

Sport, heritage, and the environmental psychology of place

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Much has been written on the psychology of sport but very few studies have focused on the psychology relating to the places where sport is played, and none have investigated people's interactions with the historic sports environment. This is what Julie Graham, Gill Chitty and I set out to do as part of an English Heritage pilot study that looked at various aspects of the history and heritage of sport in Manchester in advance of the Commonwealth Games held in the city in 2002.

Twenty years ago, three members of the University of Surrey's Department of Psychology – David Canter, Miriam Comber and David Uzzell – published a study of the environmental psychology of football grounds, concentrating on the spectator's experience of football and on the places where it was played. The study included a qualitative survey which canvassed the views of nearly 1000 supporters at 10 clubs across the UK. The survey took place before the major redevelopments at football grounds that began in the 1990s, so questions focused on physical conditions at the grounds and possible improvements, rather than history and heritage per se or concerns over loss and change. Nevertheless, the observations are still revealing and relevant today:

... people go to football matches to watch football and ... what really matters [to them] is the standard of play on the pitch, the team and how it is managed ... While this may be so, these are not the only aspects to play a role in defining the identity of the club. It is also true to say that both the intangibles, such as club history and traditions and the 'feel' of a club and the physical reality of the ground ... make a major contribution to the enduring qualities of the club.

One of the most important physical symbols of a club is the ground itself: the social history of the club is embedded in and complemented by the grounds.

In their conclusions, Canter and his fellow investigators put forward six major areas of activity which comprised a positive strategy for dealing with the then crisis in British football. One involved making the public in general and the football supporter in particular more aware of their football heritage:

The history and heritage of football is an extremely valuable asset which can be used to restore pride, create a sense of identity and belonging, enlist public support and enhance the spectator's appreciation and enjoyment of the sport.

English Heritage's Manchester pilot study sought to build on Canter's earlier work by widening the scope of enquiry to include all types of sport and exploring the synergies between sport, heritage, and place. The study, entitled *A sporting chance: extra time for England's historic sports venues*, set out to understand the significance of what sports heritage survived, what these survivals meant to people, and to use the results to help identify where sport and heritage interests could work together to enhance the value of places and improve the quality of life for communities.

The present article summarizes the results of a public views and attitudes survey and a wider consultation exercise, which together comprised the first ever piece of environmental psychology research applied to the heritage of sport.

Planning and the historic sports environment

The consultation exercise was concerned with seeking opinions about local planning issues relating to sports facilities, both old and new. It was also designed to explore with relevant sports and heritage bodies how this information could be best used in future decision-making, balancing the needs of a particular sport or facility against the wider historic importance of the ground or building and sharing ideas about policy, design, and planning implications.

Consultation was by means of in-depth interviews, each lasting one hour or longer, with thirty key policy shapers, decision makers, and opinion formers at local, regional, and national levels. The focus was on people who had direct responsibility for planning and/or the provision of sports facilities, and those who were in positions of influence over such people. The organizations the consultees worked for included the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the relevant non-departmental public bodies (Sport England, English Heritage, and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), local government organizations and authorities, regeneration and community organizations, national and local amenity societies, and university departments.

Key themes

While the sense of tradition attached to a sports facility would appear to be important for people, the degree of importance will vary, and may even be temporary, depending on circumstances. More generally, there is a feeling that options should be kept open when deciding whether to refurbish a sports facility as opposed to demolishing and rebuilding it. While heritage was seen as an issue, the determining factors were largely ones relating to community access, sports development needs, and economics. There would appear to be general acceptance of the idea of converting a sports facility for another use, especially if this could be for other sports or leisure use, as long as the special character and features of the building are retained. There would also appear to be a strong sense of

community identity and social cohesion associated with local sports facilities. If a facility is to be relocated then the general preference is to see the alternative located close to the site of the original.

There would appear to be a general presumption in favour of the needs of the players, spectators, and club over and above the need to conserve the character and appearance of a sports facility but clear recognition that more informed judgements or improved outcomes could be achieved in the future if best practice guidance, proactive planning and research, and access to expertise and bodies of literature are available.

There is overwhelming support for the maintenance of sports facilities associated with public parks and open spaces, principally because they offer inexpensive and open access for informal sport for everyone. There is concern, however, that such environments are increasingly under threat. There is universal approval for a plaque scheme to mark people and places that have a special significance in the history of English sport. There would appear to be mixed feelings about the extent to which local authorities should consider the heritage value of sports facilities when determining planning applications but clear recognition that local authorities need to be alert to the visual impact, design, and context of large, new sports facilities.

Views and attitudes towards Manchester's sports heritage

As with the consultation exercise, a largely qualitative approach was adopted for the views and attitudes survey. Face-to-face discussions, each lasting around twenty minutes, were conducted with 188 individuals at sporting and non-sporting venues in the Manchester area. An attempt was made to obtain a sample that was as socio-demographically inclusive as possible. The sample achieved a broad spread across age (18 to 65 years), gender, ethnic origin, employment status, and geographic location. In addition, 10% of individuals perceived themselves to have a disability of some form or other. The sample was representative in terms of the various sporting activities that were found in the study area. Views were also obtained from individuals with no interest in sport at all. 18% of individuals were members of conservation or heritage trusts and societies, and 63% had visited a museum or historic site in the previous twelve months. It could be argued, therefore, that these individuals had some degree of awareness of and interest in the historic environment.



Surveying public views and attitudes

Key themes

While the sense of tradition attached to established sports facilities would appear to be very important for individuals and communities alike, the degree of importance may be dependent on many factors including the type and level of sport, the level of peoples' involvement with sport, the size of the venue, and the views of the community. There would appear to be a strong sense of family and social tradition associated with sport, that is often quite independent of any building or ground that may exist. More generally, people would appear to have a healthy respect for the heritage of sport, preferring refurbishment of existing sports facilities to closure and alternative development. There does, however, appear to be a perception amongst some that older buildings mean outdated facilities and equipment.

There would appear to be a strong sense of place, community spirit, and identity associated with local sports facilities. The need for consultation with local people, players, club members, and spectators regarding individual cases of refurbishment, closure, and relocation of existing sports facilities was apparent. Factors to consider may include: situation and location, size of the club, type and level of sport, type and state of the building, length of time it has been there, and community versus non community status. There would also appear to be a strong sense of family and social tradition associated with parks, open spaces, and the countryside. Community sports facilities,

parks, open spaces, and the countryside are significant in as much as they offer inexpensive access to sport for everyone.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the significance of people's interactions with the historic sports environment. The context for the study has been Manchester, but across the UK the challenge remains the same – how to realize the value of what survives; how to appreciate what these survivals mean to people; how to make informed and appropriate choices of what to retain and how to adapt; how best to memorialize those valued things we have lost or will lose; how to mark and celebrate the tangible and intangible heritage of our sporting past. In short, it means understanding the public representation of sport through its history and heritage, through its material and non-material culture, and promoting programmes that offer a more inclusive reach in terms of community participation.

A tradition of sport is only one dimension of the historic environment but it is a keenly distinctive aspect of 'place' for spectators, supporters, and participants. Two thirds of all adults in the UK take part in one or more sporting activities and many more gain their enjoyment from watching and supporting. In Manchester alone it is claimed that its sports venues and community facilities attract twenty million participants and spectators every year. For those engaged actively, the heritage of a sports place is defined as much by the longevity and continuity of use as it is by any physical resources or buildings. In other words, the tradition of sport in a place appears to be an important element of what is valued, and this persists long after the venue itself may have gone or any historic structures have been removed by new development.

The Manchester pilot study concluded that to achieve a balanced approach to the wide range of values and benefits that flow from sports heritage means more than understanding and respecting the special historical and architectural significances of historic sports venues (although these are important). It must also include celebration of the local customs and traditions that people associate with sports places and actively promoting forward-looking strategies that are sensitive to the richness of sports history and its personalities.

Sport and heritage interests can be made to work together. Whether it is through improved integration of management and conservation action across the sports and historic environment sectors, or by finding ways to mark and celebrate the tradition of historic sports places with their communities (or ideally both), it ought, with imagination, effort, and investment, to be achievable as well as beneficial to unlock the heritage of sport.

References

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