

The Stadium as Sociotechnical Change

CERIANNE ROBERTSON¹

PRATIK NYAUPANE

University of Southern California, USA

Stadiums appear to be singular colossal structures—hosts of spectacular performances that are removed from the everyday environs they loom over. Yet they are intricately networked with the built and social environments around them. They are technologies that change the relationships between the material and the sociocultural elements of their surroundings. In this article we zoom into SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, to explore how the stadium redirects flows through complex local and global networks. We trace how the stadium mobilizes flows of state funding for transit infrastructure; convenes a network of security actors and local and federal resources; and attracts media attention, circulating competing discourses and images. Approaching stadiums as networked infrastructure highlights how the development of a stadium produces uneven outcomes.

Keywords: stadium, infrastructure, urban development, flows

The street corners at Prairie Avenue and Arbor Vitae Street in Inglewood, California, were packed on Super Bowl Sunday, 2022. Crowds amassed at this major entrance to SoFi Stadium, sipping beverages in front of the 7-Eleven convenience store or munching on patties outside the local Jamaican restaurant, Blessed Tropical. While it was a great day for these businesses, their neighbors just four minutes' walk down the street had a vastly different experience. Lee's Caribbean Restaurant is set further back from Prairie Avenue in a shopping center that many pedestrians bypass on their way to the stadium, while many regulars steer clear on game days to avoid the traffic. For Lee's Caribbean and the other local businesses in the same plaza, SoFi Stadium events often lead to a decrease in business. The introduction of the stadium has reshaped the flows of people, transportation, and capital that impact, sustain, and threaten these local eateries.

Stadiums may appear to be singular colossal structures—hosts of spectacular performances that are removed from the everyday environs they loom over. Yet stadiums are intricately networked with the built and social environment around them. Moreover, stadiums are infrastructure. They are technologies that change the relationships between the material and the sociocultural elements of their neighborhoods. They produce dynamic spatial and temporal rhythms and flows, such that “they themselves are fluid elements of urban political economy” (Gaffney, 2022, p. 44).

¹ Both authors contributed equally.

As infrastructure, the stadium (re)directs flows of humans, vehicles, emissions, energy, goods, water and waste, capital, technologies, security resources, attention, discourses, and images. Often built from and with the latest “state-of-the-art” technologies, the stadium itself is a technology employed by politicians, planners, developers, and stadium owners to reconstruct the neighborhood and its networks. The stadium requires significant amounts of land for its main structure, parking, and other related infrastructure. Its size facilitates its role as a tool to attract investment and visibility to areas that have undergone disinvestment. In urban and suburban regions in the United States, these areas are disproportionately home to racialized, poor, and working-class residents due to patterns of redlining and segregation. Contrary to many stadium boosters’ claims, such investments of capital and visibility do not necessarily translate into long-term social benefits for residents (Matheson, 2019). As Gaffney (2022) notes, “some places and spaces become more connected to larger, faster networks, while others are blocked, ignored, or stagnate . . . creat[ing] and exacerbat[ing] uneven geographies” (p. 44). Stadium investments often come with high opportunity costs and can accelerate processes of displacement and gentrification (Friedman & Andrews, 2011; Lipsitz, 2011).

Coalitions of private investors and corporate sponsors use the stadium as a tool to redirect flows of capital for financial gain. Elected officials may seek to utilize the arena as a tool to harness flows of media attention and political capital. But it can also be a mechanism for contesting power when actors outside of that coalition appropriate the visibility and networked flows of the stadium to advance their own goals. Street vendors coming from across the region to the stadium grounds to sell food and merchandise demonstrates how the stadium redirects flows beyond—and sometimes contrary to—the intentions of its designers.

While other large-scale development projects also reroute and reshape urban flows, the stadium stands out for its symbolic power—its ability to produce and circulate meaning, images, and discourses. It is the site of extraordinary performances and events that capture imaginations near and far. The stadium itself is designed (increasingly by “starchitects”) to be an iconic landmark both for the local populace and for national and global publics. As stadiums have become global cultural sites, every year millions of individuals travel internationally to visit stadiums as sport tourism and as cultural forms of pilgrimage (Kassing & Nyaupane, 2019). The stadium’s circulation of cultural symbols at multiple scales creates its ability to redirect other flows. The stadium would not command the same flows of people and capital, for example, without its circulation of cultural symbols.

In this paper, we zoom into SoFi Stadium in Inglewood to offer three snapshots that help exemplify the stadium’s role as infrastructure that redirects flows through complex sociotechnical networks. We trace how the stadium mobilizes flows of state funding for transit infrastructure, redirecting a myriad of other flows in the process; convenes a network of security actors and local and federal resources; and attracts media attention, circulating competing discourses and images.

SoFi Stadium, Inglewood, Los Angeles

SoFi Stadium opened in 2020 at a cost of \$5.5 billion, making it the most expensive stadium in the world. It is the home stadium of the Los Angeles Rams and Los Angeles Chargers of the National Football

League (NFL), the most popular sports league in the United States. SoFi Stadium has quickly also become a top destination for global popstars such as BTS, Bad Bunny, Beyonce, and others.

The stadium is nestled in Inglewood, California, a majority-minority city in Los Angeles County where 41% of residents identify as Black and 50% as Latinx, according to 2020 census data. Following decades of redlining, Inglewood became a majority Black city in the 1970s following White flight to the suburbs, around the same time the LA Lakers of the National Basketball Association, who played in the Inglewood Forum from 1967 to 1999, began to establish Inglewood's moniker as the City of Champions. Although the city's Black population has since declined, Inglewood still holds an important place in the cultural imaginary of Black Los Angeles. Rams owner Steve Ballmer bought land in Inglewood in 2014, fueling real estate speculation and displacement as rent rates soared. The mayor of Inglewood, James Butts, has described the stadium as the city's own "Genesis Device," referring to a device from Star Trek's 1982 *The Wrath of Khan* that instantaneously explodes life onto barren planets (Henry, 2019). While SoFi Stadium's aesthetics would not look out of place in Star Trek, the analogy is inaccurate: Inglewood was not barren before the stadium. The mayor's techno-utopian reference recalls colonial imaginaries of land as "empty" or "underutilized," serving to obscure the violent displacement that underlies the sleekness of the area's "beautification" process. SoFi Stadium's role in displacement is a continuation in a history of LA area leaders using stadiums from Dodger Stadium to the Staples Center to bulldoze and reshape racialized neighborhoods—and a history of residents fighting back (Nusbaum, 2020; Saito, 2022).

SoFi Stadium's development coincided with Inglewood and Los Angeles vying to host not only national events such as the NFL's Super Bowl and the National Collegiate Athletic Association Football Championship, but also the largest events on the world stage—the 2028 Summer Olympics and 2026 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Men's World Cup. By 2028, SoFi Stadium will have hosted all these events within a few years. Just as Inglewood is using its new stadium development to market itself as a sports and entertainment capital, Los Angeles is using this slate of events to brand the broader region as a global destination for sports tourism. It has positioned itself as a laboratory for new models of privately financed stadiums and events that may be exported across the country and globe. SoFi Stadium is only four miles from Los Angeles International Airport, and its proximity to one of the busiest airports in the world reinforces it as a junction between the local and global economy. As the LA area is deeply networked with regions around the world through flows tied to immigration, trade, finance, data and knowledge, labor, and the cultural industries, the following snapshots all involve connections between the local and the global.

Redirecting Capital, People, Vehicles

With events at SoFi Stadium and the Inglewood Forum increasing car traffic in the area, Inglewood's elected officials have proposed a 1.6-mile elevated rail line to connect the city's Metro station with the venues. According to the project plan, this Inglewood Transit Connector (ITC) would redirect event-goers from their cars onto LA's train system, reducing the circulation of vehicles and their pollution on event days. The ITC's construction is estimated to cost \$1.56 billion.

In today's neoliberal conjuncture, local governments compete to secure limited transportation funding. As of spring 2023, Inglewood has received \$500 million from the State of California and \$234 million from LA County tax revenue. The California State Transportation Agency's explanation for why it selected the ITC over other projects noted that "additional delays would have seriously impacted the ability to deliver the [ITC] before 2028 Olympics" (Scauzillo, 2023, para. 27). To the extent that government agencies are persuaded of the public importance of stadium infrastructure, they redirect state resources toward Inglewood and away from projects that would provide essential services elsewhere.

As state funds flow into Inglewood, they create and reshape other flows too. The transit connector, if funded, will require the relocation of 41 businesses, redirecting (and possibly short-circuiting) the circulations of goods, customers, and money within the local business community. Lee's Caribbean is among those identified for displacement. Meanwhile, the train is projected to carry just 414 people per hour at peak times on nonevent days, compared to 11,450 in the hour after an NFL game (City of Inglewood, 2021).

Redirecting Police Resources

On February 13, 2022, the United States' Department of Homeland Security in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, and local law enforcement agencies were deployed after extensive intelligence and tactical training to prevent terrorism, mass casualties, and cyber assaults (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022). Mobilizing resources and attention from Washington, D.C., and the Pentagon to the working-class majority-minority city of Inglewood, the occasion for this domestic pinnacle of militarized policing and cyber warfare was the NFL's Super Bowl LVI. The federal government designates Super Bowls with its Special Event Assessment Rating and bigger events like the Olympics as National Special Security Events, marking them as some of the most critical sites for security alongside events like the annual State of the Union. These securitization practices were implemented at sporting events after 9/11, as the U.S. government in collaboration with the private sector constructed the constant threat of catastrophic terrorist attacks and called for the implementation of the hyper-surveilled smart city to mitigate that threat (Gray & Wyly, 2007).

To understand this redirection and reallocation of federal funds and the police state, we have to recognize the Super Bowl not merely as a performance of athletic spectacle but as an apex of capital accumulation, in which over \$14 billion flow through ad revenue, retail spending, betting books, and more (National Retail Federation, n. d.). The multiscalar networked security apparatus mobilizes not primarily to protect the safety of the people involved but rather to protect and facilitate the flows of capital that the stadium facilitates, as has been demonstrated by the extensive law enforcement surveillance programs for recent Super Bowls, alongside the financial interests of AT&T, IBM, Verizon, and other NFL corporate partners (Shelby, Barnes, Parvin, & McDonald, 2020).

Redirecting Attention

Using Media Cloud—an open-access media analysis tool—to track mentions of "Inglewood" from 2010 to 2022 in national news platforms in the United States, we find the largest spikes in coverage around the week leading up to the 2022 Super Bowl, as well as on January 12, 2016, the date the NFL approved the

Rams' relocation to Inglewood and made official the plans to build a new stadium. These data show how stadiums create and attract media spotlights. In doing so, they also fuel the movement of discourses, ideas, and images. While many articles around the Super Bowl mentioned Inglewood just briefly, others reported on the city more in depth. The latter reporting enabled the expanded circulation both of the dominant discourse of Inglewood's elected officials and developers—that linked the city's stadium construction to concepts like "renaissance" and "economic development"—and a competing counter-discourse from some tenants and community organizers, who articulated the stadiums with terms like "displacement," "gentrification," and "exclusion." The heightened attention from major news publications took ongoing local debates about change and magnified them to national and global audiences.

Stadiums can also change the type of image or story circulated about a given place. In recent decades, mainstream media coverage has frequently painted Inglewood as a crime hotspot and unsafe area through coded racialized and classist tropes. The more recent emergence of coverage focused on stadium development could disrupt and reshape the public image of the city. While a move away from racist coverage that dramatizes violence and poverty is a positive shift, there is a risk that it could be replaced by overly celebratory narratives that obscure ongoing processes of dispossession and struggle.

Implications

Across these snapshots, we see flows of people, vehicles, emissions, consumer spending, state funds, security technologies and personnel, media attention, and discourses and images—all redirected and reconstituted by the stadium. Some of these flows are altered at specific moments: at the announcement of a plan to build the stadium, at the influx of funding, or at a particularly high-profile event. Others ebb and flow according to the temporal rhythms of the venue's events. And still others shift slowly over time, such as the establishment of new businesses aimed at event-goers or the exodus of low-income tenants who can no longer afford increased rents. Thus the stadium is dynamic, continually interacting with the built and social infrastructures around it. Since SoFi Stadium opened in 2020, its engagement with the local, regional, and global environment has been ever-changing. The stadium will mobilize different publics, networks, and flows as a host site for the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup compared to the publics, networks, and flows it engineers for the 2028 Summer Olympics, both of which will be different from the more regular assemblages it arranges for NFL games and concerts.

Not all stadiums intervene the same way in the same kinds of flows as SoFi Stadium. As the United States' most expensive stadium and the most recent snapshot of "state-of-the-art" technologies for NFL venues, SoFi Stadium may not exactly represent today's average stadium. But while the specific networks and patterns may look different from venue to venue, every stadium redirects flows of people, resources, and ideas through space and time. Moreover, SoFi Stadium's developers have presented it as a model to be exported and replicated, so what is distinctive about it today may be the "normal" of tomorrow.

Mayor Butts' reference to the stadium as a Genesis Device suggests that the stadium is an isolated intervention that simply generates positive change out of thin air. But through establishing stadiums as networked infrastructures that produce evolving spatial and temporal rhythms and flows, we are better able to see how the development of a stadium produces uneven outcomes. Customers, transit, and capital, for

example, flow along some routes and not others, toward some nodes and away from others, serving some people's needs and threatening others. Thus, it is essential to pay attention to what and how these new flows move where, when, and, crucially, for whom.

References

- City of Inglewood. (2021). Inglewood Transit Connector Project: Draft environmental impact report. Retrieved from <https://envisioninglewood.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Recirc-DEIR-Complete-November-2021.pdf>
- Friedman, M. T., & Andrews, D. L. (2011). The built sport spectacle and the opacity of democracy. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 46(2), 181–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690210387540>
- Gaffney, C. (2022). Flows, circulations, accumulations: Theorizing mega events. In N. Hanakata, F. Bignami, & N. Cuppini (Eds.), *Mega events, urban transformations and social citizenship* (pp. 37–51). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gray, M., & Wiley, E. (2007). The terror city hypothesis. In D. Gregory & A. Pred (Eds.), *Violence geographies: Fear, terror, and political violence* (pp. 329–348). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Henry, J. (2019, November 24). *NFL stadium a catalyst for Inglewood rebirth, but some fear the community is losing its soul*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailybreeze.com/2019/11/24/nfl-stadium-a-catalyst-for-inglewood-rebirth-but-some-fear-the-community-is-losing-its-soul/>
- Kassing, J. W., & Nyaupane, P. (2019). "I just couldn't believe I was there": An exploration of soccer pilgrimage. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 12(2), 167–184. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2018-0165>
- Lipsitz, G. (2011). *How racism takes place*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Matheson, V. (2019). Is there a case for subsidizing sports stadiums? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 38(1), 271–277.
- National Retail Federation. (n.d.). Super Bowl data center. Retrieved from <https://nrf.com/super-bowl-data-center>
- Nusbaum, E. (2020). *Stealing home: Los Angeles, the Dodgers, and the lives caught in between*. Los Angeles, CA: Public Affairs.
- Saito, L. (2022). *Building downtown Los Angeles: The politics of race and place in urban America*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Scauzillo, S. (2023, March 21). Why 2 major LA Metro rail projects were denied funding by California transit agency. *Los Angeles Daily News*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailynews.com/2023/03/21/internal-document-tells-why-certain-rail-projects-got-state-funding-others-got-shut-out/>
- Shelby, R., Barnes, S., Parvin, N., & McDonald, M. G. (2020). The conjoined spectacles of the "smart Super Bowl." *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, 6, 312–319.
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2022, February 9). DHS partners with state and local officials to secure Super Bowl LVI. Retrieved from <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2022/02/09/dhs-partners-state-and-local-officials-secure-super-bowl-lvi>