot dog with mustard and onions and a cup of coffee before most of the media had arrived... After that, I would walk down to the field, where I might pick up some interesting information and meet with the TV announcers and some of the opposing coaches. Then I would walk through the Coliseum tunnel into the locker room to soak up more of the atmosphere. Coming back into that stadium as the fans started filling the seats remains one of the most powerful experiences I’ve ever had as an announcer. Like the players, I was hit with an adrenaline rush as I turned the blind corner in the tunnel and saw the massive stadium spread out in full view ready for the three-hour drama to come.”⁵

Woody Strode, the pioneering African American football player for the UCLA Bruins, recalled the pulsating energy



Fig. 3 Opening Ceremonies, 1984, © AP Photo/Dave Tenenbaum

that he felt at the Coliseum as he prepared to play one of the stadium's most memorable events, the 1939 UCLA-USC college football game. Strode, along with the legendary Kenny Washington and Jackie Robinson, was among the first African American stars in the Los Angeles sports scene. In his autobiography *Goal Dust*, he vividly recalled feeling overwhelmed as he prepared for the game in the team's locker room: "As I sat there I could feel the vibration of the crowd. Those thick concrete walls were pulsing, boy, and my heart was keeping time... To this day, it was the biggest crowd in the history of the Coliseum. When I ran out of the tunnel onto the field the sight nearly took my breath away; I nearly hyperventilated. There were 103,500 paid admissions and there must have been another 5,000 when you counted all the press people, the vendors, the officials, and the gate crashers. It was a splashy, colorful ocean of people."⁶

If players and spectators were often taken by the Coliseum's vast size, they also noted another distinguishing feature of the arena: the 400-foot wide concrete peristyle on the east end of the stadium. Designed to be a memorial for veterans who served in the First World War, the columns and arches with the torch that was added for the 1932 Olympics is what separated the stadium from other bowl-shaped structures that were erected in the early 20th century. The addition of the torch was part of the first renovation of the facility in the two years leading up to the 1932 Games, which included raising the seating capacity from 75,000 to 100,000. The peristyle remains a Memorial Court of Honor that commemorates not

only military veterans, but also many significant figures in the city's sporting and civic history.

The 1932 Olympics also facilitated another unique facet of the Coliseum in the history of stadium management. Since the building's opening, control of the stadium was subject to battles between local elites and public officials from the city, state, and county. The relationships that led to the erection of the Coliseum can be characterized as an uneasy alliance between elite boosters and local politicians. The result was an arrangement in which the Coliseum was managed by public officials, but funded by revenues generated from events held at the facility. Commissioners frequently pointed out that no tax dollars were used to manage the facility.

While a fuller analysis of the endless battles over the facility's management is beyond the scope of this essay, for our purposes, I want to highlight the formation of the Coliseum Commission in 1945 and the hiring of Bill Nicholas as manager of stadium operations soon thereafter. Nicholas directed events at the Coliseum for almost 30 years. His administrative skill and national connections helped make the Coliseum a self-supporting enterprise, one could say, a model of public stadium management. Nicholas's impact was felt almost immediately. Coliseum events and attendance rose respectively from 27 events and a total attendance of 709,095 in 1943–44 to 70 events and a total attendance of 1,889,923. By 1959, the Coliseum had a full range of events, including 28 football games, attendance 1,416,297; one track meet, attendance 39,213; 79 baseball games, attendance 2,998,596;

and four other events, attendance 206,546, making the grand total for that year 4,661,352.⁷ Much of the revenue generated from events enabled the Commission to regularly fund stadium improvements that maintained it as an attractive facility. However, by the 1970s, this model of stadium management could not keep up with the growing power of professional sports teams, all of whom desired – and obtained – their own facilities. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the Coliseum Commission’s role in shaping the evolution of Los Angeles sporting culture and the effective role it played in managing the Coliseum for much of its history.

The Coliseum helped create a unique Southern California sporting culture that enabled it to become an international sporting destination for much of the 20th century. In the decades that followed the 1932 Olympics, the city developed a robust sporting scene from the high school to the professional levels. It also became the home field of the perennial nationally ranked college football programs, the USC Trojans and the UCLA Bruins. In the post-World War II era, the Coliseum made it possible for the city to lure professional sports teams to Los Angeles. In 1946, the National Football League (NFL) came to Los Angeles when the Rams franchise moved to the city from Cleveland. In 1958, Major League Baseball arrived in Los Angeles when the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to the city. During their first four seasons in Los Angeles, the Dodgers played their games in the unideal confines of the Coliseum, an arena that was ill-suited for baseball. Still, the Coliseum turned out to be the only viable facility as the Dodgers awaited their new stadium to be built. Soon more professional franchises followed, propelling the city to one of the most influential sporting scenes in the United States.

Over time, the Coliseum also became arguably the most important civic and cultural space in the city. It was one of the main public spaces of congregation in a city that became defined by suburbanization and sprawl. It was an important public space not only for official commemorations organized by the state, but also for political rallies, concerts, and other events organized by marginalized communities in the city. Events of note that were held at the Coliseum were: John F. Kennedy’s acceptance speech during the National Democratic Convention of 1960; and religious ceremonies, including the Billy Graham Crusade, which drew 134,000 spectators, the largest ever to see an event at the building in 1963. Local African American activists also were able to occasionally hold rallies and concerts at the Coliseum, including the 1964 Freedom Rally with Martin Luther King as one of the headline speakers, and the memorable Wattstax concert in 1972, when over 100,000 spectators commemorated the seventh anniversary of the 1965 uprising in Watts, South Los Angeles. In 1981, a naturalization ceremony was held in which 10,000 immigrants became US citizens. In short, the building that the boosters built for the Olympics became a truly multipurpose facility, one of the most socially inclusive spaces in the city for people from all class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

Meanwhile, the local Olympic movement remained active during the decades after the ’32 Olympics. Garland and other city boosters went to work to bring the Olympics back to Los Angeles. The forces spearheading the local Olympic movement eventually formed the Southern California Com-

mittee for the Olympic Games, an organization that sought to demonstrate the desirability of Los Angeles as a site for future Olympic Games. Part of this effort was to stage the Coliseum Relays, an annual track and field meet that attracted athletes from across the world. Founded in 1941, the relays were largely successful, particularly in the decade after World War II. Although the relays petered out as track and field declined as a spectator sport in the late 1960s, the efforts of local Olympic boosters and civic leaders eventually paid dividends when they successfully brought the Olympics back to Los Angeles in 1984.⁸

In the mid-1970s, two factors led to the revival of the local Olympic boosterism. The first was the ascendance of John C. Argue as the new head of the Committee in 1972. The second was the historic election of Tom Bradley as mayor of Los Angeles in 1973. Argue was a prominent attorney with strong ties to the older generation of Olympic boosters. He was a steadfast believer in the so-called “Olympic Spirit,” the belief that amateur sports could be a force for promoting international understanding and cooperation. Soon after Bradley’s election in 1973, Argue convinced the new mayor of the desirability of hosting the Olympics. However, critics of the Olympic campaign rightly highlighted the financial catastrophe of the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, which saddled the city and the country with more than \$1 billion in debts. Still, Argue continued to make his case by insisting that Los Angeles could host the Olympics in an efficient and profitable manner. “Los Angeles is superbly equipped for an Olympiad,” Argue told readers of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1974. He went on to recite many of the arguments other pro-Olympic Angelenos have now made for decades: the \$1 million profit turned by the 1932 Games, the presence of already existing sports facilities in the city, and the impetus the Olympics gave to Los Angeles, making it a “sports capital of the world.”⁹

Although the Committee lost the bid for the 1980 Olympics to Moscow in 1974, three years later Argue rallied his forces once again to attempt to stage the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. This time he was able to round up a powerful coalition of business interests and civic leaders, including Hollywood executives, the Mayor’s office, and the Coliseum Commission. Though Angelenos were proud of their Olympic heritage, powerful segments of the population were opposed to the usage of public monies to sponsor the Games. In response, Argue and Mayor Bradley advanced the then novel idea that the Games could be totally privately financed. This clashed with the IOC’s stipulation that governments assume financial responsibility to finance the Games. In May 1978, the Committee scored a victory when the IOC decided to provisionally grant the bid to Los Angeles on the condition that the government would underwrite the Games. Mayor Bradley, keenly aware of powerful arguments of the anti-Olympic opposition in Los Angeles, refused to succumb to the IOC’s demands. Instead he constituted the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, a non-profit entity that assumed the financial risk of the Olympiad. Bradley and Argue caught a break when Tehran, the only other competing city, dropped out of the bidding process due to the upheavals generated by the Iranian Revolution. With no other viable option, the IOC had no choice but to capitulate to

the private financing package presented by Los Angeles in October 1978. Once again Los Angeles revived the Olympic movement, this time by successfully staging an all-privately financed Olympic Games (Fig. 3) and establishing a model for all subsequent host cities, though this model of staging the Games has rightfully come under widespread criticism in recent years.¹⁰

Conclusion

Los Angeles is one of the cities where the Olympics had a positive long-term impact. Both the 1932 and 1984 Games were profitable and both produced lasting effects on the infrastructure and cultural life of the city. The 1932 Games were efficiently organized and produced a modest surplus in a period when the country was suffering from the Great Depression. The private financing model developed by the 1984 Olympic Committee was even more successful in easing the public financial burden of staging the Games. The novelty of the private financing model generated a surplus that lives in the LA '84 Foundation, an organization that has been supporting youth sports programs throughout the Southern California region since 1985.¹¹

The 1984 Olympics introduced private underwriting of the Games, but recent Olympic history suggests that the model is in need of radical revision. Most have been financial failures or marred by corruption, wasteful spending on useless infrastructure, and political conflict. As the catastrophe of the Rio 2016 Games illustrates, host cities are mired in debt and left with wasteful white elephants and minimal long-term impact apart from the temporary influx of revenue during the staging of the event itself. The environmental, social, and political costs of hosting the Games are leading more cities to reject the Olympics outright, as was the case with the aborted Boston bid in 2015. Indeed, organizing a successful mega-event is going to be a tall order for future Olympic cities, including Los Angeles, which is scheduled to host the Games in 2028. Still, the organizers of LA 2028 might have history on their side. They also have a city with pre-existing Olympic-ready venues, including the Coliseum. It remains to be seen if Los Angeles can make yet another contribution to the Olympic legacy as it has in the past.

Abstract

Warum haben einige olympische Austragungsorte nachhaltige Auswirkungen auf die Gastgeberstädte und andere nicht? In diesem Beitrag wird der Fall des Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum untersucht, ein Stadion, das die Geschichte der Stadt langfristig beeinflusst hat. Das gewaltige Bauwerk mit 77 000 Sitzplätzen, das teilweise gebaut wurde, um die Olympischen Spiele von 1932 anzuziehen, ist einer der wichtigsten Veranstaltungsorte in der Geschichte des modernen Stadionbaus. Es ist ein nationales und staatliches Wahrzeichen, in dem zahlreiche Sport-, Kultur- und Bürgerveranstaltungen stattfanden. Dieser Aufsatz veranschaulicht, wie die einzigartige Gestaltung des Kolosseums und die Geschichte der öffentlichen Zugänglichkeit einen nachhaltigen Einfluss auf die Entwicklung von Los Angeles als Metropole sicherte.

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¹ Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission, *The Story Behind the Largest and Finest Stadium* 1952, np.

² Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission, *Brief History*, p. 5. The cost of building the facility in 1923 was \$800,000.

³ See GARLAND, *Story of the Origin of the Xth Olympiad*, n.d. and RIESS, *Power Without Authority*, 1981, pp. 50–65.

⁴ GEE, *Iconic Vision*, 2013, p. 138.

⁵ ENBERG, *Oh My!*, 2004, p. 61.

⁶ STRODE, *Goal Dust*, 1990, p. 100.

⁷ FORD, *Thirty Explosive Years*, 2010, p. 198.

⁸ DYRESON and LLEWELLYN, *Los Angeles is the Olympic City*, 2008.

⁹ ARGUE, *LA and the Olympics*, May 25, 1974.

¹⁰ Amateur Athletic Foundation, *Serving Youth through Sport 20th Anniversary*, 2004, p. 5.

¹¹ See <https://la84.org/>