

THE BIG BEAUTIFUL GAME

SPOTLIGHT

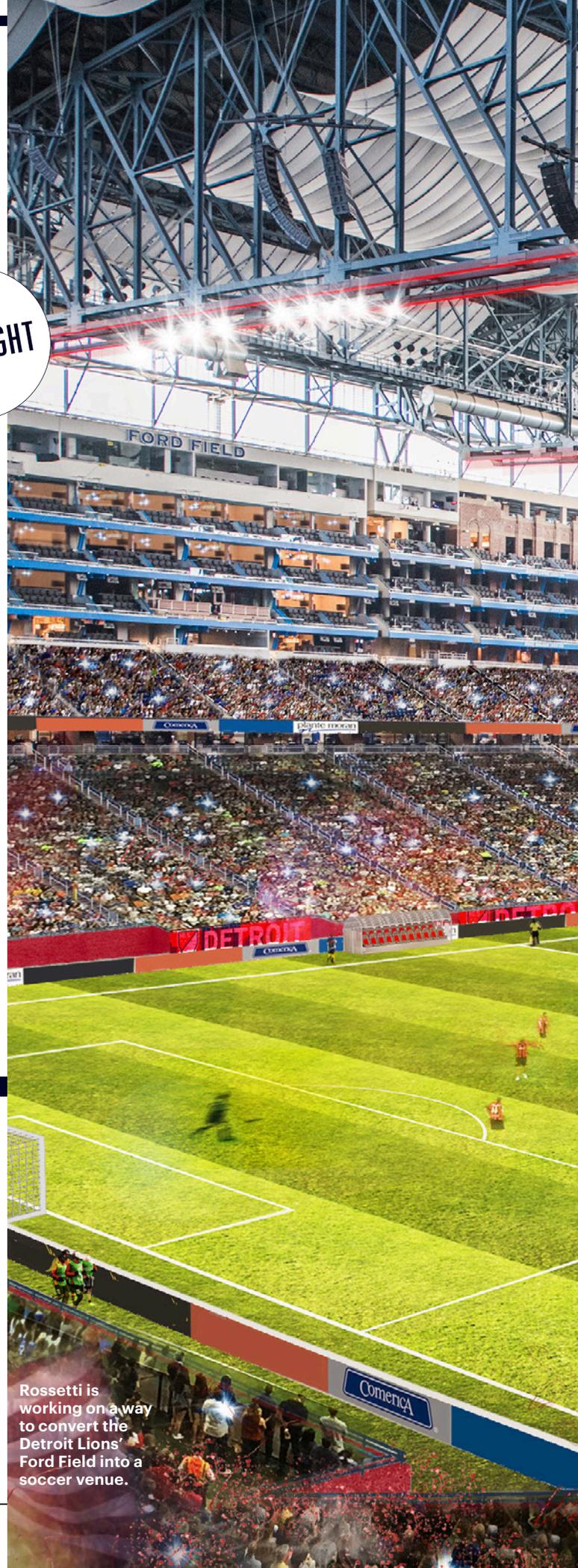
BY DON MURET

AS STADIUMS IN OTHER LEAGUES ARE SHRINKING,
MLS FRANCHISES ARE LOOKING AT ADDING SEATS

OH ATLANTA! THE huge success of Major League Soccer's Atlanta United FC at Mercedes-Benz Stadium culminated in record attendance for the 2018 MLS Cup. More than 73,000 fans packed the stadium Dec. 8 to see #ATLUTD beat the Portland Timbers and win the cup. It was the largest crowd in the league's 22-year history.

It's not an anomaly. Atlanta United recorded crowds of 70,000 for some of its bigger matches over its first two years in MLS, and it has caught the attention of U.S. pro soccer teams developing new stadiums in Austin, Cincinnati, Nashville and Sacramento, among other markets. They're all taking a closer look at whether the typical soccer-specific

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COURTESY DETROIT PISTONS

Rossetti is working on a way to convert the Detroit Lions' Ford Field into a soccer venue.



FORD FIELD

FANDUEL

Comerica



pepsi



DETROIT

DETROIT

MLS

REDEFINING 'PREMIUM SEAT' AND THE EXPERIENCE THAT GOES WITH IT

HAS THE PHRASE “premium seat” become a dated term in today’s sports economy?

As the customization of fan experience continues to expand across sports and entertainment and the lines blur for what’s considered a seat upgrade, it’s a good question to ask architects.

“Teams are spending a lot more time wanting their venue to reflect the diversity of clientele that comes to them,” said Byron Chambers, design director and principal with Populous. “I’m not even sure if premium is the right word. Instead of using it to describe a suite or a loge box, you’re seeing social spaces a big part of it as well. It’s not actually a seat. It’s an environment.”

“Social gathering space” has been the buzz phrase for about five years now and even it sounds a bit dated, but standing-room-only hangouts tied to food and drink are still working for teams. For stadiums, whether it’s an extension of a club lounge or a platform in the upper deck, architects say it’s that feeling of exclusivity that teams are increasingly looking for as they split the ticketing market across all demographics.

“Authenticity comes to mind, giving people authentic experiences,” Chambers said. “People want something of and part of the local community. The Heineken rooftop bar at Audi Field is one example. It might actually be the best view of the entire stadium. It’s not associated with a particular seat, and thinking that way is very important.”

Some are taking the next step. In their talks with MLB teams, Populous officials came up with an intriguing concept they call “one ticket, three ways.” Under that scenario, the fan’s game-day experience is split into three-inning increments, say, a prime seat for three innings, followed by a visit to the park’s microbrewery for the middle three innings and culminating with a standing-room perch over the team’s bullpen for the final three frames.

It’s something the Tampa Bay Rays have considered for their potential new stadium as they work with Populous on the project. In the leisurely sport of baseball, the concept is basically driven by people who prefer to roam the park while introducing a variety of premium seat options over the course of time, “so they can kind of see their path to a better experience,” said Gina Stingley, the architect’s marketing director for the Americas.

“We’ve tested it with a few teams,” she said. “It’s kind of like a tasting.”

The taste for getting as close to the players as possible without invading their space, typically a premium perk, is trending to the point where one Australian Football League stadium has a glass ceiling over the home team’s locker room. At GMHBA Stadium, home of the Geelong Cats in a city 75 miles southwest of Melbourne, it’s part of the

“Ultimate Fan Experience” package. The team has control over when fans can peer into the locker room, Stingley said.

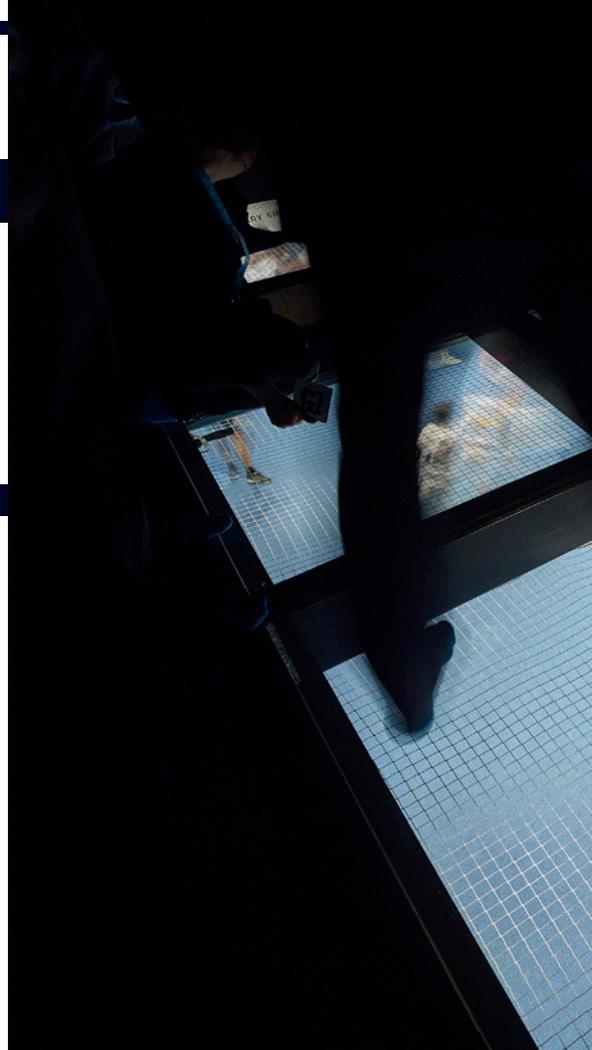
Along the same lines, big league teams could learn from NASCAR and some of the things it does, such as allowing fans to pay more to rub elbows with drivers in the garages before big races,

Rossetti principal Jim Renne said. Over the past five years, his firm has worked for International Speedway Corp. to design major renovations to tracks in Daytona Beach and Phoenix.

“We can do more with that,” he said. “We have the tunnel clubs at stadiums, but is there a way to (create) other activities around players? The drivers go into a sponsor’s hospitality space and talk. It’s hard because coaches want to keep (players) isolated and focused on the game. The unique thing about going to an event is the athletes and how can you bring that culture to the fans? We should make that piece more of a spectacle that you can’t get anywhere else.”

At college football stadiums, social spaces are popular at schools such as Kentucky, where the Keeneland Paddock, a patio deck, sits behind a section of new club seats at Kroger Field. Elsewhere, field-level suites and clubs in the end zones are trending at Washington, Mississippi State, Louisville and Texas. One sports architect doesn’t understand why athletic departments aren’t focusing on the primary real estate along the sidelines to develop new premium spaces.

“They’re electing for the easy solution in the end zones,” said Gerardo Prado, HNTB’s sports group director and vice president. “The most exclusive and best experience should be the seats closest to the action with the best vantage point. Some schools are deviating from that concept because of the fear of exploring surgical renovations and the complexity of doing it along the west sideline, where the sun is behind you and you’re in the shade for the most part. With the end zones, you’re always going to have that glare during portions of the game.” — Don Muret





As a premium perk at GMHBA Stadium in Australia, fans can look down into the home team's locker room.

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model of 20,000 seats best fits their markets.

The upstarts in Atlanta are not alone. The Seattle Sounders, another MLS team playing in an NFL stadium, averaged 40,641 at CenturyLink Field in 2018, placing second in the league behind Atlanta United's 53,002. The Sounders have consistently drawn crowds of about 40,000 since the team started MLS play in 2009, despite covering the upper deck with a tarp for most matches at the stadium.

MLS attendance was down 1 percent in 2018, the league's first drop in five years. Still, 10 of the 23 teams averaged more than 20,000 fans, including Los Angeles FC, a first-year club at Banc of California Stadium.

The uptick in MLS is one of several trends to watch in stadium development in 2019, according to sports architects. They also addressed further segmentation of the premium seat market, providing closer access to players at event level, the evolution of videoboard technology and the flexibility to convert stadiums to fit other large-scale sports events such as the Miami Open tennis tournament at Hard Rock Stadium.

In general, downsizing has been the trend for MLB and NFL facilities, both in new builds and renovations. MLS is the exception. No other league is building more new stadiums, and in a sport where most MLS teams debuted in NFL stadiums in the mid-1990s before moving to soccer-specific venues, could there be a shift back to bigger buildings?

Perhaps, depending on whom you ask among designers and builders of sports venues.

In the early days of MLS, playing matches in an 80,000-seat stadium retrofit that looked empty was discouraging, said Bill Johnson, a design principal with HOK and leader of the firm's development of Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Standing-room-only hangouts tied to food and drink are still a successful pitch for MLS teams.

In Atlanta, HOK designed a building for both the NFL and MLS with a custom half-house setup for soccer that's more than just a big black curtain hanging from the roof. It blends into the bowl seamlessly for most Atlanta United games, which draw 35,000 to 40,000. For rivals such as Orlando City SC, the upper deck stays open.

"Coming off Mercedes-Benz Stadium, a lot of people have looked at it, almost everybody in the NFL," Johnson said. "The surprise there was Atlanta United; they've almost taken it over. We're getting a lot of questions such as, 'OK, so in my existing stadium, what can I do to learn some lessons or modify some things to bring it up to this new expectation?'"

"I feel bullish on the whole soccer conversation," he said. "You're going to see existing

soccer venues start to add seats in some cases. When you start to get up to 30,000 to 40,000 seats and you can block off the upper deck, it feels good. As those lines start to cross somewhere in the middle, it's going to be more acceptable for soccer to play in NFL venues. If you're competitive, soccer is going to draw the crowds. The other thing is, it's more affordable."

The one thing that sets Atlanta and Seattle apart is the strong cultural aspect to the city and community buying into the sport's traditions, Johnson said.

"The whole 'march to the match' concept in Seattle where you have this organic grid that happens out of the bars and into the streets and into the stadium is something we talk about a lot in terms of development strategy for new buildings," he said.

In Detroit, design firm Rossetti is working with the owners of a proposed MLS team to find a solution for converting Ford Field, the 65,000-seat home of the NFL's Detroit Lions, into a soccer venue. To date, MLS Commissioner Don Garber has criticized Detroit's plan for playing soccer indoors on artificial turf. League officials prefer an open-air facility with natural grass.

"The league is not keen at all on an indoor stadium, but we propose the idea of opening the roof," Rossetti principal Jim Renne said. "It comes down to making it feel like a soccer stadium that's not fully indoors. If you look at Atlanta (and its retractable roof), what if somehow this market could do the same thing? At what point do you accommodate these venues where if you've got the market, maybe it really makes sense."

It makes sense, says Dale Koger, vice president and general manager of PCL Construction's sports group. Over his 40-plus-year career, Koger has worked on five MLS stadium projects, including Banc of California Stadium, plus a dozen NFL facilities spanning both new

builds and renovations. The Seattle and Atlanta models are the future of a league still growing in its third decade of operation, Koger said.

"When you think about MLS, it's still a relatively new league," he said. "I can see a day where you might build an NFL/MLS combination stadium and make it 50,000 seats."

For those teams in smaller cities developing soccer-specific stadiums, the tricky part is balancing a boost in capacity against the increased cost to construct bigger, more sophisticated venues. Over the past few years, the price tag for MLS stadiums has jumped from \$100 million to a high of \$400 million for Audi Field, D.C. United's new facility, which opened in July.

"I'm a big believer in scarcity," said Dan Meis, whose firm, Meis Architects, is designing a new



Above: Atlanta United FC recorded crowds of 70,000 for some of its bigger matches over its first two years in MLS, drawing the attention of others in the league.

Left: Allianz Field, the new home of Minnesota United FC, opens in April with a 3,000-seat supporter section.

stadium for FC Cincinnati, a United Soccer League club that starts play in MLS in 2019. As it stands now, Meis said, the new venue will seat 25,000 to 30,000 for a team that consistently draws those numbers at Nippert Stadium, the University of Cincinnati's football facility.

"Given that these buildings have become much more expensive than they were five to 10 years ago, we're a bit careful about that," Meis said. "Cincinnati is one of those clubs that was able to drive a huge fan base as a USL team. For them, it's hard not to want to build as big as they can, and we're pretty confident that it will follow them into the new building."

In Washington, Audi Field has 20,000 seats, but building on an urban site and upgraded premium spaces resulted in higher costs. Overall, as the MLS stadium model matures, there's been a shift to developing a greater variety of club seat and loge box products across the league, starting with Children's Mercy Park, home of Sporting KC.

Premium seats carry a higher price point, and when tied to long-term contracts, those packages give teams the ability to pay construction debt over time. Sporting KC's stadium opened in 2011 with five clubs and a field-level lounge tied to the team's supporter

groups. Banc of California Stadium features 114 loge boxes and about 2,000 club seats, plus MLS's first bunker suites.

In Los Angeles, the finishes in the club lounges at the \$350 million facility are on par with NFL stadiums, said Bill Rhoda, president of Legends Global Planning, the owner's representative for LAFC.

HNTB is studying the capacity issue and the right premium seat mix for a few MLS stadium projects. It's involved with the Sacramento Republic and the Columbus Crew.

HNTB is also a finalist for the Inter Miami FC project headed by British soccer royalty David Beckham. In South Florida, Inter Miami FC already plans to build a 25,000-seat stadium, matching the size of Orlando City Stadium, which opened in 2017.

"For select markets, higher capacity may make sense, but in discussions we've had with several potential MLS teams, they're still looking at the low to mid-20,000 range for overall seating," said Gerardo Prado, HNTB's sports group director and vice president. "What we're seeing is a higher percentage of premium seating, 14 percent to 16 percent of total seating."

He said, "If you look at some of the second-generation stadiums, they're adding more

BLUEPRINTS: U.S.

CITY	VENUE	EST. COMPLETION
ARIZONA		
TEMPE	Sun Devil Stadium	August
CALIFORNIA		
LOS ANGELES	Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum	August
FLORIDA		
NORTH PORT	CoolToday Park	March
KANSAS		
WICHITA	Minor league ballpark	March 2020
ILLINOIS		
CHICAGO	Wrigley Field	April
CHAMPAIGN	Memorial Stadium	TBD
IOWA		
IOWA CITY	Kinnick Stadium	August
MINNESOTA		
ST. PAUL	Allianz Field	April
NEVADA		
LAS VEGAS	Las Vegas Raiders stadium	July 2020
SUMMERLIN	Las Vegas Aviators ballpark	Spring
TENNESSEE		
NASHVILLE	Nashville Fairgrounds Stadium	2021

clubs and loges to carve out additional revenue without a significant construction cost. Fans get engaged with the action in club seats with a better product to market [over suites]. Sacramento is asking us to review things in terms of the overall premium strategy and Miami as well."

For sports architects, the focus is on the MLS general admission customer as well,

HOK: POPULOUS

EST. COST	OWNER	ARCHITECT	BUILDER	NOTES
\$307 million	Arizona State University	Gould Evans, HNTB	Hunt/Sundt JV	The current work is the third phase of a long-term renovation plan for the facility with a total price tag of \$307 million.
\$300 million	University of Southern California	DLR Group	AECOM Hunt / HathawayDinwiddie	The project's focal point is a new suite and press deck on the south side of the stadium, which will add multiple founder's suites, premium suites, loge boxes, club seats, press box and a new concourse.
\$125 million	Sarasota County	Fawley Bryant Architecture	Tandem Construction	The Atlanta Braves' new spring training home will have 7,000 seats and capacity for 8,500. The ballpark will open for one game in March and become the team's full-time spring home in 2020.
\$75 million	City	DLR Group, SJCF	JE Dunn, Eby Construction	New downtown Triple-A ballpark will have a capacity of 10,000 and include a variety of seating options. An outfield entry will feature an entertainment district and hall of fame highlighting the history of baseball in the city.
\$760 million total; \$140 million for current phase	Tom Ricketts	Populous	Pepper Construction	The ballpark will undergo facade and concourse improvements while satisfying requirements of the Chicago Landmarks Commission and National Park Service as part of long-term renovations.
\$130 million	University of Illinois	HNTB	Turner Construction / Clayco	A new 10,000-seat south end zone addition and renovations to the east sideline of Memorial Stadium will be done after the addition of a new football performance center.
\$89 million	University of Iowa	Neumann Monson Architects, HNTB	JE Dunn Construction	The project consists of a complete tear-down and rebuild of the north end zone with a new four-level structure. Indoor club space and concourse amenities will be completed for the 2019 season.
\$250 million	Minnesota United FC	Populous	Mortenson Construction	The new stadium exterior will consist of a translucent tensile mesh fabric that will glow while functioning as a crowd noise amplifier and weather-shielding structure.
\$1.8 billion	Las Vegas Stadium Authority	HNTB, Manica Architecture	Mortenson / McCarthy JV	The new 62,500-seat stadium will host NFL games for the Raiders, World Cup and FIFA-sanctioned soccer matches, UNLV football games, concerts, music festivals, shows and other community events.
\$150 million	Howard Hughes Corp.	HOK	Hunt Construction, Penta Building Group	The 10,000-seat stadium will provide a wide range of seating options, including 22 suites, club seats, berm seating and party zones, and will be designed to complement a master planned community.
\$275 million	Metro Sports Authority	Populous	Mortenson / MesserConstruction Co.	The new MLS stadium will feature 20,500 seats.

specifically the supporter sections behind the goals where the team's most fervent fans congregate. Those spaces are expanding to more than 3,250, which is the case of Banc of California Stadium. Allianz Field, Minnesota United FC's new stadium, will open in March with 3,000 supporter spaces.

"That's the heartbeat of the pitch," Prado

said. "Those are the people who elevate the energy level, are always going to be chanting and if they're not excited and into the game, nobody else really will be. We pay close attention to how we can keep improving the experience for the supporters with their own concourse and club that they can transform into their own space."

In today's digital age, where fans can stream more live sports on their mobile devices than ever before, apart from the stadium experience, it's critical to get those numbers right, Johnson said.

"The buildings can only do so much, and then it comes down to the teams and owners to adapt to the changing market," he said. ▣