

# Sport Venues Evolving to Tourism and Hospitality Giants? Proof of Dynamic Tendency



Ourania Vrontdou

**Abstract** Sport venues have extended their role of sport competition hosts to multi-faceted social and economic players constantly seeking new ways to increase profitability or at least secure viability of this huge ‘concrete’ investment. With the increase of sport-related traveling being recorded and widely searched in that last three decades, huge over-engineered venues tend to invest further in hospitality initiatives proving their extended value and infinite potential for significant business stimulation. The present study aims to provide evidence of the extent, nature, and patterns of this tendency recently observed through the examination of venue case studies, international sport organization developments and sport tourism market indicators. The offered proof suggests an unavoidable evolution for sport venues towards spectacularizing their infrastructure to become attractive landmarks, embedding of strategic tourism alliances, investing in sponsorship capabilities such as naming rights and enrolling in new partnership schemes in order to gain visitors’ hospitality engagement that go beyond traditional attendance.

**Keywords** Sport venues · Sport tourism · Venues attendance · Event tourism

**JEL Classification** Z21 · Z23 · Z32 · Z33

## 1 Introduction

Despite the undisputed and archaic significance of the venues as hosts of sport competition, it becomes more evident that they are now facing the challenge of securing viability and profitability both in short and long term, especially when mega events are over. This new reality suggests the inclusion of different leisure and hospitality services that can invite new market segments all year round and outside event schedule, while at the same time sustain loyal local fans. Renovation of facilities, quality services and personalized experiences seem to be guiding the

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O. Vrontdou (✉)

Department of Sport Management, University of Peloponnese, Sparta, Greece

future of sport venues in urgent need for rebranding in order to respond to changing trends. Local distinct image and culture is blended in the offer to create a competitive product. Hospitality brings in specific operating mechanisms, experienced staff, upgraded services, and the overall feel that sport spectating is drastically upgraded to become a holistic leisure experience. The study seeks proof of the tendency and the potential towards the inclusion of hospitality practices in venues operation and sport procedures.

## 2 Theoretical Considerations

### 2.1 Framing the Contemporary Sport Venue Role

Powell and Sheard (2005) have early attempted to analyze the contemporary venue development producing the typology of the '*modern sports venue*'. The typology follows an historical–causal path seeking understanding of the future venue development and the role they can play within the socio-economic environment. Focusing on the new 'generation' of venues emphasis is given on the '*commercial venue*' where venues initially had to invest in controlling antisocial fans' behavior and gain spectators trust on security issues. In 1990, the Taylor Report (UK Parliament, 1990) not only directly affected the English football venues but also many more European football localities towards securing football competition. This development signals much more than protecting the fans since the new audience is now interested in engaging in more than spectating a football match. In the same period, sport venues invest on their clubs' history offering fans a more complete venue attendance and a longer visit to the wider venue area and facilities. The '*adjustable*' venue refers to the capability of the new venues to satisfy demanding media, sponsorship, and most evidently TV requirements necessary to reach profitability and a secure position amongst global sport venues. The '*urban landmark*' role of the venue is emphasized here as having the power to lift the image of a city through impressive architecture, advanced technological systems, and structural adjustability. The involvement of local or even central government through direct financing of the construction as well as many international events led venues to be effective promotional vehicles for cities in need for certain image formulation and often national pride uplifting.

Since then, venues received increased attention on operational but most vividly sustainability matters (Mangione, 2009). Borrowing the marketing 'lifecycle model' Darcy and Taylor (2013) suggest that venues tend to fluctuate according to the different key operators, users, or owners. International sport organizations focus mainly on a 2-week sport venue operation, while governments aim at long-term benefits that go beyond the 30-year venues' complete lifecycle that Westerbeek et al. (2005) propose. Sport venues represent 'concrete' superstructures that would be difficult to serve future users if they do not early accept their crucial need for flexibility and adjustability. The contemporary venue design and construction faces the

constant development of sports and most significantly spectators' demanding expectations for a complete experience. The venue clientele has been expanded to other leisure segments similarly attracted by the appealing sport venue image and impressive structure. These superstructures either constructed to accommodate local sports clubs or host large international events are now challenged by an unpredicted future. The realization that sport venues have to adopt a more flexible structure and a multi-faceted infrastructure in order to face changing sport and leisure trends is evident (Zhang et al., 2007). Actually, the distance between the construction completion and the first venue readjustments is closer than anticipated since users, leisure trends and sports change rapidly (Flowers, 2017).

Increase in multi-use sport venues regarding the dimensions and features of the field of play, flexible arrangement of the supporting facilities, and a non-permanent overall construction strategy have been recorded in order to face future changes (Kiuri & Reiter, 2013; Nixdorf, 2008). Similarly, the concept of temporary (or 'overlay') venue construction has been widely exercised for sports competitions, especially in Olympic Games where specific Olympic requirements must be met for just two weeks. Well-known venues with significant sport history will have to adjust to achieve sustainable operations (Kiuri & Reiter, 2013). Significantly, the fact that future venue operation costs is impossible to estimate leads to constant innovation adjustments to safeguard returns and increase profitability.

Additional great sport-related partners surround this venue development such as technology providers constantly seeking to enhance the sport experience thus contribute to the creation of a passionate audience (Wainwright, 2017). Media and TV, sport technology providers, venue technology contractors and sponsorship partners now directly affect the main event hosted in the competition area but can also promote the total of the venue activity and accommodated supplementary services (Geraint et al., 2013). Lately, these supplementary services seem to be gaining more attention by the business sector that appreciates the attractive event and venue image. Targeted clientele not only includes venue visitors but also remote potential spectators through TV and internet applications promoting a wider venue profile for leisure and entertainment.

It becomes increasingly more evident that this need for redirection creates a dual role for sport venues internationally. There seems to be a distinctive turn into exploiting venues' capabilities and amenities to satisfy not only leisure-related activity but also corporate and other business functions (Herstein & Jaffe, 2008). Conferences invest on the greatly attractive venue environment, shops, gyms, and museums as well as pre-school playgroups and public gardens they all considered to be supplementary and compatible services that can benefit from the coexistence (Green Sports Alliance, 2015).

## 2.2 *Marketing Contemporary Sport Venues*

Authors note a global city competition in an effort to gain the attention of the clientele since both corporate action and leisure trends initiate from urban environments. Similarly, significant sport action and events need the city's support, image and facilitation to be developed. The urge for 'high end', 'global scale', and 'international audience' has driven the whole of the leisure industry into an 'increased global inter-urban competition' seeking ways to differentiate from competitors (Bélanger, 2000). Brands' constant search for the most effective environment finds an unmatched environment in venues' spectacular feel and sport thrilling experience. In addition, sport venues realizing that they participate in this urban competition for a share in the wider leisure industry are now shifting towards a more flexible profiling and inviting mode that goes beyond sport accommodation.

Critics argue on the "monopolistic structure of major sport leagues" that guide venue subsidies based on the evident appeal of teams to cities (Jakar et al., 2021). However, even conservative sport federations and egocentric sport clubs have come to terms with the need for an exocentric sport venue. The increase in venue superstructures indicates that sport is entering an era of 'spectacularisation' not only for reasons of promoting clubs, leagues, and mega events but also for a wider economic and political reasoning. Great architects are employed to create venue landmarks with unique characteristics to stand out in the international competition. Democratic as well as authoritative regimes despite their different motives both invest in sport venues to emphasize their market power or their political might (Giannakopoulou, 2019). Corporate partners find an attractive and exciting setting to match their profile and a core product that has the ability to simultaneously attract the international customers packaged within the limits of a competition schedule and a wide range of supplementary activities gathered around the power of sport.

Corporations, governments, events, and clubs are sharing the same need for an appropriate environment to operate and sport venues have been largely appreciated for offering an effective setting. 'One of a kind' experience includes a plethora of tangible and intangible features leading sport venues in a new wide role of delivering holistic new services and products. Sport events, as the focal point, gather a variety of leisure industries in order to achieve this promise, functioning as a unique social, corporate, entertainment, and business planet. This transformation from a single sport venue to a wider corporate leisure giant suggests that professionals and processes have to adapt to a new role in order to achieve a complete and effective operational manner. Operational adaptations would prove complex with different players included in the managing team (Lee et al., 2015). Sport venues might be witnessing a new role for their superstructure where sport is the most significant but not the sole element in the overall operation and development.

The use of hospitality inside sport venues has been exercised for some time initially as a contractual service to the constituent groups that are directly associated with mainly professional and mega events. Upgraded services, dedicated seating, set of privileges, and specifically allocated facilities within the venue formed the agreed

offer to the ‘official partners’ of the event as part of the sponsorship or partnership agreement with the hosts. Since then, the ‘use’ of hospitality is reinforced towards building new relationships, inviting new clients, and produce extra market channels. The development of this hospitality offer has been prioritized by many clubs and leagues based on the notion that it can directly affect venue customers’ satisfaction levels. Despite the massive increase in digital marketing and promotional techniques that obviously dominate the strategy of the corporations, doubts start to build around the observed distance between the brands and the physical environment of the venue. Mainly sport-related customers, through the use of digital advertising are alienated from the brands that clearly have a much more vivid impact inside the atmosphere and real feel of a venue accommodating live sport competition (Voon et al., 2014). Is now the time to face the digital alienation through personal in-venue warm welcoming and services?

### **3 Methodology**

In the course of seeking understanding in the evolution process of sport venues turning into hospitality structures, qualitative research is considered the appropriate approach. Examining the reasons behind the initiation of corporate strategies and sport venues’ mechanisms needs focused attention (Stavros & Westberg, 2009). Multi-cases study approach was used in the present examination due its capacity to parallel analyze factors influencing this venue evolution producing therefore concrete assumptions (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2008). Harling’s (2012) suggestion of ‘case by case analysis’ or ‘within case analysis’ is followed here to gain detailed insight into the specific features of each venue or organization related to hospitality development, therefore facilitating assumptions. This approach offers in-depth understanding and produces reliable, transferable conclusions (Grandy, 2010) through the ‘content analysis’ of published corporate reports, organizations’ policy statements, venue-related business profiles, and official internet sources, academic studies and research that aim at highlighting similar patterns of development and increased tendency.

## **4 Evidencing the Competition Venues’ Transformation to Hospitality Platforms**

### ***4.1 Olympic Recognition of Sport and Venue Hospitality Potential***

Accommodation of all related key ‘customers’ has always been one of the most critical and risky functional areas of an Organising Committee for Olympic Games following a challenging protocol of quality hotel and room allocation often puzzling

local organizers. Huge numbers of participants, differently accredited groups, specific accommodation IOC guidelines and limited local hospitality resources caused headache to Olympic organizers and often turned accommodation into a political issue. Complex agreements between the OCOG and the tourism and hospitality partners had to be reached early in order to secure availability while the government has to step in to support the upgrading of the hospitality infrastructure in order to meet Olympic hospitality protocol.

The development of sport venues into hospitality spots has been already evident at the Tokyo 2020 Games despite the dramatic COVID-19 pandemic. Tokyo 2020 Olympic Official Hospitality Programme refers to eight types of packages, all of which include tickets for top category seats, while private VIP suites were designed to be offered at a certain number of venues. Considering it as an “ultimate space” for visitors and guests, organizers utilize the venue to produce an “unforgettable hospitality experience”. Tokyo had already set the basis of developing the venue attendance into a complete hospitality experience incorporating services at all levels of venue features, such as first hosting and viewing areas in the competition arena, private or semi-private space for use during the event, VIP access pass and lanyard, personal attentive staff dedicated exclusively to each suite, exclusive door way for hospitality guest and more (TOCOG, 2020).

The Tokyo organizers admittedly stated that “sports hospitality is a major business development tool in the US and Europe but remains an unexploited opportunity in Japan” but the realization is evident. Their notion that “the unique shared memories and unrivalled closeness of a well-managed VIP experience are an unbeatable opportunity to build a deep and profitable long-term relationship” was translated into providing hospitality services in more than 15 sports plus the opening and closing ceremonies (<https://officialhospitality.tokyo2020.org/packages/>). However, the pandemic curse has initially narrowed bookings to only local residents and later to no spectators. Despite this development, Tokyo signaled a new reality for mega events’ hospitality boosting the potential of uplifting the venue attendance during Olympic Games.

The International Olympic Committee realizing this promising trend suggested new revenue sources produced by more efficient hospitality management while the same time simplifying accommodation procedures and “lift this burden from local organizers” as expressed in Olympic Agenda 2020+5 (IOC, 2021). More specifically, under recommendation 15, “innovated revenue generation models” require a “Centralised Olympic hospitality programme for the benefit of all Olympic stakeholders”. Consequently, the dynamic potential related with the hospitality involved with large events moved a step further. In June 2, 2021, a new global hospitality model was introduced for the 2024, 2026, and 2028 summer, winter, Olympic, and Paralympic Games (IOC, 2021). It is a solid expression of a new shift of services towards all constituent groups as well as visitors that goes beyond accommodation facilitation. A holistic traveling experience will be offered to all attending the Games through one exclusive hospitality provider appointed by the IOC through the official “multi-staged selection” program. A unified system will offer a complete hospitality experience including traveling, competition tickets, opening and closing ceremony

tickets accommodation, venue hospitality, and host city visiting services. Dedicated ticket inventory for athletes, families and friends, access to accommodation and overall hospitality facilitation signals a new era of sport-related hospitality, resulting to venues' conversion to hospitality giants.

The first provider to deliver this complete hospitality offer is "On Location" a subsidiary of "Endeavor" experienced in hospitality, ticketing, and traveling and is an official partner and provider of many sport organizations such as NFL, NCAA, UFC, PGA, and many cultural and artistic events. On Location will be the first exclusive service provider for the Paris 2024, Milan-Cortina 2026, and Los Angeles 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games hospitality programs ([www.onlocationexp.com/olympics](http://www.onlocationexp.com/olympics)).

The benefits seem to be expanded at all sides of the Games management. Organizers would not have to face the huge challenging task of accommodation allocation and control, while new revenue sources for the IOC and all related partners are created. More importantly, investing in quality venue features and services seem to be the right measure towards securing the legacy and the viability of the venue post-event. If this notion of "hospitality enhanced venue" is incorporated in the venue design and structure it seems to be the most significant development towards sustainable large venues in Olympic localities.

Similarly, the World Cup would embrace the same notion towards uplifting the venue attendance offering a "superior spectator environment, interactive displays and pre-match appearances at select matches" (<https://hospitality.fifa.com/2022/en/by-hospitality-products/>). Using the motto "enjoy a FIFA World Cup 2022 experience carefully tailored to you" becomes the epitome of the new hospitality offer. An Official Hospitality Team will welcome sport guests to a new holistic sport experience with 'MATCH Hospitality' being the official provider of "sports experiences," and the worldwide exclusive rights holder of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Official Hospitality Programme. FIFA hospitality specific feature is the mix of tourism services, accommodation offer, venue hospitality, and sport attendance in an appealing host city, all combined to make it a new distinct sport tourism product.

The investment on this new quality sport-related hospitality offer signals the new direction venues will have to undergo in order to satisfy an increasingly demanding sport clientele while increasing profitability and thus, securing viability of the venue structure. Questions are now raised whether small-scale sport venues in smaller localities could follow these developments since quality requires resources and international partnerships in order to be materialized. Similarly, with outsourcing increase rapidly, i.e. hospitality, ticketing, and results, how is sport management, clubs, and leagues going to be affected?

## 4.2 *Venue Case Studies Proving Tourism and Hospitality Potential*

The distance between sport events and hospitality seems to be narrower than ever. In Europe, the power and tradition of football dominates venue attendance and overall engagement in clubs activities. It is expected that football venues would be the first setting for hospitality services to flourish, realizing the passion and power of sport tradition (<https://www.sportstravelmagazine.com/future-of-sports-venues-where-hospitality-meets-the-fan-experience/>). The business sector increasingly and repetitively supports the notion that strong relationships and new clients can be built in the exciting venue environment lifting corporate experiences further (<https://insights.bcdme.com/blog/insights/why-sports>). Keith Prowse report (2019) puts it right: ‘People buy experiences’ underlining that “hospitality that was once considered VIP is now more accessible.”

Premier League football club **Tottenham Hotspur** seeking a “massive regeneration of their new stadium” aims to “transform the way that Premium guests experience matchdays.” The new management stately admits that is directed towards winning new clients, treating loyal fans, offering facilities for different celebrations, education, and leisure within a quality infrastructure. Looking carefully at relevant publications, a few terms were noticed that mark the new strategy direction. ‘Upmarket the venue’, ‘transform matchdays’, ‘unrivalled fan experience’, promise a differentiated venue visit (<https://www.tottenhamhotspur.com/tickets/accommodation/>). As recorded, construction, IT, hospitality, retail, and sports industries have been united to achieve this strategy while all will be “singlehandedly spearheading the regeneration of Tottenham” (<https://bdaily.co.uk/articles/2017/06/05/revealed-the-iconic-upmarket-hotel-that-will-sit-next-to-tottenham-hotspurs-new-stadium>).

Hilton has not been accidentally associated with **Wembley Stadium**. The stadium has hosted major and home football matches built on the same area that the old stadium existed before being demolished to offer England a new state of the art venue that national football deserves. Hilton became more than a near-by hotel since is the heart of many offered programs related to venue attendance and hospitality services. With 30% discount at the Hilton London Wembley offered to fans and visitors Hilton becomes directly linked with the experience along with a series of hospitality services which have become the core ingredient of the new Wembley stadium operation. Sport football history and quality contemporary competition seem to base the expansion of the Wembley ‘product’ to further aspects of the leisure and culture market. “Connections is a series of money-can’t-buy experiences and exclusive access to memorable events across the world of entertainment, sport, business and culture... that happen also on sport event days through the year” (<https://www.clubwembley.com/the-experience>).

Booking.com, the Official Accommodation Booking Partner of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Euro 2020, organized a European competition to all those fans entering a survey and the results prove the main question of the present study. Seventy-two percent out of the 7,500 fans stated “that staying as close



to the stadium as possible is a top priority when organizing their football-inspired travels.” Their wish became the prize for winners of the research who were offered accommodation inside the venue at the executive suites premises: “For football fans this is truly an overnight football experience to rival all others!” (<https://www.coliseum-online.com/nailbiting-euro-2020-moments-in-lap-of-luxe/>).

The product is enriched by innovative supplementary sport activities that often become main motives, such as meeting football legends, golf at a top course, or access to an England training session, stadium tours, and more. The programme termed ‘club Wembley’ runs in parallel with the competition management group as an autonomous venue operation. Some might question the balance between the two since the promotion of the latter seems to dominate the official site and overall venue profiling. An analysis of the official sources could assume that the venue hospitality character is predominant at every part of the promotion becoming a great piece of evidence that the sport venues are becoming a much wider leisure arena to accommodate evolving leisure, sport, and culture but also business and marketing initiatives (<https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/conferences-exhibitions-sports-venues-add-hospitality-offer-sporting-arenas-investing-events-facilities-increase-appeal-beyond-hospitality-conference/77384>).

Similarly, **Brighton and Hove Albion Football Club** is the professional Premier League football club based in the City of Brighton and Hove in England. The club’s football stadium strategically decided that hospitality upgrading is the way to move forward and protect the viability of the club and the stadium itself. In 2015, the quality seeking goals led to four nominations in the ‘Stadiums and Hospitality Awards’ proving that the strategic decisions move in the right direction. Ten lounges, 21 executive boxes, open doors prior to match, traditional ‘pub’ style food, facilities to accommodate meetings, parties, and weddings suggest a wide spectrum of hospitality amenities that prove that the stadium’s new sport entertaining character is here to stay. The “1901 Club” with six Gold Lounges and an industrial brewery-themed lounge sponsored by Heineken, indicates that sport and hospitality linkage can attract other businesses obviously realizing the potential for further development. This potential is reinforced by the fact that major hospitality partners such as ‘KSS’ undertake the latest stadium’s refurbishment with the inclusion of additional premium spaces.

The increased number of hospitality partnerships on sport venues and events prove the great potential arising for both sides. Sport venues operational plans shift towards building the capability to accommodate hospitality requirements for a wider and more global audience who is enjoying a differentiated attendance experience. International key sport bodies seem to be gradually accepting this new reality and the promising benefits (<https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/>).

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Evidently, the sport venue managers are constantly seeking new profitable ways of operating venues and similarly, international sport organizations have to provide a sustainable future to their sport, proving the common positive ground for involved partners. However, the impact on the host clubs and local venues has to be further examined to see if this increased level of commercialization can harm or benefit clubs and events' intrinsic sport value and character. Is sport competition still the protagonist and core ingredient of participating or is this character covered by luxurious facilities and hospitality services impressing the world audience but not really 'loved'? Will sports benefit from high-end hospitality infrastructure and what does the added value refer to? What is the new role of the sport bodies in controlling the quality and offered services when sport spectating is operated by new global partners? How is this new development going to influence the very nature of the sport? Adversely, how will the luxurious and global feel of the hospitality setting offer contribute to the marketing and further development of the sport? But, is this a game of the wealthy and rich? Or can it also be adjusted to local venues to increase revenue and long-term viability?

The sport venue seems to be expanding its operational borders to the wider industry of leisure, tourism, and hospitality engaging in more than sport competition and fans' attendance. The infinite infrastructural capabilities, the appealing sports nature, the passionate audience, the accumulation of powerful sport and corporate leisure partners creates a setting of effective marketing practices, tourism new segment formulation, further sport development, and host city image enhancement proving an infinite potential.

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