

Cathedrals of Sport : Football Stadia in Contemporary England

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Since 1990 there has been a dramatic transformation in English Premier League stadia. As a result of the Taylor Report (1990), English stadia were rebuilt to incorporate high levels of safety (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1997). A central element in this was the requirement that spectators had to sit rather than stand during matches.

The new stadia are an impressive sight. In the North West region of England (the historic heartland of the professional game) Blackburn Rovers (see Photograph [1](#)) and Bolton Wanderers (see Photograph [2](#)) replaced their geriatric stands with ultra-modern, visually dramatic new constructions. Manchester United rebuilt three sides of Old Trafford to produce England's largest current football stadium with 67,800 seats (see Photograph [3](#)). Sunderland have built a new stadium holding around 50,000 spectators (see Photograph [4](#)). Manchester City moved from Maine Road – an old stadium blighted with poor views – to the Commonwealth Stadium (now renamed the City of Manchester Stadium) in 2003.

These new stadia are amongst the architectural wonders of the age (Parkyn, 2004). Indeed, The City of Manchester Stadium featured prominently amongst the iconic buildings catalogued in the monumental **Phaidon Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture** (2004). They also feature in a range of recent studies of sports architecture (Provoost, 2000; Sheard, 2001 and Images Publishing Group, 2003). When the organisers of Euro 2008 from Austria and Switzerland came to England to examine architectural best practice, it was to the stadia in Manchester and Bolton that they headed.

The purpose of this paper is to examine two sets of features of these new Premier League stadia. The first is the extent to which the new stadia physically embody **powerful emotions** within their construction. These **affective** aspects

simultaneously connect to the longer histories of these clubs, often at grounds elsewhere that have been abandoned but they also act as powerful forms of **control** both for the home and the visiting supporters. Indeed, they are central to the emergence of new forms of spectator behaviour within these stadia. The second, and in my judgement, related point is the connection between the new affective architecture and the absence of graffiti on these stadia. This point will be pursued through a comparison with the graffiti-covered stadia in Serie A in Italy.

The new stadia physically embody a range of powerful emotions. At Bolton Wanderers' Reebok Stadium this is illustrated by the recently constructed Memorial to the 1946 Burnden Park disaster (see Photograph [5](#)). This prefigured the 1989 Hillsborough disaster and led to the death of 33 spectators as the result of a stand collapsing during an FA Cup game between Bolton and Stoke City (Darby *et.al.*, 2005). The Memorial involves a book of remembrance with the names of all those who perished, the pages of which are turned regularly in a manner akin to similar books in churches that commemorate those who fell in the two World Wars of the twentieth century. Within the Memorial – which is situated on the side of the stadium, close to the main entrance – is an eternal flame which makes the book visible throughout the day and night. Once again this parallels similar flames in cemeteries.

Manchester United also has a memorial to the Munich Air Disaster in 1958 (see Photograph [6](#)). This involves a plaque shaped like the old stadium with a pitch marked out in grey and white. The names of the players and officials of the club who died that day are etched on the pitch. The plaque was situated on the pre-1990 stadium and was moved to a prominent position on the East Stand in the mid-1990s. Just around the corner, on the old South Stand (the only stand not to have been rebuilt during the 1990s) stands the Munich clock which simply reads 'February 6th 1958 Munich', the date of the disaster (see Photograph [7](#)). On the front of the new East Stand stands a statue to Sir Matt Busby, the

manager seriously injured at Munich who returned to manage the team to the Holy Grail of the European Cup in 1968 (see Photograph [8](#)).

The new English stadia have a series of such statues, often commemorating talismanic players of yesteryear. These include 'Dixie' Dean at Everton's Goodison Park (see Photograph [9](#)), Wilf Mannion and George Hardwick at Middlesbrough (see Photographs [10](#) and [11](#)), Stanley Matthews at Stoke City (see Photograph [12](#)), Tom Finney at Preston North End (see Photograph [13](#)), Jackie Milburn at St James's Park Newcastle and Billy Bremner at Leeds.

Statues are not just limited to famous players. At Liverpool, the main statue is of Bill Shankly – the manager who created the modern successful team – and the inscription beneath simply reads 'He made the people happy' (see Photograph [14](#)). Also at Anfield is a plaque of Bob Paisley, Shankley's former assistant, who led the club to its succession of European Cup victories in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Photograph [15](#)).

Blackburn Rovers have erected a statue to Jack Walker, their millionaire owner who funded both the new stadium and the team that won the Premier League in 1995 (see Photograph [16](#)). This was provided by funds collected by the supporters at Blackburn, not by the club itself. It features Walker with arms outstretched, wearing a Rovers' scarf with the inscription 'Rovers Greatest Supporter'. Next to the statue is a commemorative garden with a poem on a stone wall behind the shrubs (see Photograph [17](#)). This has become a sacred space for Blackburn fans. Soon after the erection of the statue, families instigated a new 'tradition' of taking one bunch of flowers from the funeral cortege of a deceased Rovers' fan and laying them in homage at the feet of Jack Walker's statue (see Photograph [18](#)). Clearly he made a powerful impact on local fans. Indeed, immediately after Blackburn's League Cup victory over Tottenham at the Millenium Stadium in 2002 Blackburn fans chorused with the song 'There's only one Jack Walker' as a tribute to their deceased owner.

Perhaps the most unusual and the most explicit statue is to be found outside Sunderland's Stadium of Light. Here is a statue to the fans themselves : a man, a woman and two children (see Photograph [19](#)). The inscription below the statue is extensive and poignant : 'All generations come together at the Stadium of Light. A love of "The Lads" has bonded together supporters for more than 125 years and will for many more years in the future. At Sunderland it is this statue to the fans that has pride of place. Supporters who have passed away have their support carried on by today's fans, just as the supporters of today will have their support continued through families and friends. We share this vision and bond as one because Sunderland AFC is For Us All' (see Photograph [20](#)).

Outside some of the new stadia are commemorative brick walkways. The one at Bolton features grey square slabs with gold inlaid lettering that feature inscriptions remembering deceased Wanderers' fans (see Photograph [21](#)). These are adjacent to rectangular red bricks with lettering in gold that list various supporters. At Old Trafford the walkway features red brick with the names of supporters in blue-grey amidst bricks with gold letters that name famous United players of yesteryear (see Photograph [22](#)). These walkways bear testimony to the importance of the respective clubs to their supporters and the need to commemorate this allegiance within the space of the stadia themselves.

At Bolton's new Reebok Stadium, a series of banners and flags from the former Burnden Park ground have been hung in the foyer of the club's museum (see Photograph [23](#)).

What is the significance of these physical features at the new stadia? They indicate that each new stadium is a sacred space. It involves the strong topophilic emotional attachment to 'home' that characterizes modern sport (Tuan, 1974; Bale, 1994 and Dunning, 1999). These stadia also act as memorials to the dead. Famous players, managers and even owners are remembered both by

statues and commemorative walkways. These are also places where ordinary fans are remembered. In a very real sense the stadium transcends mortality. In their scale and aesthetic grandeur these stadia express both past glories and future hopes.

The new Premier League stadia are sites of enormous local pride. Indeed, in towns like Blackburn, Bolton and Sunderland, the new stadia are the most important new architectural sites since 1945. They act as tourist attractions : large numbers come to eat, drink (see Photographs [24](#) and [25](#)), shop (see Photograph [26](#)) and visit museums (see Photograph [27](#)) and take tours of the stadia themselves. Many simply come to look. Opposition fans also respect and admire the new stadia, often arriving early to wander around the stadium and to shop in the club stores.

There is no graffiti on the new Premier League stadia. These compare dramatically with the municipally-owned communal stadia in Italy's Serie A (see Photographs [28](#) and [29](#)). Paradoxically some of the Italian graffiti makes use of English hooligan templates in an attempt to plug into the widespread myth about English football that continues to impregnate current Italian fan culture (see Photographs [30](#) and [31](#)). Italian stadia are covered in graffiti some of which is explicitly political (see Photograph [32](#)). This feeds upon the longstanding politicization of Italian football and Italian stadia that was a central plank of Mussolini's nation-building (Martin, 2004) in the 1920s and 1930s (see Photograph [33](#)). This is especially apparent outside the Stadio Olimpico in Rome, home to AS Roma and Lazio, where an obelisk to 'Mussolini Dux' stands at the entrance to the long avenue from the banks of the Tevere to the stadium itself (see Photograph [34](#)). This avenue has a colonnade of carved stones sized around 3 feet high, 5 feet wide and 1 foot in depth with a series of Fascist-inspired nationalist slogans (see Photographs [35](#) and [36](#)). The walkway itself has a series of explicitly warlike messages built into its construction (see Photograph [37](#)).

Even at the Renato Dall'Ara stadium in Bologna, despite the removal of Mussolini's bronze statue after the war (see Photograph [38](#)) and the local political hegemony of the Italian Communist Party, Fascist eagles remain on the main gates (see Photograph [39](#)) and within the entrance to the modernist tower (see Photograph [40](#)) where Mussolini's statue used to stand (Campisi, 2002). The politicization of Italian stadia is a powerful strand in the persistence of graffiti. Major Italian cities are also covered in such graffiti, much of it political in nature (see Photographs [41](#), [42](#) and [43](#)). Indeed, a great deal of the imagery remains tied to the intense political polarization in Italy between 1943 and 1948. The battle between left and right, particularly between Communists and neo-Fascists takes this visual form in many Italian urban settings. Graffiti in football stadia is but another expression of this pattern (see Photograph [44](#)).

English stadia remain graffiti-free. This demonstrates the power of the stadia and, in particular, their success in expressing popular emotions. The new stadia have become sacred spaces. There is little doubt that the success in combating hooliganism is more than a matter of seated stadia and CCTV. A vital element is the positive emotional affectivity generated by the physicality of the new stadia themselves.

It is in this sense that we can talk of 'Cathedrals of Sport'. The new English Premier League stadia inspire awe and express transcendent values. The intimate architectural details enshrined within these stadia simultaneously embody popular emotions and act as a powerful mechanism of control over such emotions.

Photographs

1. Aerial shot of Ewood Park, Blackburn Rovers.
2. Reebok Stadium, Bolton Wanderers.
3. Old Trafford, Manchester United.
4. The Stadium of Light, Sunderland.
5. Memorial to the Burnden Park Disaster 1946 at the Reebok Stadium, Bolton.
6. Munich Memorial, Old Trafford, Manchester United.
7. Munich Clock, Old Trafford, Manchester United.
8. Statue of Sir Matt Busby, Old Trafford, Manchester United.
9. Statue of 'Dixie' Dean, Goodison Park, Everton.
10. Statue of Wilf Mannion, Riverside Stadium, Middlesbrough.
11. Statue of George Hardwick, Riverside Stadium, Middlesbrough.
12. Statue of Sir Stanley Matthews, Britannia Stadium, Stoke City.
13. Statue of Tom Finney, Deepdale, Preston North End.
14. Statue of Bill Shankley, Anfield, Liverpool.

15. Paisley Gateway, Anfield, Liverpool.
16. Jack Walker Statue, Ewood Park, Blackburn Rovers.
17. Jack Walker Memorial Garden, Ewood Park, Blackburn Rovers.
18. Flowers at the Base of Jack Walker's Statue, Ewood Park, Blackburn Rovers.
19. Statue of Fans, The Stadium of Light, Sunderland.
20. Inscription on Statue, The Stadium of Light, Sunderland.
21. Memorial Brick Walkway, Reebok Stadium, Bolton Wanderers.
22. Memorial Brick Walkway, Old Trafford, Manchester United.
23. Old Banner, Reebok Stadium, Bolton Wanderers.
24. Lion of Vienna Bar, Reebok Stadium, Bolton Wanderers.
25. Blue Café, Ewood Park, Blackburn Rovers.
26. Inside Mega Store, Old Trafford, Manchester United.
27. Entrance to Manchester United Museum, Old Trafford.
28. Graffiti inside Bologna Stadium.
29. Graffiti inside Fiorentina Stadium.

30. Graffiti outside Fiorentina Stadium.
31. Graffiti inside Bologna Stadium 2.
32. Graffiti Bologna Stadium Seating.
33. Bologna Stadium Architecture.
34. Obelisk to Mussolini, Stadio Olimpico, Roma.
35. Walkway to Stadio Olimpico, Roma.
36. Fascist Inscription, Walkway to Stadio Olimpico, Roma.
37. Fascist Message, Walkway, Roma.
38. Mussolini Statue in Bologna Stadium during 1930s.
39. Fascist Eagle on Gate, Bologna Stadium.
40. Fascist Eagle on Tower, Bologna Stadium.
41. Graffiti, Central Rome 1.
42. Graffiti, Central Rome 2.
43. Graffiti, Central Rome 3.
44. Graffiti, Stadio Olimpico, Roma

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