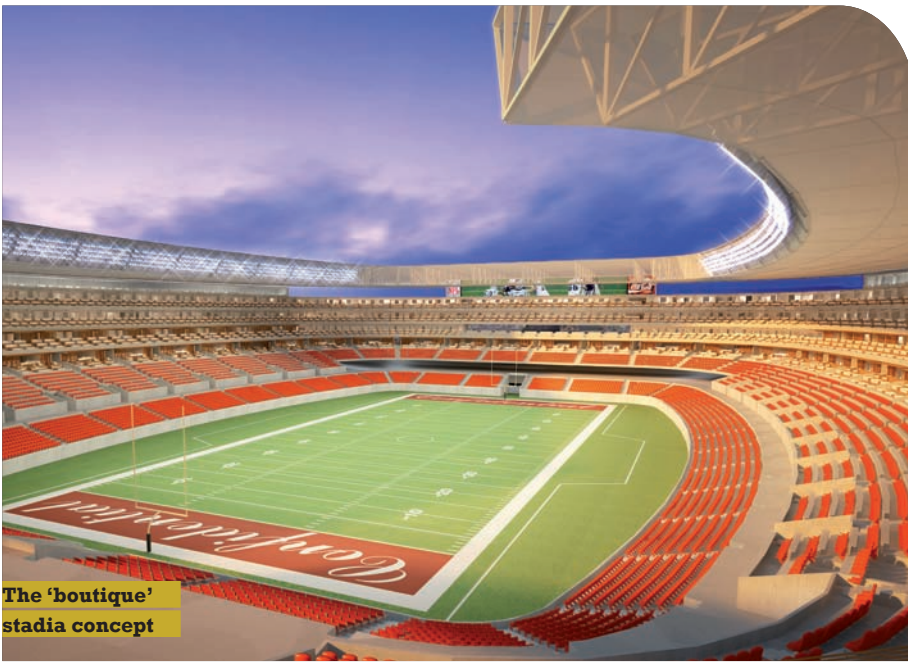


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The 'boutique' stadia concept

Fortune favours the brave: David Manica believes the future lies in more intimate stadia

Designers of stadia and arena could learn a lot from observing design trends in other industries. For example, the explosion of the 'boutique' hotel may pose the question as to how such elements of personality, style and intimacy might be brought into a stadium. The airline industry too, in spite of its obvious and well-publicised challenges, continues to upgrade aircraft with new technology, entertainment and increased comfort, especially for premium customers. At the same time the cruise industry is adding greater and more personalised services, amenities and entertainment. It would certainly seem that all of these industries have undergone dramatic changes to respond to their clients' evolving demands for a more positive, comfortable and memorable experience. In all of these cases, the basic offering of each industry has been substantially reinvented to become more personalised, intimate and comfortable. In short, quantity has been replaced by quality.

In contrast, the sports industry continues to build the same behemoth stadia again and again. Based on the stadia recently built or currently under construction, it would certainly seem the industry continues to measure itself by the mantra that 'bigger is better'. Over the past ten years, the average built area of stadia has increased more than 50%, along with construction costs. But a return visit to these extra-large stadiums years later confirms a harsh reality – struggling suite renewals, lower season ticket sales and the most disappointing and frustrating sight of all; row after row of empty upper deck seats.

Empty seats

As the size and cost of stadia has increased dramatically over the past decade, cities and teams struggle more than ever to finance these billion dollar stadia, only to find that after two or three years in the market they can't even give away the upper deck seats.

For an increasing number of fans, minor upgrades in food offerings and the number of toilets pale in comparison to watching the game with friends at home on a large HD television with surround sound. After an exhausting week at work, who actually wants to pay to spend their weekend fighting traffic to sit in the upper deck in the hot sun for three hours in a 19in (480mm) wide plastic seat with no legroom?

The irony of the current model of course, is that the construction cost for seats in the upper deck is approximately twice the cost of lower bowl seats, and yet they yield approximately 20% of the total stadium revenue. With such a dismal rate of return, and the obvious increase in competition for consumers' leisure time, isn't it time for a dramatic change? What can be learnt from other industries that have been more nimble in reacting to a universally changing market?

The future may bring a new kind of stadium – one with no upper deck and so smaller capacity, but the same revenue generating ability as its larger peers. The focus would be on making every seat more comfortable and personal, allowing people to really relax and enjoy the experience – making it a more enticing prospect and therefore increasing ticket sales. There would be less seats but they would not be empty.

The usual arguments against such extravagance (related to cost and negative perceptions of such exclusivity) would in fact not apply to this model. With the offset of the smaller capacity and lower construction costs, coupled with the larger returns per seat, the minor increase in finishes could be paid for within one or two years. With a wide variety of ticket options, all better and more unique than the typical stadium experience, there would be no shortage of options for spectators of a wide variety of means.

MANICA Architecture believes this is where the future of stadia design lies – in smaller 'boutique' stadia that are more efficient, more comfortable and more fun.

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