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The Past Informing the Future: The Next Generation of Sport Venues

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Earl Santee is a senior principal, global chair, and founder at Populous, the leading architectural and design firm in the sport facility sector. Santee's career has spanned nearly 40 years and has included highly impactful projects including, Wrigley Field renovation (1989–1991), Coors Field (1995), PNC Park (2001), Nationals Park (2008), Yankee Stadium, (2009), McLane Stadium (2014), Kyle Field renovation/expansion (2015), and Truist Park (2017). Earl is touted for his skills in both urban design and architecture, and his designs evoke a new type of sport experience that connects with the city, community, and culture. Earl has been recognized in the *Sports Business Journal's* 2019 Class of the Champions: Pioneers & Innovators in Sports Business, in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* as the 2010 Sportsman of the Year, and by the *Kansas City Star* as a Top 25 Most Influential Sports Figures in Kansas City for 2002.

Rachel: Describe how some of the breakthrough projects of the 1960s or 1970s influenced and changed stadium designs like the Truman Sports Complex (Arrowhead and Kauffman Stadiums in KC) that included one of the Populous founders, Rob Labinski.

Earl: For us [Populous], I am going to give you some context. How we look at stadiums in the states is through different eras of sports stadiums. In the United States, the first era that is still around is that we have the buildings that were built from the 1920s to the 50s. Most of them were single-purpose buildings, designed for one sport. As we got past the 50s, 60s, and 70s, we saw what we call the second era of modern sport venues—most of which were publicly financed, so they had to be really efficient in how they utilized the buildings. Multi-purpose would have meant they played football and baseball in the same building. In the 60s and 70s, at the same time, we saw the advent of a couple. The single-purpose buildings that still survived and have been thriving recently, which include the likes of Dodger Stadium and Kaufman Stadium, although I've always called it Royals Stadium for whatever reason.

What we found and saw was the contrast between the multi-purpose stadiums and those single-purpose buildings. If there's a breakthrough to be identified, that was what people wanted in single-purpose buildings going forward. That was true with Kauffman and Arrowhead, as well. Our practice started in

1983, so we are celebrating 40 years, and early on many of our clients would say, “Well, we want Kauffman Stadium. We don’t want a multi-purpose stadium.” There was a proliferation of new stadium design work that was generated or leveraged from the experiences people had in those single-purpose buildings. There is this really unique difference between baseball and football that needed to be reflected in the stadium designs.

Rachel: How do you view the development of the first venue featuring luxury suites in the NFL with Joe Robbie Stadium (1987) or the NBA’s Palace at Auburn Hills (1988) in impacting the venue construction boom of the 1990s and early 2000s?

Earl: The first building with suites that was a multi-purpose stadium that housed both baseball and football was the Astrodome—that was in the 60s, so it preceded both Joe Robbie and The Palace of Auburn Hills. I think what you saw, then, was this shift in how people wanted to have different experiences. To go back to my earlier comments, in the 60s and 70s, when you went to a sporting event, you had basically one or two experiences, either sitting in the lower deck or the upper deck.

In this time in our history (the 80s and 90s), we provided what I would call more of a premium experience that people would pay for. Now, unfortunately, a lot of suites were built because they were tax write-offs for corporations. Once those went away, the suites we still have in our buildings carry an emphasis of less is more. It’s more personal. The impact on design and construction is trying to find a location where you could get really great value from the suites from a user standpoint where they would appreciate that.

It is also interesting to note that both Joe Robbie and The Palace of Auburn Hills were privately funded buildings.

Rachel: With globalization of the sporting world increasing, how do you see the design and features of some of the new stadia outside the U.S. impacting future trends in both design and use?

Earl: It is really interesting. I’m on my 39th year here, so you can really see it happening. I would say that, historically, up until the last 10 years, that the U.S. and the domestic sports world was probably 10 years in advance of the global sports world from a design standpoint. Now, what has happened over the last decade is that all of those buildings are hard to tell whether they were designed in the U.S. or another region of the world. All of the elements you would see and all the design processes that we use are relatively consistent and, at the same time, authentic to those locations. These designs fit in within a city, and they connect to the city itself. If you look at a building we did at Tottenham for a Premier Soccer League team—Tottenham Hotspur—and then you compare that building with the new Buffalo Bills building, you can see the elements that make them unique to their locations.

Quite a bit of what we’ve done here in the states has been transforming how sporting venues across the globe are perceived, so the focus these days is really city building and community building. We try to make these buildings fit well within their community. We are designing so much more than the building,

so the overall approach involves the brand of the community and the team. The brand of the fan base is also really important.

Clearly, the streaming of events and the use of social media all have influence on who we're marketing to and how we market to them. At the end of the day, though, everyone still wants a unique and personal live experience. They want to be present, and they want to have those currencies they can put in the memory bank and to say that they were there. That is really hard to replicate in a non-live experience, but that is just the way it is with streaming and social media. Fortunately, for us, it doesn't matter what demographic you are or what generation you are—the live experience is never the same for everyone. Our job is trying to find what makes the live experience unique in every way.

Rachel: In the Sports Business Journal, you talk about the concept of representing the community in the stadium's designs. Do you have the opportunity to spend time in those communities before construction, and if so, how much time do you usually spend?

Earl: A long time, for sure. Part of it is that it's not a generic building. Think about this as being your home and say I'm designing a home for your parents. I wouldn't design your home for your parents without talking to them and getting to know them first. I wouldn't design it without understanding how they live and work and play. That's our way of designing these buildings in these communities—you have to understand what's going to motivate people. That's really a key part is what is going to motivate people to come in. In a lot of ways, there's this sense of pride, but also of ownership. The brand of the team or the brand of the community—the only way to really grasp that is to be there to experience it and to see it for yourself. I call it sharing this mutual understanding of what is memorable for them, and that's really important. There is nothing like sharing life experiences with people.

Rachel: How have you seen efforts and initiatives in environmental sustainability influencing stadiums in the recent past, and where might you see impacts in future stadiums?

Earl: I think we are just starting to see it in the last 5 years. We've had quite a few buildings that are LEED certified buildings, but I think the main idea we're pushing is turning to neutralized carbon usage within the buildings—trying to be net zero on use of fossil fuels and focusing on how we deal with waste or plastic pollution. That stuff has always been there from a sustainability standpoint, but I think now the messaging behind it is really important. We, as a global practice just last year, identified someone to work on this specifically within our entire company. We are organized into three regions: America's practice, which is here, the Europe/Middle East/Africa (EMEA), and the Asia-Pacific (APAC). Those three practices and the governments that they work with are all uniquely different. So, for our recently announced global director of sustainability, his job is to take the best practices from all three regions and try to find ways to push this forward.

The thing about sustainability is that, before, it was just like a checklist. Now, it's so much more and it's part of our lives. That impacts how we operate the buildings we create. We opened up Climate Pledge Arena in Seattle around 2020–2021, and it's considered the most sustainable arena in the world.

It's clearly pushing the idea of net carbon, it's pushing the idea of no waste, no plastics, and no fossil fuels.

For us, it's becoming the epitome of what we would desire to be in the future. Frankly, we still have some education to do with our clients because some believe it costs more, but if you coordinate and organize the operating costs with the initial costs to implement some of these strategies, they tend to be pretty much a wash. We are pushing forward, and trying to be the future thinkers about how we make these buildings more sustainable, which is an ongoing process. As architects, our job is to be conscious of what the public wants, and we have to be mindful of how our buildings could impact not only the experience but also the energy use within the community.

Rachel: How have you seen the design process change in relation to factors such as fan experience, player experience, and revenue generation needs within stadiums?

Earl: Typically for us, when we start a project, we do data collection on both demographics and psychographic analysis to find out more about why people do what they do. Where they spend their money, the types of people they want to associate with, what their income looks like, if they're married with kids or single, these are all things we try to figure out. Then we're looking at potentially 25 different user types within a building. We do this early on. We call it market study, and it's usually provided by an outside firm. The idea is that if we identify and understand the motivations, then we can also understand what kind of experiences they want. We can also understand if they want more than one experience.

We can map someone's experience—from the point they leave their car to when they come into the community where the facility is located and to what they do afterwards. We can use that data for a lot of that design process. The data mining can include things like how long someone stays at a restaurant before they go to a ballpark or performance information to support the potential financing of the building. This also supports what the revenue streams would look like. The McLane Stadium project at Baylor that I worked on provides an example of this concept. What we did there was actually spend lots of time in Waco and we tried to connect the McLane experience to downtown Waco. We did something called the zone of influence map, based on a half-mile walk or so to the stadium. Within a half-mile of the stadium, we wanted people on game day to experience some part of the city and what it means to you economically. It goes beyond just how these buildings impact the university or the sports team, and it delves into how it impacts its communities to show a positive economic impact to these communities. When planned this way, these projects, we believe, are pretty successful.

Rachel: Do you believe we are approaching the next building boom for stadiums and arenas? If so, what might be different in the coming boom compared to the past? If not, what do you believe is constraining the next building boom?

Earl: Some people say that the pandemic had a really negative impact on our projects. However, I would say that most of our projects were delayed, but they never stopped. I'm going to prelude by saying that I've been here 39 years, and this is the most robust design and construction period in our history right now. I would say that's globally, too, as there are countries that are trying to find a way to promote sport.

Beyond the politics of it, they're promoting sport in a way that brings people together and unites people, especially in the Middle East right now. There is a clearly defined evolution of American sport, and it may not necessarily be what's on the field or play, but in everything else. Communities and teams have realized the value of their brand and how they would both monetize it and expand it.

As a practice, we've grown. This year, I think we've grown 30% alone, and we're always a year or two ahead of the construction industry. The construction industry is going to try to manifest its workforce to do this work, because it's going to have to, and it's going to be a lot. Look at the collegiate side of things, with NIL we certainly see it. People thought NIL would slow down the construction of collegiate venues, but it's done just the opposite. There are probably four or five new football projects being discussed each year. Collegiate sport is about 30% of our business right now, where 10 years ago it was about 10%—that's how much it's changed. We have a lot more sources that are causing these developments to happen, and it's somewhat perceptual, but it is the reality that there is money to be made. As an example, the Atlanta Braves make more money from the development they do than from the ballpark itself.

Rachel: How has the design and construction process for stadiums and arenas become more specialized, and how has that contributed to the formation and success of Populous?

Earl: I'll use an example—we started our practice purely in sports architecture and, as time went on, people would say that we needed to start doing this other stuff. We've transitioned into more of a design practice and consultancy practice, so we have architects, but also brand activation people who do design work. We have urban planners, urban designers, and landscape architects. We have interior designers and hospitality designers. What's happened is that we're moving into this broader design world, which is symbolic of the shift that we see in the experience planning elements that we do for our clients.

We will always be a specialized practice in this way—we do sports, but we also do convention centers, public assembly facilities, and we've been doing live events for 40 years. We do the Super Bowls and World Cups and all the Pro Bowls, All Star Games—all that. We try to be strong with how we apply our brand to new projects and try not to do a lot of general architecture. But we also try to inform people that we're going to be the best and what we do, what we focus on, we can only get better. We're not trying to be everything for everybody. Specialization has allowed us to be a premium brand in our marketplace, and it allows us to deliver the kind of experiences that we hope our clients, fans and communities enjoy.

Rachel: What do you see or anticipate in the future of sport stadium and arena design that most interests or excites you?

Earl: The hot topic for us is AI. As architects, our job is to provide venues that impact the community and the state. We're supposed to take care of the well-being and the safety of people that attend our buildings, to the extent that we have to seal the drawings with our licenses. What's happened with AI is that we're evaluating it, and we created a global practice of digital technology to figure out how to apply certain things. Right now, we're in that evaluation stage with AI, but at some point, it will be a part of our

design process. What will that mean? More than likely, it will mean that we'll be able to do design work faster—a lot faster—and I do think that'll be the key shift.

The biggest paradigm shift that we have to work on is the construction side. It's hard to make AI build stuff. What it could do is fabrication, but we haven't found this is always the point we could do. We could do everything in AI, but we don't have the other side—the build side—equally capable of using the designs that we produce. I do think the fabrication side and the construction side is really where it needs to push forward because with this robust economy, from a construction standpoint, we are clearly seeing a need for AI labor in our projects, and it's caused our projects to take longer to build than they used to.

Going forward, we will, and we are looking at how AI influences our design process. We are going to try to see how we can have that influence and how we look at fabricating some elements of the building, so it allows us to not only design the buildings quicker but build them quicker. I'd say that's a 5- to 10-year process. Once people realize the efficiencies behind it, it will change our world completely.

Rachel: To wrap up, I wanted to know if you had a favorite or most memorable project over the years, or anything else you would like to add to the conversation.

Earl: One of the things I've enjoyed most about my career is spending time in the city and learning and meeting the people there. It's funny because I live in Kansas City, but I've really enjoyed these other cities. Sometimes I'm almost jealous of these other cities, you know? What I cherish most, and I'll say it that way, is the relationships of the clients. The ones we've had great relationships with, we've produced our best work. Whether that be Target Field in Minneapolis, or PNC Park in Pittsburgh, or McLane Stadium in Waco.

It's those experiences that you remember. I remember walking across the bridge on opening day at Baylor and taking Drayton McLane and his family on a pontoon boat up and down the Brazos River. The things you remember about a place are the people you're with. It's the shared moments of that that's still valuable, and that's how I look at it. To be brutally honest, I've forgotten dozens of projects I did in my first ten years because contact with those people isn't what it used to be. In the end, I cherish most the people in the places I get to see and work in.