The Making of Baltimore’s Camden Yards Stadium

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...In 1980 Baltimore ranked fifth among fifty-eight cities on a composite measure for urban distress that includes poverty rates, decline in per capita income, and unemployment. Some 25 percent of the city’s 780,000 residents in 1980 lived

below the federal poverty line. . . . Housing affordability, once a great Baltimore virtue, was declining; because of a shrinking capital base, property taxes increased as much as five-fold in some middle-class neighborhoods between 1980 and 1990, and the tax rates averaged twice those of neighboring Washington, D.C. The city lost 13 percent of its population during the 1970s. More than 50,000 jobs disappeared during the same period, and another 20,000 between 1980 and 1983. . . .

The political institutions of Maryland and Baltimore appeared powerless to address the city’s major problems. The mayor, the Board of Estimates and City Council, the bureaucracy, the schools, political parties, and philanthropies all reacted to problems rather than confronting them in any fundamental or comprehensive way.

Reflecting the city’s mixed fortunes were the fates of its two major league sports franchises. The Colts of the National Football League, once an emblem of blue-collar pride, left in 1984. Owner Robert Irsay moved the team to Indianapolis after protracted bickering and negotiating in Maryland and romancing and negotiating in Indiana and elsewhere. After the Colts’ departure, Maryland approved construction of a new stadium to keep the Orioles baseball team in town. The construction project promised a glittering addition to the city’s downtown but did little if anything to help the city address its basic problems.

The sports franchises had the advantage in talks with the city because they could initiate action whenever and wherever they wanted in the long process of negotiations. Even under the leadership of its most powerful mayor in the century, Baltimore had limited negotiating leverage. The city’s most important tool, the power of eminent domain, was not only questionable legally but also risked pushing the team out of the city.

The Manipulation of a City

When the Colts were still playing in Baltimore, Mayor Schaefer and others rejected the idea of building a new stadium, insisting that Memorial Stadium was one of the best in sports. Schaefer wanted to avoid the expensive debt service that other cities had incurred with new stadiums. . . . [T]he Colts and Orioles refused to sign leases longer than two years, and the city’s concessions to the two teams escalated. Increasingly, new facilities appeared to be the only way to keep the teams in Baltimore.

The city’s relations with Robert Irsay typify the fragmented, step-by-step progression of controversies between sports franchises and cities. When Irsay acknowledged that he had met with representatives of Indianapolis and Phoenix in 1976, Baltimore officials scrambled to meet the immediate threat at the expense of coherent, long-term planning. . . .

Baltimore’s public and private leaders did not always present a united front. When the Colts demanded restructuring of a loan Irsay had received in 1972 to buy the Colts, Indianapolis quickly offered a loan at 3 percent below the 1984 prime lending rate. Baltimore did not match the offer. Major Schaefer expressed frustration at the failure of local financiers to help keep the Colts. . . . In addition, local media expressed reservations about the mayor’s bidding war for the team, while the Indianapolis media and public almost unanimously supported that city’s efforts.
Ironically, as the Colts case shows, teams with poor management can be tougher negotiating partners. The Colts—once the envy of the NFL, with fifty-one consecutive sellouts at the 60,714-seat Memorial Stadium—suffered from a series of questionable front-office decisions. Irsay, for example, fired General Manager Joe Thomas, who had assembled a young squad that won three straight playoff berths. Irsay also let go one of the league's most dynamic young quarterbacks, John Elway. In addition, Irsay committed a number of public relations blunders, such as ignominiously benching Johnny Unitas, a local hero. It was no accident that Irsay first demanded improvements in the Memorial Stadium lease in 1979 when the team was starting to perform poorly on the field.

Since the Colts controlled the pace of negotiations, the city had to exercise care in dealing with Irsay’s mercurial personal moods. . . . [In January 1984] Irsay said he and Mayor Schaefer were close to terms on a new lease and “I have not any intention to move the goddamn team.” Days later, however, Irsay began final talks with Indianapolis.

The city was buffeted by a protracted game of “me-tooism” by the Colts and Orioles. The process began in 1973 when the Orioles owner, Jerold Hoffberger, put the team on the market but found no buyers; immediately afterward, he demanded and got a more favorable lease. The Colts responded by demanding a new lease based on dollar parity with the Orioles. They got the new lease, in which the Colts paid the same rent as the Orioles, in 1977, and it was made retroactive to 1975. When the 1980–81 lease talks came along, the Colts management again complained about its level of payments vis-à-vis the Orioles, and refused to sign. This time the Colts argued that they and the Orioles should not pay equal rent because the Orioles used the stadium for more games. The Colts asked for rent based on a formula rather than preset dollar amounts. The city agreed and the Colts promised to stay in Baltimore at least until 1984. . . .

In February 1983, Mayor Schaefer attempted to end the game of me-tooism by conducting separate negotiations with the Colts and the Orioles. He asked the general assembly to approve $15 million for renovation of Memorial Stadium—$7.5 million to address complaints of each of the teams. The legislature approved the measure that spring, after intense lobbying by Schaefer. Following difficult negotiations, the city and the Orioles signed a three-year lease in January 1984. The “decoupling” of Orioles and Colts negotiations was a crucial moment in Baltimore sports history, because it tacitly acknowledged that the Colts would probably leave. Schaefer’s objective was to do what he could to hold on to at least one major league franchise. The Colts, now isolated, were ripe for the picking by Indianapolis. . . .

Irsay’s most frustrating tactic could be termed “plausible deniability.” He could take a step that seemed ominous for Baltimore, then plausibly deny intending any harm. For example, in February 1984, Irsay halted the mailing of the Colts season tickets. It was speculated that he was holding back tickets to gain leverage in stadium negotiations, but he said the delay was due to indecision on ticket prices. . . . Irsay would turn the focus first to reports of negotiations with Phoenix and Indianapolis, then to complaints about Memorial Stadium, then to comparisons with the Orioles’ lease, keeping city officials off balance.

Schaefer had concentrated on wooing rather than confronting Irsay, but in 1984 aides to the mayor started to consider a more aggressive approach. Mayoral
aide Mark Wasserman proposed seizing control of the Colts through eminent
domain. . .

After the Colts moved, one political ally of Mayor Schaefer suggested suing
both the Colts and the National Football League—the only time the city consid-
ered addressing the real root of the problem, professional football’s monopoly sta-
tus. Noting that the NFL bylaws require consent of team owners for franchise
shifts, attorney George W. Baker suggested, in a confidential memorandum dated
March 30, that the city attack the league for failing to honor its own rules. The
league, Baker suggested, might have an obligation to the city and authority over
the Colts by dint of the league’s definition of a franchise as the right “to operate a
professional football club in a designated city.” . . .

Interestingly, Baltimore won the rights to the Colts franchise in 1952 as the re-
sult of a lawsuit against the NFL. The litigation strategy might have had a chance
in 1984; the mere threat of a suit against the NFL or Irsay might have induced them
to seriously consider leaving the team in Baltimore. But, in the end, Schaefer de-
cided to cooperate with, rather than challenge, the NFL. Schaefer wrote to Com-
misssioner Pete Rozelle after the Colts move, informing him that Baltimore had
formed a committee to seek a new franchise. . . .

The Eminent Domain Suit

Employing the city’s greatest power—eminent domain authority—required great
delicacy, since the mere mention of that power would undoubtedly unsettle Irsay
and hasten his flight from Baltimore. Ultimately, the city’s attempt to seize the
franchise failed. . . .

For more than a year after the Colts’ move, Baltimore fought Irsay in the
courts. The case turned on whether Irsay had moved the franchise before Balti-
more initiated condemnation procedures. At issue was whether the state still had
jurisdiction over the franchise, or whether such a claim could be made by other in-
volved states. . . .

Federal Judge Walter E. Black, Jr., dismissed Baltimore’s suit in December
1984. Judge Black ruled that Baltimore did not have jurisdiction over the club
when the case was filed. . . Rather than appeal the case, which had already cost
the city $500,000 in legal fees, Mayor Schaefer began a campaign to attract a new
football club and to build a new stadium to keep the Orioles. The city was signal-
ing its willingness to play sports politics by league rules. . . .

“It was a dark and stormy night”

On the night of March 12, 1984, moving vans arrived unannounced at the Balti-
more Colts’ training complex at Owings Mills, Maryland, to remove the club’s
property. . . By morning, all the team’s possessions—helmets, shoulder pads,
weights, video equipment—were in a caravan of eleven moving vans headed west
on Interstate 70.

Mayor Schaefer heard about the move on the radio news. He called an emer-
gency session of the city council to consider action. . . Public reaction was fast
and angry. Hundreds of telephone calls deluged City Hall in the days after the
move, and the city began preparations for a lawsuit to bring the Colts back.
The scene at the Owings Mills complex became more vivid in the public mind as time passed, and it was an important influence in the city’s eventual decision to build a new stadium. The image of the departing moving vans became the symbol of the Robert Irsay’s underhanded and cowardly ways. . . . Irsay’s action was dubbed the “midnight move” and “midnight raid,” conjuring up images of furtiveness and deceit. Irsay was reviled as a coward, a carpetbagger; his physical attributes were the source of bitter local parody. Bumper stickers condensed the long and sorry episode: “Will Rogers Never Met Bob Irsay.”

As is often the case in sports discourse, the situation was reduced to a simple opposition: Baltimore versus Irsay. Ignoring the larger question of how the structure of major league sports makes franchise shifts a constant possibility undermined Baltimore’s ability to take a well-rounded, rational view of the problem at hand and of professional sports in general. By focusing on Irsay’s personality, the city eventually wasted millions of dollars, antagonized the NFL, and failed to confront the real meaning of the loss. . . .

As Edelman observes, “enmity is a bond as well as a divider.” After a certain point Baltimore was helpless to do anything about the Colts, but its leadership became single-minded in its efforts to keep the Orioles in the city and to attract another football team. The obsession with landing a team would prevent the city and state from developing an imaginative response to the sports industry—and from dealing with the city’s more entrenched problems.

With its demonizing of Irsay, Baltimore set itself up to be manipulated again—the next time by the NFL, which set rigid standards for cities seeking expansion teams, and by the Baltimore Orioles. Rather than addressing the many aspects of the sports-cities dynamic, Baltimore once again placed itself at the mercy of professional sports leagues. It accepted the idea that cities had to meet the demands of the leagues and franchises. Baltimore was only reactive during the next series of dealings with the professional sports industry.

*Defensive Politics: The Twin Stadiums*

Sports politics in Maryland changed dramatically when it became clear that Baltimore could not force the Colts to return. With the conversion of William Donald Schaefer to the cause, the drive for a new facility had irresistible momentum. . . .

Schaefer had always argued against a new stadium on the grounds that other municipal problems were too pressing and the city budget too limited. Schaefer called Memorial Stadium one of the best sports facilities in the country. Typical was his comment in 1983, when Baltimore was still competing with Indianapolis and its brand-new Hoosier Dome to host the Colts: “We’re not going to build a new stadium. We don’t have the bonding capacity. We don’t have the voters or the taxpayers who can support a $60 million stadium. One-third of the people in Baltimore pay taxes. Unless private enterprise builds it, we won’t build it.” But by the time Schaefer ran a successful campaign for governor in 1986, he was a vocal proponent of a new stadium—and perhaps even two new stadiums.

Schaefer wanted new facilities in Camden Yards, a warehouse district near Baltimore’s revitalized business district and Inner Harbor tourist attractions. That site had the virtue of downtown location and proximity to the increasingly
important Washington, D.C., market. It also abutted a warehouse recently bought by a group of investors that included Schaefer's leading fundraiser. . . .

By March 1987, barely three months into his term, Governor Schaefer had secured state funding for "twin stadiums." The governor used his overwhelming election victory the previous November as political capital, and he threatened and cajoled opponents of stadium building across the state. Schaefer was not bashful about offering material rewards to the legislators who cooperated—and deprivation to those who resisted.

The Orioles' negotiating strength clearly got a big boost from the Colts' departure. Being the only team in town is more significant than being one of two. The Colts had proved that a franchise could leave whenever it wanted; attention turned to a possible Orioles exit. When Edward Bennett Williams, a prominent Washington attorney, bought the team in 1979, it was feared that he would transfer the team to the capital's Robert F. Kennedy Stadium. Baltimore would have to respond or it would risk losing the team without any legal or political recourse.

Williams made vague and contradictory statements that gave him extraordinary leverage. Williams rarely talked about moving the team, and in fact vowed to stay in the city; but by refusing to sign a long-term lease, he assured that the team's departure was always a possibility. Williams was in the driver's seat. . . . It became clear that only a new stadium could entice Williams into a long-term relationship. Even when the city agreed to build a new stadium, the Orioles would agree to only a fifteen-year lease (the standard sports lease prior to the 1980s was twice that duration). . . .

The Politics of Numbers

Reports filled with promises of economic benefits, backed by a steady stream of debatable numbers, paved the way for a new stadium. . . .

The reports gave the campaign for a new facility an aura of scientific objectivity and legitimacy. . . . Official reports use a number of strategies. First, they emphasize the city as a whole, in order to submerge a project's impact on specific interests. Second, the reports focus on statistics and technical concerns that drown out qualitative considerations. . . . Third, the appearance of officialness enables those who wield these report to depict even the most perfunctory encounters with citizens as serious deliberation.

The reports' major argument was that a new stadium would produce substantial economic benefits to the city and region. The Butta report, for example, maintained that a stadium at Camden Yards would have a larger economic impact than Memorial Stadium had, but it based this conclusion on the assumption that the Orioles would attract 20 percent more fans at the new site. The report did not submit the estimate to any analysis, but rather derived it from "information provided during discussions with local government officials, Baltimore Orioles management, and other community representatives"—that is, the promoters of the new facility. The report also projected a "new stadium bonus," an attendance increase of 400,000 in the first year and 200,000 in the second year due to the excitement of a new stadium. While the estimate turned out to be correct, it did not take into account other factors considered more crucial to attendance, like team performance and population base.
The Butta report also understated the costs of building a new stadium, most notably by excluding the costs of financing (as much as $10 million a year for thirty years) and by ignoring property tax revenues lost to the tax-free stadium (as much as $16 million annually). Other miscalculations characterize the Butta report. The stadium authority, for example, budgeted $7.4 million for relocation of all the businesses and homes on the construction site—a low estimate, as events would eventually demonstrate. . . . The multiplier effect was often offered as a major justification for building the new stadium, even though a new Baltimore stadium would simply transfer an operation from one part of the city to another, and even push some businesses out of the city.

This quantitative blanket smothered the expression of intangible concerns, such as the fabric of neighborhoods and the need to balance sports with other urban concerns. The neutral-sounding words of planning officials reduced the ability of the affected parties to respond. . . .

Stadium opponents had a difficult time overcoming the steady beat of arguments not only in consultant reports but also in the local news media. When these reports did not tout the economic gains for the whole city, they underscored the project’s inevitability. Governor Schaefer, it was said, was too powerful a public figure to confront on the stadium issue. Community resistance to the stadium plans was practically impossible. There was no way to shift the issue from small-scale skirmishes fought against overwhelming odds to a larger debate involving the priorities of the city as a whole.

**A City of Neighborhoods**

. . . But the neighborhoods did not shape their own destinies in the case of Baltimore’s stadium politics. The sports industry’s ability to control the pace and tempo of the deliberations reduced neighborhood participation to a few quixotic battles mostly irrelevant to the decision-making process.

People in both the current and the proposed stadium neighborhoods opposed the new stadium because of the way it would affect the fabric of their communities, but they failed to involve a wide variety of community groups in a broad-based debate. The discussion, therefore, proceeded according to the logic and demands of the sports industry.

As is often the case with large public projects, some neighborhoods felt they had to accept the basic premise that a new stadium was necessary. When a new stadium appeared inevitable, neighborhoods organized to protect their own parochial interests. . . .

The new stadium site, Camden railroad yards, is on a choice wedge, two blocks to the west of the Inner Harbor. . . . The site is directly connected to the suburban and Washington markets by the Baltimore-Washington Expressway, the Baltimore Beltway, and a number of major downtown arteries. . . .

Public support for construction of new stadiums in Baltimore was doubtful, especially in the state at large. While 53 percent of persons surveyed in the Baltimore City area said they supported building a new stadium, 45 percent said it was not important whether Baltimore had a professional football team. The survey did not include the opinions of residents of the rest of the state, which was overwhelmingly opposed to the stadium. . . . The data seemed to suggest that the stadium might fail if the question of its construction were opened up for public debate.
Despite the bitterness that lingered after the Colts’ departure, many Marylanders saw little reason to believe that the Orioles would leave the city. The Orioles drew more fans than ever at Memorial Stadium, even when the team suffered bad seasons on the playing field. In 1987 and 1988, for example, the team finished in the last place but still managed to draw close to 2 million paying customers; in 1988, the team set all-time records for ineptitude but still drew 1.6 million fans. The stadium was located in a charming part of town, the franchise’s promotion efforts were successful inside and outside the city, and the team seemed to have won a place in the hearts and routines of the city.

Even though the public was lukewarm about the need to build a new stadium, Governor Schaefer decided to act, for three reasons. First, Schaefer did not want to be the public official held responsible for “losing” another major league franchise. Schaefer avoided blame for the Colts’ departure because Irsay was the target of enmity, but losing a second team could be the municipal equivalent of “losing China.” Schaefer also wanted to attract a new NFL team to restore the city’s damaged pride. Second, big public works projects involve big contracts and public works jobs. Third, large projects provide visible signs of life for the state and city. Schaefer promoted a stadium for the same reasons he had, as mayor, championed the Harborplace development, downtown construction projects, and various gentrification schemes. They gave the city an image of renaissance and action.

Governor Schaefer put his proposal for a new stadium at the top of his legislative agenda. His resounding victory in the previous year’s primary and general election campaigns, and his own energy, gave him that executive “power to persuade” that he needed to get stadium legislation through the general assembly.

The mechanism that the state adopted to implement the plan for new stadiums was the quasi-public authority, with its politically advantageous quasi-accountability. The authority would coordinate the many aspects of stadium construction—from running the state lottery that would raise funds to evicting the residents of the neighborhood that would be the site of the new facility.

The Maryland Stadium Authority was designed to operate above the tangled politics of the Baltimore City. It had the power to select a stadium site and to condemn property in the area without negotiations. The authority did not consider renovation of the existing Memorial Stadium or a wide range of alternative sites for building a new stadium. Its extensive powers liberated it from the inconvenience of arguing with local interests.

Opposing the stadium authority was difficult. The authority was an instrument of the state but also separate from the state. Its fund-raising capacity lay in the sale of tax-exempt bonds and the operation of lotteries. These devices avoided the direct coercion of taxes but were provided the state’s fiscal backing. Because the public financial burden was indirect, challenges could be blunted. The state could claim that the authority did not impose a financial burden on the public; it could then turn around and claim the opposite, that the authority was a full-fledged part of the government, which is exactly what it did during the battle over the state referendum process. In short, the device of the authority could so blur the distinctions between public and private that a meaningful public discourse could not develop.
Quixotic Resistance

Once the authority had the legal and financial wherewithal to condemn land and build stadiums, there was little room for public debate. Neighborhoods and other opponents could make claims for benefits from the stadium but could not question the project's validity. Given the existence of other urban problems needing state support, most decided that opposing a new stadium was not worth crossing the governor, especially since William Donald Schaefer is well known for his grudges and tit-for-tat style of politics. Working through the stadium authority enabled the state to avoid demands for democratic access, procedures, and debate. The public space was closed. Stadium politics was restricted to the course determined by the tightly controlled authority and the sports industry.

Without the referendum process, which San Francisco and New Jersey used to defeat major stadium projects the same year, opponents of the Baltimore stadiums had little recourse. The stadiums were not popular, but the issue of whether or not they should be built did not justify the kind of massive and concerted activism that would have been needed to defeat the proposal. . . . The belief that the stadium controversy was not important enough to risk activism underscores the fragmentation of local politics. Even though the Camden Yards stadium had the potential to affect the makeup and even the existence of many neighborhoods, residents consciously decided to treat the stadium as an isolated matter. Urbanites are used to coping with numerous and difficult problems, and the kinds of problems that might result from the stadium—such as increasing traffic and driving out middle-income families and small businesses—were not immediate enough threats to prompt an all-out, coordinated fight. . . .

Marker's organization did not faze the stadium juggernaut. Pitted against the city's power structure and Governor Schaefer's enormous power in Annapolis, MASS [Marylanders for Sports Society] had little impact. It also failed to tie the issue to the broader historical picture. Chicago neighborhood activists, by contrast, argued that their displacement by a new stadium was just one event in a long series of policies that segregated the city. Camden Yards stadium opponents might have argued that, combined with the earlier displacement of nearby residents and small businesses to make way for the Harborplace development, the stadium represented a complete takeover by commercial interests of a large part of the city.

In the final analysis, MASS and the neighborhoods failed to extend their battle beyond the immediate circumstances. The feeling of inevitability and the failure to see the linkages to other problems doomed the anti-stadium effort. Camden Yards was selected as the site of a new stadium, among other reasons, to minimize conflict. The area's isolation from more political neighborhood, and its proximity to the downtown area, made it a natural appendage to the already extensive downtown development. . . .

After creation of the stadium authority, there was little that could be done to control it. The responses to the authority's early cost overruns indicate just how much the authority was in charge. State Senator Laurence Levitan said he was "shocked" by the cost overruns; "I'd say they did a lousy job" in estimating the costs of the project. . . .
As Oriole Park at Camden Yards neared completion in the spring of 1922, some of the doubts about the project faded. The team spent $175,000 to celebrate the previously derided Memorial Stadium on its final day in 1991, tapping emotional springs and helping to ease the transition to the new facility. Breaking with the standard "cookie-cutter" approach to stadium design of the 1970s and 1980s, the stadium authority selected an architectural design that recalled the sport's traditional neighborhood parks: An irregular field shape, fewer seats, the use of a historic warehouse as a back drop to the right field fence, and art deco ornamentation made the park feel lived-in before it even opened. One wag commented that he had heard so much about the park's old-fashioned atmosphere that he "expected to see Harry Truman throw out the first pitch." Complaints about cost overruns, favoritism, and political pressure tactics did not seem to matter amidst the national and local media celebrations of the new facility.

The Baltimore elite's constant concern about professional sports can be attributed to a desire to counter the image of decline in the city. Such a concern is reactive, so it was predictable that the monopolistic sports industry would control the way issues were deliberated. With issues discussed in a narrow, sequential style, an open, public dialogue was prevented. The public may have financed the show, but it never managed to land a significant speaking part.

**Further Reading**

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Kenneth Jennings, *Balls and Strikes* (1990)
Barney Nagler, *James Norris and the Decline of Boxing* (1964)
Andrew Zimbalist, *Baseball and Billions* (1992)