

## Uniformization of European football stadiums (The)

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### Abstract

When the Champions League anthem resounds in a European stadium configured and formatted according to the requirements of the UEFA and modern football in general, recognizing the sports facility hosting the event is often difficult, even for the most astute observers. “English style” terraces, French velodromes, and Italian multi-purpose stadiums of the Champions League gradually gave way to grounds that are uniform in their appearance and management models, as standardization has undeniably expanded since the 1990s. It is clear that such structures have been drastically changed by compulsory security rules, management models, continental architectural references, and an economic revolution of the European space of football. In an open Europe, the circulation of models and knowledge has greatly contributed to this uniformization.

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### Article

When the Champions League anthem rings out in Benfica’s Estadio da Luz in Lisbon, or Arsenal’s Emirates Stadium in London, differentiating between the two stadiums is particularly difficult at first glance. Their architectural similarities and common staging create a sense of uniformity that prompts nostalgia on the part of some viewers who frequented the grounds of yesteryear. Hiding behind this feeling is a complex historical phenomenon that can be unpacked.

European stadiums firstly share a common reference to Antiquity, from which contemporary architects still draw. While a line of descent from amphitheaters, stadiums or circuses can be challenged, as can the relation between traditional games and contemporary sports, these constructions undeniably established forms that spread across all Hellenized, and later Romanized, spaces. However, current stadiums are especially the successors of productions that began to appear in the late nineteenth century, with the emergence and diffusion of codified sports activities, as well as national and later continental events. During the interwar period, the quest for monumentality was an obvious consideration in Europe, with fascist Italy serving as an admired model for the innovative architecture of stadiums. Finally, an Olympic model that surpassed a strictly European setting was gradually created in connection with the specific requirements of this sporting event (monumentality, track & field), and led to major references up through the end of the century (Munich, Montreal, Beijing). Despite these shared trends, a number of distinctive local features for a time created

national “stadium” identities, whether real or imagined.

The “English-style stadium,” as personified until recently by Highbury (Arsenal), structured around four independent terraces, is perhaps the best example of an architecture that became part of an identity, given the extent to which this model was diffused across all of British football. In France, velodromes were long seen as another national hallmark. In Italy, some of today’s *calcio* stadiums have barely been transformed since the fascist constructions of the 1920s. These more or less affirmed distinctive features attest to a certain European heterogeneity that can be explained by the unequal rise of national sport movements, the different popularity of various sports, the level of intervention on the part of private or public actors, and recourse to a limited group of actors (the architect Archibald Leitch for the British world, for example). This suggests that the circulation of knowledge and models was first limited to the national level, even though certain innovations occasionally crossed borders. Today, these references nevertheless seem to be disappearing, as a global transformation has begun.

During the 1980s, catastrophes resulting from violence or crowd-management problems (Bradford, Heysel, Hillsborough, Furiani) emphasized the obsolescence of such infrastructure, and drastically changed the security of all European stadiums (for instance, the elimination of standing-room tickets). These transformations were prompted by the regular publication of guides (such as Britain’s *Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds*), as well as the adoption of specific national and continental regulations. For example, the UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) established requirements for hosting its major competitions (Champions League, European Championship), which use a “top-down” approach to impose considerable modernization on the clubs, stadiums, or countries standing as candidates for these events. The Council of Europe’s convention on the safety and security of stadiums (1985) and various EU initiatives occasionally played a role, and the Bosman ruling by the European Court of Justice (1995) no doubt had an indirect influence. By establishing the free circulation of European football players within the EU, it contributed to the explosion of the transfer market, as well as the formidable rise in club budgets, thereby requiring the search for new sources of revenue. Football subsequently underwent a profound revolution, reinforced by the explosion of TV rights and the arrival of new investors.

Adaptation became indispensable in this highly competitive field. The stadium’s space is today the keystone of a business model based on income from match days (such as seats with services) as well as non-match days, for the site must operate beyond matches (conferences, concerts, tourist visits such as at Camp Nou in Barcelona). In order to have better visibility, football terraces are mostly circular in form, thereby excluding older track & field stadiums, or the cycling tracks of the past. Many structures are now multi-purpose (retractable roofs, movable terraces), with numerous internal and external spaces (offices, shopping centers, conference rooms) that sometimes give rise to new

neighborhoods on the outskirts of cities. Technical requirements (such as an anti-doping control space), the needs of media (production areas, mixed areas), crowd management (handicapped access for example), environmental impact (solar panels, LED lighting), and connected terraces (smart stadium) impose perpetual arrangements that tend toward a single model. The layout of terraces, the standardization of dugouts, naming (see the stadiums of the “Allianz” group), and the implementation of shared programs (“*Healty Stadia*”) or specific protocols (Champions League Anthem), help create a standardized visual and sensory world, one that is configured and certified by the UEFA or FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), for this phenomenon has spread beyond Europe. The South Africa (2010) and Brazil (2014) World Cups emphasized the global nature of this phenomenon.

Finally, this uniformization was made possible by the increased circulation of models, actors, and practices. The success of some, for instance Germany at the 2006 World Cup, has prompted specialists to seek inspiration beyond national borders. Some specialized architectural and engineering firms now work on a European or global scale (HOK Sports, Volkwin Marg, Herzog & De Meuron). Stadium owners, clubs, federations, leagues, and business partners also circulate knowledge and experiences. Practices ultimately became professionalized around trained and qualified stadium managers, while specialized platforms (ESSMA-European Stadium and Safety Management Association, for example), conferences, and seminars organized by the UEFA or professional leagues also facilitate “bottom up” exchange and skills transfer.

As facilities that are by their nature subject to norms—since they host sports events with a common set of rules—stadiums for a time developed distinctive features that sometimes served as powerful national markers. However, they gradually gave way to ultra-modern and uniform productions whose architectural innovations in terms of facing do not always succeed in distinguishing them.

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