

## **Out of The Shadow of the Dome: Atlanta's Westside Residents Challenge the Rules of Sport Mega-Development**

Kate Diedrick, independent researcher, Research|Action Cooperative, 753 Gresham Avenue SE, Atlanta, GA 30316, 617-306-3936, [kate@researchaction.net](mailto:kate@researchaction.net)

Kate Diedrick is a community organizer and researcher. Her work focuses on qualitative and ethnographic studies of labour, social movements, and alternative economies and draws from a number of disciplines, including: American studies, labour, history, and studies of the social and solidarity economy.

Christopher A. Le Dantec, Digital Media, Georgia Institute of Technology, Digital Media / TSRB Rm 316-A, 85 5<sup>th</sup> St NW, Atlanta, GA 30306, 404-385-7555, [ledantec@gatech.edu](mailto:ledantec@gatech.edu)

Christopher A. Le Dantec is an Associate Professor of Digital Media in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at Georgia Tech. His research is focused on the area of digital civics emerging from the intersection of participatory design, digital democracy, and smart cities. Le Dantec's work has direct impact on how policy makers and citizens work together to address issues of community engagement, social justice, urban transportation, and development. He is the author of *Designing Publics* (2016, MIT Press).

# **Out of The Shadow of the Dome: Atlanta's Westside Residents Challenge the Rules of Sport Mega-Development**

We describe findings from a five-year Participatory Action Research collaboration in predominantly African American Atlanta neighbourhoods. The historic communities with whom we worked are located next to the 1992 Georgia Dome and the 2017 Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Drawing on interviews and participant observations, we outline the emergence of novel forms of 'activist play' that were mobilized to challenge the development of the 2017 stadium. This paper offers examples of local efforts to resist sport mega-development projects in the U.S. South, where contemporary systems of development and displacement emulate the historical and global patterns of colonial infringement.

Keywords: resistance and activism; poverty and inequality; participation and power; neoliberalization; democratization.

## **Introduction**

*'They have built two football stadiums. They have built two baseball stadiums. And they have built them on the backs of the poor folk.'* – W.L. Cottrell, Atlanta, 2015

In the global context, the marriage of sport and development produce a chimera of aspirational promises and underwhelming outcome.<sup>1</sup> The chasm between the rhetoric and well-meaning behind sport development – by which we mean a set of activities that includes the development of professional sport stadia as well as the social and economic programming that follow in their wake – and the actual effect developments have on local communities is grounded in the way these programs rely on and perpetuate neoliberal ideas of development, market relations, and the unalloyed good of sport as a pure endeavour through which to build capacity (capital, infrastructural, and human).

At the same time, in sport development, particularly those that come with large-scale construction projects and associated mega-sporting events like the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup, similar long-term consequences are inflicted on the host

communities. Here, sport is not the vehicle *for* development, but rather the end in itself. The familiar promises of economic growth, windfall employment, and transformation fall short precisely because the new infrastructures and facilities are built to accommodate the demands of the global sport event and not to address needs of local communities.<sup>ii</sup>

In both cases, whether as a means to an end, or an end in itself, development activities associated with sport pose particular problems to the communities in which they are sited. The narratives of progress and increased local capacity, of economic renewal, and of cultural relevance play out in the Global North just as they do in the Global South.<sup>iii</sup> It is within this context that we examine more closely a specific sport development and how Atlanta's Westside community responded to it. The 2017 Mercedes-Benz Stadium (2017 Stadium) development project has been the latest in a string of mega-sport initiatives affecting the same area – most recently, the 1992 Georgia Dome (1992 Dome), and the linked preparations for the 1996 Olympics. This legacy of prior sport developments shaped the response of the Westside neighbourhoods, a predominantly African American, low-income community directly adjacent to the existing 1992 Dome and the new 2017 Stadium (the current and future home of the National Football League's Atlanta Falcons). The tactics the community used to organize a grassroots resistance to the perpetuation of the status quo marked by divestment in, and displacement of, local residents substantially shifted from 1992 to 2017. Within this setting, we are particularly interested in the various ways in which pockets of activists and organizers, many of them African American women, mobilized to challenge this new development by looking back at how the same communities responded in the late 1980s to the construction of the 1992 Dome that sits four hundred feet from the new project.

To add depth to our understanding of how these neighbourhoods responded to these stadia projects, we present an analysis of interviews and oral accounts of community-based responses to both the 1992 Dome and the 2017 Stadium. This analysis draws on archival interviews conducted in 1988 and 1989 by local high school students, and follow-up interviews we conducted in 2015 as part of a long-running Participatory Action Research (PAR) project working to establish new forms of community engagement that began prior to the 2017 Stadium's announcement. The interviews and oral accounts reveal the contours of political change within the city of Atlanta as the neoliberal agenda shaped the city through the period following desegregation.

What we observed is that the changing conditions within the neighbourhoods immediately affected by both stadia development projects led to new forms of grassroots activism, or what we develop here as 'activist play.' As we develop this conceptual framing, we are attending to the ways in which residents in the affected neighbourhoods began to take steps to confront the stadium and subsequent development by learning from *history*, building shared *identity*, and developing a right to occupy and contest *space*.

### **Development in Developed Regions**

Before turning to the details of the context in Atlanta, it is worth examining a wider field of view with respect to sport development. Internationally, sport development shares a general aim 'to improve life chances throughout the world but particularly in countries considered to be low income.'<sup>iv</sup> There are a number of ways programs of development aim to positively impact local populations. These typically include promises of economic development to the immediate community, improvement through hard development in the form of infrastructure and stadia, or through programming and

local capacity building. Meanwhile, the lasting impact of sport development programming remains difficult to measure.<sup>v</sup> Often, the aspirations of these programs attempt to exempt themselves from more critical considerations of how sport, and even the development agenda, configure territories of intervention in terms that further existing global markets and political power structures.<sup>vi</sup>

Chief among the challenges of sport development is the relationship between sport and the colonial and post-colonial urges of nations in the Global North. Here the desire to establish new footholds of global economic power butts up against the reflex to frame such interventions as having positive impact on the countries and communities in which they unfold. However, as Darnell and Hayhurst put it, it is through this tension that ‘sport can be mobilized (and is complicit) within the politics of intra-national colonization in which marginalized groups struggle for full representation and access to success within the social and political economy.’<sup>vii</sup> Positioned to address the systemic inequities left in legacy of colonial control, Darnell and Hayhurst further point out that programs of development through sport ‘should be recognized as largely inseparable from colonial histories.’<sup>viii</sup> Their larger point is that sport development efforts, particularly those based in the global development charters of the late twentieth-century, simply reconfigure post-colonialist development into territories of neo-colonial control by asserting boundaries of intervention aligned with global commodity consumption.<sup>ix</sup>

While there are important differences between stadia development projects in the Global North and similar projects in the Global South, they often deploy a common rhetoric of development that promotes the positive impact such projects will have on local communities.<sup>x</sup> It is in this rhetoric that, in the Atlanta context, we find similar territories of neo-colonialism where boundaries of intervention are configured around commodity consumption. The communities directly affected by the 2017 Stadium were

configured around participation in the commodity of sport in part by displacing local cultural institutions by siting the project where two historic African American churches resided, and by constraining access to economic gain by gatekeeping access to jobs and service contracts during and following the stadium's construction.

The promises made by the developer and the state tap into internal colonial histories and urges, where development projects typically focus on infrastructure – taming wild or undesirable regions through betterment of living conditions, and economic uplift.<sup>xi</sup> Just as stadia projects in the global context are sited in poverty stricken communities where the dearth of employment and physical infrastructure runs up against promises of windfall opportunities to alleviate those systemic issues, so too has this been the case in Atlanta, leaving little effective room for the local communities to contest the projects or negotiate outcomes that will have lasting positive impact.<sup>xii</sup> Our analysis below connects with this position as the residents we worked with focused on cultivating an understanding of history, local culture, and collective identity in order to reclaim their access and right to place and the livelihood it might provide.

### **The Atlanta Way**

The city of Atlanta is often touted as a prime example of the progressive New South, where people of all races work together harmoniously in ‘the city too busy to hate.’ This was the birth of the ‘Atlanta Way’ – a development approach deployed during the Civil Rights era by the city’s white leaders ‘as a device to demobilize and moderate the civil rights movement.’<sup>xiii</sup> Recent scholarship has revealed the ways in which racism, race relations, and class – from slavery to the present – have shaped the city, creating a system through which Black Atlantans are ‘constrained through segregation and institutional white supremacy,’ and live in a contemporary form of resilient and ‘entrenched apartheid.’<sup>xiv</sup>

Throughout the last sixty years, development and displacement in Atlanta's Westside has reinforced racial and class divisions using spatial boundaries. As historian Ronald Bayor describes it, 'In the 1960s, as a stadium and civic centre were built and blacks were displaced, race was a prime factor and fit into a long history of racial residential control and the maintenance of segregation.'<sup>xv</sup> However, beginning in the late 1970s, with African American leadership in the mayor's office [Maynard Jackson 1974-82, 1990-94; Andrew Young 1982-1990], 'class divisions replaced overt racism'<sup>xvi</sup>. For the construction of the 1992 Dome, the state used eminent domain to take land from hundreds of African American families with the goal of demolishing and displacing persistent poverty and poor living conditions. This move was both class-centred and racialized. It was also larger than just the 1992 Dome, as the seeds for an Olympic bid had already begun to sprout and the stadium was but one in a set of sweeping changes promised to the communities of the Westside.

Twenty-five years after the 1992 Dome, similar classist concerns arose. Boosters for the 2017 Stadium pointed to transforming distressed neighbourhoods, while residents pointed to the need for equitable economic opportunity, and a desire to see redevelopment that would positively impact current residents rather than simply brush them aside. With the history of displacement and undelivered promises of economic and social uplift, residents moved to contest how the 2017 Stadium would re-shape their community.

### ***Methods: Triangulating Through Archival and Participatory Action Research***

We come to this work and the topic of stadium development through a series of PAR projects begun in 2011 to build local capacity through cultural heritage and oral history. PAR provides a framework for working in community settings to create and sustain interventions aimed at social change, and to blur the lines between 'researcher' and

‘subject.’<sup>xvii</sup> Importantly, PAR builds upon a set of shared commitments between researcher and host community, where problem scoping and ultimate assessment of efficacy arise through a joint partnership rather than as imposed external standards.<sup>xviii</sup>

The initial PAR project was directed toward examining the role of, and co-producing technologies to support, community and civic engagement.<sup>xix</sup> Over a four-year period, we had developed a rich working collaboration with the Historic Westside Cultural Arts Council (HWCAC), and its principle members Mother Moore and Tracy Bates to develop a series of biannual interventions that alternately collected and then presented community narratives linking the current conditions of the Westside to the historic legacy of the neighbourhoods.<sup>xx</sup> This tick-tock model enabled us to spend one part of the year training ten to fifteen residents in semi-structured interviewing techniques so they would be in conversation with their own community; the second part of the year was spent in extensive design and production workshops so that the community members with whom we worked had direction over how the collected content would be curated and presented. In this way, the scope of the interviews, the selection of who to interview, the framing of how the interviews were presented, and their digital form were all developed in close and deferential collaboration with Mother Moore, Tracy Bates, and over forty-five community members involved with, or recruited through, HWCAC.

The larger PAR project was concerned with cultivating community engagement and specifically interrogating how digital tools and design-based approaches could build collective capacity for community action. When the 2017 Stadium was announced, the focal point for action organically shifted to the ways in which residents could assert themselves with respect to the new stadium. The small group of residents with whom we had been working adapted their approach – of recording local narratives, curating,



and presenting those narratives to cultivate a positive collective identity and encourage action – in order to resist the stadium project. This in turn enabled us, as external researchers, to work with the community to develop and examine these forms of resistance; in particular, understanding the various ways in which pockets of activists and organizers, all of them African American, and most of them women, like Mother Moore and Tracy Bates, mobilized to challenge the new development.

To complement the ongoing community narrative work of the PAR project, we worked with the Atlanta History Center to digitize archival audio recordings in their collection from 1988-89, when local high school students conducted semi-structured, face to face interviews with area residents about the plans and construction of the then new 1992 Dome. Following this, in the summer of 2015, we launched a new interview effort with Tracy Bates and HWCAC to create a response to the interviews (and outcomes) from 1988-89. Tracy, who had participated and contributed to interview training sessions for four years, brought a broad view of the project, of working with residents to develop years' worth of narrative content, and visibility within the community that enabled her to conduct the follow-up interviews. These interviews, like the work that preceded it, pivoted around the culture and heritage of the neighbourhoods with respect to the impact the 1992 Dome construction had and the promised impact of the new stadium.

In total, we had sixty-two interviews: fourteen from 1988-89 and forty-eight from 2015. We transcribed the conversations and then, in consultation with Tracy Bates and Mother Moore, coded them in an inductive manner to identify key themes that spanned the two development projects and which spoke to the conditions of the neighbourhoods, the tactics used to promote and gain public support, and the modes of resistance that were deployed in each stadium development process. In reporting details

from the interviews below, some of our partners were comfortable with their names being used while others were not. In alignment with the principles of PAR, we followed the wishes of our partners in reporting or withholding their names. While Mother Moore and Tracy are those most often quoted in this piece, their observations have only been selected when they are representative of broad trends across the interview corpus.

### **Activist Play**

Responding to the call for approaches to sport that challenge neoliberal ideologies and suggest collectively oriented alternatives, we define activist play based on the work of the organizers with whom we conducted our PAR research collaboration.<sup>xxi</sup> Activist play is a framework of values and practices that suggest and formulate a counter understanding of sport: one that focuses on social movement, and direct action intended to destabilize the rules of oppressive systems. In the case of our project, organizers used oral history gathering and sharing to encourage those often left out of both sport and political decision making to act politically. They worked with the poor, people of colour, the elderly, women, the disabled, sex workers, drug dealers, and others operating in the underground economy to establish a shared identity cultivated through a renewed understanding of history and culture in order to make claims to land and space. As Mother Moore explained, they were working to preserve and share their community's identity because, "colonization of countries happens in part by demolishing cultural identity. Disempowered people have no sense of identity."<sup>xxii</sup>

### *Learning From the Past*

One of the key characteristics of the emergent resistance to the new stadium project was the process of seeking out information about the injustices of the past, including the promised transformation that never materialized following the first 1992 Dome and the

1996 Olympics. This work was done, in part, by collaborating with us on research: taking trips to the local archives, reviewing the oral histories from the 1988-89 collection, collecting newspaper clippings and other material culture from area residents at major community events. As Tracy Bates put it, “you have to understand the system in order to fight it.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

The archival oral histories were an especially important part of that process as they put current residents into conversation with what happened over two decades ago. Organizers were surprised to see so many of the same concerns present across the earlier interviews, and they quickly realized the human aspects of the earlier stories would speak to current residents. For instance, one of the residents interviewed in 1989 was Mabel Austell, she had lived in the neighbourhood for fifty-seven years, placing her arrival date in the early 1930’s, when Atlanta was highly segregated and when only a few neighbourhoods were open to African Americans. As she explained her fear about the 1992 Dome:

Well, I feel that I will have to move. I feel that the stadium is built and probably will take in my home, [build] all parking, all hotels or something of that sort. Leaving will pose a problem, trying to find a place to go. Because you see, we own our home and at this late stage in our lives, trying to go somewhere and purchase another home would pose a great problem.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Stories like this led to the formation of a special focus in the interviews on the ‘taking of historically Black land’ and ‘uprooting families’ that had lived in the area for generations. When conducting interviews about the 2017 Stadium, Tracy would often read the quote above (and others like it), asking for reactions about it, and thus putting the contemporary conversation in dialogue with the long historical arc of systemic racism in city building and prior development projects.

Our community partners also made connections between historical injustices enacted on people of colour around the world and their own personal histories. They used this analysis in conversations with fellow activists and at events where they were speaking out against developers and city leaders. As noted above, Mother Moore saw a connection between the attempts to erase cultural and historical identity in her community with histories of colonialism. Her observation was that a sense of history and identity was necessary before an effective resistance could be mounted:

With some people, you can get to the understanding of the systems, challenging them and building counter-power. But right now, on the Westside, you have to go all the way back to providing a mechanism for thinking about culture, history, and agency. <sup>xxv</sup>

The activist play that arose in opposition to the 2017 Stadium, the mechanism Mother Moore and Tracy used to get people to think about their “culture, history, and agency,” were stories. Stories of systemic racism, oppression, and struggle, but also of the power that communities had to resist those conditions.

### *Cultivating a Shared Sense of Identity*

Understanding the conditions of the Westside within the larger arc of time in Atlanta and the nation was crucial to our community partners. It laid the groundwork for cultivating a shared sense of identity with other active members of the community through the interviews conducted in the summer of 2015.

During that summer, two-thirds of those interviewed were women. These were the residents most active in stadium resistance. Many were single parents. They were at home caring for children, elderly relatives, or were retired but continued to be caregivers. There was often a direct, if unstated line, between their care for children and family and for their neighbourhood, for other Black people. In the interviews, they

connected their struggle against the stadium to struggles for physical, political, and representational space and larger intersectional experiences of race, class, and gender oppression.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Mother Moore, influenced by her politicization rooted in 1970s radical Black feminism, helped raise this consciousness. For her, the experience of being a woman could not be separated from class and race. Recalling her work organizing a majority-female childcare workforce in the 1970s, she noted, “we chose to build trade unions in daycares where there was a workforce that was un-unionized and abused... one of the things I learned was that Black people have a different perspective on [organizing] work.” She adds that the key to this difference was in the inclusion of all working-class people, and the development of strong organizations based on a sense of shared identity and trust.<sup>xxvii</sup> Particularly among the women activists with whom we worked, their desire to build tight-knit relationships and community was integrated with organizing and resistance. This was both despite and because of what Patricia Hill Collins and other Black feminists view as the “ongoing interplay” between oppression and activism.<sup>xxviii</sup> The resistance to the stadium itself became the space through which the women illustrated that “there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be.”<sup>xxix</sup>

This sense of autonomy was critical for the larger project of seizing on and celebrating a collective identity in the community. Looking back to before she was politically active, Mother Moore recalled a sense of isolated frustration, a lack of individual empowerment:

I experienced a date rape and got pregnant. And this was 1956 and there was no abortion option... There was major ostracism... All of the Civil Rights stuff was just: you need to stop fighting, get a job and pull yourself up. And I believed that for a time.<sup>xxx</sup>

She then juxtaposed this experience with her sense of identity and purpose once she became politically active:

Everything that I learned was through doing it. So, I'm saying that you don't have to say to [Black] people: "You gotta be this." But what we do have to say to [Black] people is "It's not you. You are not the problem." Because that's what I learned: I wasn't the problem. There wasn't anything wrong with me. There is racism and its real and Black people are excluded. I learned about its historical development. I learned about how it was part of the constitution's discussion and deliberate institutionalization, to make money, to build this country.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Thus, part of the project for the leaders was always to instil pride in their fellow residents—use historical lessons to teach them that they are not the problem. But organizing in a community with some of the highest incarceration rates of young African American men in Atlanta not only made this challenging but also brought out specific gender dynamics. One of the women active in the interview project, a single mother of four who cares for her grandchildren, explained that one reason she remains and participates in activism is that she has seen the negative effect of the over-criminalization of young African American men in the neighbourhood:

A lot of brothers you hear talking about going to jail. I don't think it's no place for them to be going. But if they get out... they can't change, because you go to try to find a job and if you've got a felon[y] they can't find a job. That's holding them back.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The opportunities for employment were not available to members of the community who had been incarcerated, further displacing any benefit from the stadium away from the local community. This traces similar observations from Darnell and Hayhurst in that participation in the programs that enabled access to resource allocated through sport development projects faces structural barriers within affected neighbourhoods.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Moreover, the gendered mismatches between who benefits and who labours in sport

development were perpetuated, simultaneously burdening the female leaders that were attempting to mobilize their communities, while creating employment and economic opportunities that favoured men (even as many of those men were ineligible).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### *Cultivating a Right to Remain*

To encourage a shift in “people’s view of themselves”, organizing leaders intentionally set out to connect the past to the present – asking residents to place themselves and their personal histories into the historical forces working in the neighbourhood. This was a process that began through earlier work within the larger PAR project, where Mother Moore and Tracy Bates had begun to create a vision for enacting an alternative future by creating a sense of shared identity with a common past. Central to that vision was giving those living the deepest within the current Dome’s shadow the belief that they too had the right to build and participate in that future. As Mother Moore described their work in this area:

If you don’t have [pride] then you don’t even have the capacity to be able to stand up. When we started this work, people were thinking: “I’m nothing. I made no contribution. My family made no contribution.” But what we are able to do is to bring them in and tell them, “You’re somebody and you have a voice. No matter who you are, you have a right. You are a prostitute on that corner? You still have a right to say something about what oppresses you. Your means of employment does not deny you of your constitutional right to reject oppression.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

One of the ways they did this was by organizing festivals, yearly Black History celebrations, and ‘street events.’ These events were designed as affirmations of the neighbourhoods’ people and history and their right to the space that made up the neighbourhoods. Tactically, the events served to activate a diffuse and disempowered base through trainings, shared responsibly with residents (and thereby a sense of ownership), and a mandate for community members to turn out and to speak up about

their hopes and dreams for their community. ‘The festivals have been a way for people to come in and say “I can do this.” And to have some pride in themselves and in the neighbourhood.’<sup>xxxvi</sup>

It was also through these events and the shared space they created that the personal histories became linked with the larger community identity. As these links emerged through a slow groundswell of activity around the effects of the 2017 Stadium, fear and anxiety about the perpetuation of prior patterns of displacement came to the fore. An example of that anxiety came from two long-term residents interviewed:

Everybody worrying about the stadium, but what about everything in effect of the stadium? Are the people still going to be there? They still going to have their houses?<sup>xxxvii</sup>

I feel like they ain't trying to help us. They ain't trying to help the people that been staying in their neighbourhood. They're moving us out and putting rich people in, which is not fair for the ones that don't know nothing but the neighbourhood.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The constant anxiety of displacement became a tool that helped organizers remind residents that it was up to them to remain in place—to use their bodies to maintain control of the space within their communities: ‘With the stadium we recognize that gentrification is coming and we need to make sure people aren’t kicked out.’<sup>xxxix</sup> As Tracy and Mother Moore’s work continued, more and more interviews reflected residents desire to control their space:

I stay because it is my neighbourhood and I love my neighbourhood. I know best what we need. I’ve lived here for fifty-four years... My history started from violence... My mother left the rural south and moved here. Raised all seven children in a one-bedroom over here... It was kind of hard, but we managed, it taught me how to manage with mine.<sup>xl</sup>



The physical experience of historical hardship, exemplified here in the offhand reference to a history of violence – the violence of living in the racist rural south and the everyday violence of poverty and substandard living conditions – contributed to the understanding of a right to remain in place. This right, and the way it began to circulate through the community in response to the potential for displacement speaks to their understanding that the development was not just the stadium, but the reconfiguration of their neighbourhood from their homes and their histories, to an assortment of hotels, condos, and parks for a community whose history does not yet exist. That despite the promises of the 2017 Stadium,<sup>xli</sup> they needed to establish an identity to stand in opposition to the ways in which they were being configured by sport development – as extracted labour, as consumers, as a site of renewal via displacement. <sup>xlii</sup>

### *Losing the Fight But Gearing up for the Long Struggle*

Regardless of neighbourhood opposition, the plans for the 2017 Stadium continued apace. The mobilizing work we had begun in 2011, prior to the stadium announcement, relied on slow and intentional work with some of the community's hardest to reach. It was not conceived to respond to a fast-moving project like the 2017 Stadium. This, in conjunction with a dearth of financial resources to create an organized presence during stadium negotiations doomed resistance efforts to fail. Activist players were not surprised, but disappointed nonetheless.

Did I think we were going to win? I held high hopes for always winning. But the thing that I knew was the education of our people was critical in this. To start the dialogue that this ain't "all that," with the stadium coming here.<sup>xliii</sup>

While the organizers were ultimately unable to change the course of the stadium, they were able to change the course of how many in their community understood and positioned themselves within the history of the Westside and the goals of development

within Atlanta. Residents came to see the stadium and the connected developments as part of the basic ideological rules of the Atlanta Way in the twenty-first century, and in response they set out to create a new set to dislodge the hegemonic entrenchment of neoliberal idea of city making. The organizers and residents with whom we collaborated, observed, and interviewed were able to challenge – even if unsuccessfully – the 2017 Stadium project by developing a strong understanding of the specific mechanisms of the system and how it worked against their interests. Pride and solidarity became tools and sources of local power to resist the developer’s and the state’s programmatic efforts to placate, disenfranchise, and displace them.<sup>xliv</sup>

This community knowledge and power will be crucial if the 2017 Stadium, and linked development and revitalization efforts succeed in improving the value of the land, resulting in the threat of significant market-based displacements. While more significant political mobilization, direct action and structural intervention will be necessary, larger-scale and more successful resistance efforts may only be possible because of the groundwork laid through activist play.

## **Conclusion**

Large-scale sport development projects configure place in particular ways – some of those ways are obvious, like when stadia act as barriers rather than welcoming commons, but others persist through the displacement and obfuscation of local communities who must find ways to persist even as they are reconstituted so that consumption, rather than quality of life, is improved.<sup>xlv</sup> The challenge for local communities is to find creative means to resist ‘the ways in which sport can be mobilized (and is complicit) within the politics of intra-national colonization.’<sup>xlvi</sup> Through the course of our work with African American organizers in Atlanta, we can begin to explicate the tactics being deployed at the grassroots level to resist sport mega-

development. To confront the construction of a new stadium in Atlanta, community organizers put into motion a multi-part plan to mobilize residents to challenge accepted ideology of the Atlanta Way – a neoliberal assertion that market forces take primacy over concerns of systemic inequality and racism. The plan involved putting residents into conversation with each other; building a shared identity with touch points in community heritage; cultivating membership in the current community; and building capacity to take action to assert their desires for how the area would evolve.

We come to understand these tactics as a form of activist play, where history and identity dictated the movements residents were able to make. Core to these movements was a training and mobilization of disenfranchised community members to run a community narrative project where residents interviewed each other about past and present experiences in the neighbourhood. By working explicitly with disenfranchised individuals who suffer the most in the daily conditions of an economically and physically distressed neighbourhood, and who would be the most untethered during displacement, the project helped establish a shared identity and enabled residents to claim their right to take part in decision making and to remain in place. Drawing out the community's sense of historical patterns of injustice through an understanding of prior mega-sport developments like the 1992 Dome and the 1996 Summer Olympics, the residents were able to recognize patterns of broken promises and bring forward a collective resistance to the development program of the 2017 Stadium (even as the stadium itself became a reality). In this way our community partners laid claim to physical, cultural, and political space to resist the sport development narrative and instead outline their own collective vision for the future.

While the efforts of the activists remain inconclusive as the new stadium has yet to be completed and the trailing developments yet to break ground, their efforts provide

some indication of how other communities might begin to organize and mobilize so that efforts to stand fast against coercive mega-developments can deploy tactics rooted in culture and place to counter those used by sport boosters that make similar claims to culture and place. The power of an activist play framework is that it challenges the false promise of neoliberal development stadium proponents rely on, pointing out the linked ways in which these attempts to tame the ‘undesirable elements’ in these neighbourhoods and spur economic uplift are not meant to help the actual people living there. While the marginalized Westside residents continue to struggle with ‘representation and access to success within the social and political economy’<sup>xlvii</sup> of Atlanta and the U.S. South, activist play gives those most at risk of being deemed undesirable for the “improvement” of markets through sport development tools to see the complicity, colonial urges, and false promises for what they are. By making the historically African American communities visible and legible as more than a territory for economic development, organizers begin to establish alternatives to colonial development practices no matter where they occur.

Acknowledgements: We thank Historic Westside Cultural Arts Center, Mother Moore, and Tracy Bates for their leadership, patience, and steadfast commitment to organizing. The work presented here would not be possible without their partnership. This research was supported in part by NSF grant IIS-1524380.

## Notes

---

- <sup>i</sup> Jones, 'A Level Playing Field?'; Bennett and Spirou, 'Political Leadership and Stadium Development.'
- <sup>ii</sup> Jones, 'A Level Playing Field?'; Scherer et al., 'Public Consultation and Stadium Developments.'
- <sup>iii</sup> See, for example: Jones, 'A Level Playing Field?'; Bennett and Spirou, 'Political Leadership and Stadium Development'; Spaaij, 'The Social Impact of Sport.'
- <sup>iv</sup> Crabbe, 'Getting to Know You', 7
- <sup>v</sup> Crabbe, 'Getting to Know You'; Spaaij, 'The Social Impact of Sport.'
- <sup>vi</sup> Darnell and Hayhurst, 'Hegemony, Postcolonialism and Sport-for-Development.'
- <sup>vii</sup> Darnell and Hayhurst, 'Sport for Decolonization'; Darnell and Hayhurst, 'De-Colonising the Politics and Practice of Sport-for-Development.'
- <sup>viii</sup> Darnell and Hayhurst, 'De-Colonising the Politics and Practice of Sport-for-Development.'
- <sup>ix</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.
- <sup>x</sup> Jones, 'A Level Playing Field?'; Scherer, 'Resisting the World-Class City'; Thornley, 'Urban Regeneration and Sports Stadia.'
- <sup>xi</sup> Sapotichne, 'Rhetorical Strategy in Stadium Development Politics'; Scherer, Sam, et al., 'Public Consultation and Stadium Developments'; Scherer, Koch, and Holt, 'The Uses of an Inner-City Sport-for-Development Program.'
- <sup>xii</sup> Darnell, 'Playing with Race'; Darnell and Hayhurst, 'Hegemony, Postcolonialism and Sport-for-Development'; Darnell and Hayhurst, 'De-Colonising the Politics and Practice of Sport-for-Development.'
- <sup>xiii</sup> Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 289.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid*, 114.
- <sup>xv</sup> Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 256.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 257.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Lewin, 'Action Research and Minority Problems.'
- <sup>xviii</sup> McTaggart, *Participatory Action Research*; Rapoport, 'Three Dilemmas in Action Research,' 3.
- <sup>xix</sup> See: Le Dantec and Fox, 'Strangers at the Gate'; Fox and Le Dantec, 'Community Historians.'
- <sup>xx</sup> Le Dantec and Fox, 'Strangers at the Gate.'
- <sup>xxi</sup> Coakley and Pike, *Sports in Society*.

- 
- xxii Moore, Interview with Kate Diedrick.
- xxiii Bates, Conversation with the authors.
- xxiv Austell, Vine City/Domed Stadium Oral History Recordings.
- xxv Moore, Interview with Kate Diedrick.
- xxvi On Black women and political space, see: Isoke, *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance*; On intersectional resistance, see: Brooks, *Boycotts, Buses, and Passes*; Springer, *Still Lifting, Still Climbing*.
- xxvii Moore, Interview with Kate Diedrick.
- xxviii Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 238.
- xxix Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 238.
- xxx Moore, Interview with Kate Diedrick
- xxxi Moore, Interview with Kate Diedrick.
- xxxii Activist 1, Interview with Kate Diedrick and Tracy Bates.
- xxxiii Anonymous Resident 3, Interview with Terry Ross.
- xxxiv Jones, 'A Level Playing Field? Sports Stadium Infrastructure and Urban Development in the United Kingdom.'
- xxxv Moore, Interview with Kate Diedrick.
- xxxvi Organizer 1, Personal Correspondence with Kate Diedrick.
- xxxvii Anonymous Business Owner, Interview with Chuck Barlow.
- xxxviii Anonymous Resident 2, Interview with Kelly Brown.
- xxxix Moore, Interview with Kate Diedrick.
- xl Cynthia, Washington Park Neighborhood, Interview with Terry Ross.
- xli Invest Atlanta, "Community Benefits Plan;" Leslie, 'Plan for Benefits to Falcons Stadium Communities.'
- xlii Darnell and Hayhurst, 'De-Colonising the Politics and Practice of Sport-for-Development.'
- xliii Moore, Interview with Kate Diedrick.
- xliv Leslie, 'Plan for Benefits to Falcons Stadium Communities.'
- xlv Coakley and Souza, 'Sport Mega-Events.'
- xlvi Darnell and Hayhurst, 'Sport for Decolonization,' 189.
- xlvii Darnell and Hayhurst, 'Sport for Decolonization.'

## Bibliography

- 
- Activist 1, English Avenue, Interview with Tracy Bates and Kate Diedrick, Atlanta, GA, March 2015.
- Activist 2, English Avenue Resident, Interview with Kate Diedrick. Atlanta, GA, March 4, 2015.
- Anonymous Business Owner, Atlanta University Center, Interview with Chuck Barlow, April 2016.
- Anonymous Resident 1, English Avenue Neighborhood. Interview with Terry Ross. Atlanta, GA, April 2016.
- Anonymous Resident 2, English Avenue and Vine City Neighborhoods. Interview with Kelly Brown. Atlanta, GA, April 2016.
- Anonymous Resident 3, English Avenue and Vine City Neighborhoods. Interview with Terry Ross. Atlanta, GA, April 2016.
- Booker T. Washington High School. Interview with Mabel Austell. Vine City/Domed Stadium Oral History Recordings, MSS 611. Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center.
- Bayor, Ronald H. *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Bennett, Larry, and Costas Spirou. 'Political Leadership and Stadium Development in Chicago: Some Cautionary Notes on the Uses of Regime Analysis.' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30, no. 1 (2006): 38–53.
- Brooks, Pamela E. *Boycotts, Buses, and Passes: Black Women's Resistance in the U.S. South and South Africa*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.
- Brown-Nagin, Tomiko. *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence F Katz. 'The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment.' Boston: Harvard University Working Paper, 2015.
- Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez. 'Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States.' Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2014.

- 
- Christopher Le Dantec, Sarah Fox, and Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference / Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing (CSCW '15). *Strangers at the Gate*. New York: ACM, 2015.
- Cynthia, Washington Park Neighborhood. Interview with Terry Ross. Atlanta, GA, April 7, 2016.
- Coakley, Jay J, and Elizabeth Pike. *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*. London; Boston: McGraw-Hill Education, 2009.
- Coakley, Jay, and Doralice Lange Souza. 'Sport Mega-Events: Can Legacies and Development Be Equitable and Sustainable?' *Motriz: Revista de Educação Física* 19, no. 3 (2013): 580–89.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Cottrell, W.L. Interview with Kate Diedrick and Tracy Bates. Atlanta, GA, March 16, 2015.
- Crabbe, Tim. 'Getting to Know You: Using Sport to Engage and Build Relationships with Socially Marginalized Young People.' In *Sport and International Development*, edited by Roger Levermore and Aaron Beacom, 176–97. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Darnell, Simon C, and Lyndsay Hayhurst. 'Hegemony, Postcolonialism and Sport-for-Development: A Response to Lindsey and Grattan.' *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 4, no. 1 (2012): 111–24.
- Darnell, Simon C, and Lyndsay Hayhurst. 'De-Colonising the Politics and Practice of Sport-for-Development: Critical Insights from Post-Colonial Feminist Theory and Methods.' In *Global Sport-for-Development*, 33–61. New York: Springer, 2013.
- . 'Sport for Decolonization Exploring a New Praxis of Sport for Development.' *Progress in Development Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011): 183–96.
- Grady-Willis, Winston A. *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.
- 'Introduction: Critical Methodologies and Indigenous Inquiry.' In *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, 1–20. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008.



- 
- Invest Atlanta. "Community Benefits Plan." November 2013. Accessed June 8, 2017.  
<http://investatlanta.com/wp-content/uploads/Community-Benefits-Plan.pdf>.
- Jones, Calvin. 'A Level Playing Field? Sports Stadium Infrastructure and Urban Development in the United Kingdom.' *Environment and Planning A* 33, no. 5 (2001): 845–61.
- Jerrell, Booker T. Washington Neighborhood. Interview with Bill Cannon. Atlanta, GA, April 2016.
- Kuhn, Clifford M. *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005.
- Leslie, Katie, 'Plan for Benefits to Falcons Stadium Communities Moves Ahead.' *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. November 25, 2013.  
<http://www.ajc.com/news/plan-for-benefits-falcons-stadium-communities-moves-ahead/Q4EAiYTSDN2sRnB0fFabjP/>.
- Levermore, Roger, and Aaron Beacom, eds. *Sport and International Development*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- Fox, S., and Le Dantec, C. A. 'Community Historians: Scaffolding Community Engagement through Culture and Heritage.' *DIS '14: Proceedings of the 2014 conference on Designing interactive systems*, ACM Request Permissions (2014): 785-794.
- Le Dantec, C. A., and Fox, S. 'Strangers at the Gate: Gaining Access, Building Rapport, and Co-Constructing Community-Based Research.' *CSCW '15: Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, ACM Request Permissions (2015), 1348-1358.
- Lewin, Kurt. 'Action Research and Minority Problems.' *Journal of Social Issues* 2, no. 4 (1 November 1946): 34–46.
- Lindsey, Iain, and Alan Grattan. 'An "International Movement"? Decentring Sport-for-Development within Zambian Communities'. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 4, no. 1 (2012): 91–110.
- Moore, Mamie. Interview with Kate Diedrick. Atlanta, GA, August 22, 2015.
- McTaggart, Robin. *Participatory Action Research: International Contexts and Consequences*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

- 
- Mitchell, Tim. 'America's Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry.' *Middle East Report*, 1991, 18–36.
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Rapoport, Robert N. 'Three Dilemmas in Action Research With Special Reference to the Tavistock Experience.' *Human Relations* 23, no. 6 (1 December 1970): 499–513.
- Sam, Michael Patrick, and Jay Scherer. 'The Steering Group as Policy Advice Instrument: A Case of "Consultocracy" in Stadium Subsidy Deliberations.' *Policy Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2006): 169–81.
- Sam, Michael P, and Jay Scherer. 'Stand Up and Be Counted Numerical Storylines in a Stadium Debate.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 43, no. 1 (2008): 53–70.
- Sapotichne, Joshua. 'Rhetorical Strategy in Stadium Development Politics.' *City, Culture and Society* 3, no. 3 (2012): 169–80.
- Scherer, Jay. 'Resisting the World-Class City: Community Opposition and the Politics of a Local Arena Development.' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 33, no. 1 (2016): 39–53.
- Scherer, Jay, Jordan Koch, and Nicholas L. Holt. 'The Uses of an Inner-City Sport-for-Development Program: Dispatches From the (Real) Creative Class.' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 33, no. 3 (2016): 185–98.
- Scherer, Jay, Michael P Sam, and others. 'Public Consultation and Stadium Developments: Coercion and the Polarization of Debate.' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25, no. 4 (2008): 443–61.
- Smith, Zachary. 'Sartrean Ethics and Sport for Development and Peace Programs.' *Sport Journal*, 2014.
- Spaaij, Ramón. 'Sport as a Vehicle for Social Mobility and Regulation of Disadvantaged Urban Youth: Lessons from Rotterdam.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 44, no. 2–3 (2009): 247–64.
- . 'The Social Impact of Sport: Diversities, Complexities and Contexts.' *Sport in Society* 12, no. 9 (2009): 1109–17.
- Springer, Kimberly. *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: Contemporary African American Women's Activism*. New York: NYU Press, 1999.

---

Thornley, Andy. 'Urban Regeneration and Sports Stadia.' *European Planning Studies*

10, no. 7 (2002): 813–18.

Isoke, Zenzele. *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance*. New York:

Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.