Conserving History in Sport

What was once a cauldron of a sporting arena in North London, and housed some of the all-time sporting greats, like Thierry Henry and Dennis Bergkamp, has now been converted into a property development after Arsenal Football Club decided to build a new stadium. The electric atmosphere was a prerequisite of one of the most loved stadiums in the country, when all “38,419” fans were packed like sardines into the stadium. In late 1999, the club took the decision to build a new stadium which was a finished project by mid 2006. The decision created animosity amongst the fanbase. Many were not keen on the idea of abandoning the historic stadium, and moving in a more corporate direction. However, the scent of the old stadium carries over to the modern day colosseum which stands just a mile away from its predecessor. The stadium embodies a more modern architectural style but the sea of red seats are spread across one of the most iconic arenas in sport.

The history of the stadium has still been preserved despite the redevelopment of the site, and is in many ways still a staple of the area, with multiple plaques and building parts still in place and erected around the area. As can be seen when walking around the perimeter of the stadium, the entrances and design of the old stadium remain in tact for the flats and is a

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cornerstone of the novelty of the property. This is particularly clear for the old entrance for the East Stand, located on Avenell Road, which retains its authenticity from the days gone by. The paint work remains, which reads “East Stand” and “Arsenal Stadium”, and is a vital part of retaining the history of not only Arsenal Football Club, but also the area of Highbury and preserving history.

What was the main entrance to the stadium, where the majority of fans would congregate before games, is now the reception of the site which retains the authenticity of the old stadium. The history of these famous marble halls, which are now part of the property redevelopment, influenced a recent kit design for the club, showing the connection of history. The video for the kit announcement, shows the connection of new and old and the legacy from the old stadium being brought to the modern day.

A very discreet way of displaying the history of the past is also done with old signs for which way to go for where your seats were located in the stadium. These signs being scattered across the stadium, not only think back to the old days, but also add some context to the history of the arena, rather than just displaying simple signs like ‘Highbury was here’.

As well as this, the history of the old stadium is being commemorated with signs around the site of the property, which show where you are standing in relation to the geography of the

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old stadium. These little pieces further memorialise the past history of the site and it is these small fragments that preserve the history of a stadium that stood in that location for nearly a century, in such an effective way.

This video shows the history of the stadium still being preserved in the residential neighborhood despite the building reconstruction. It really stands out from the rest of what is a residential street, and yet again serves to retrieve memories for people who used to go there religiously on matchdays, to the famous ‘West Stand’ of the stadium.\(^7\)

Whilst it has been duly noted that the history of the old stadium has been preserved on the site it once stood, it should also be said that some of the history of Arsenal’s old stadium has moved up the road, along with the fans and the team. The famous clock\(^8\) that was an emblem of the old stadium and is something that the fans of the team identify with, has been moved to the new stadium and is an example of the history being retained. In addition, the new stadium also includes the “Highbury Suite” which “is a bright, spacious and versatile area suitable for a range of functions”, yet again maintaining the history of the club.\(^9\)

Additionally, legends of a bygone era for younger fans today are celebrated around the perimeter of the new stadium with statues of club legends. There are statues of one of the club’s

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greatest ever coaches, Herbert Chapman, as well as the club’s greatest ever goal scorer, Thierry Henry. Chapman was considered to be an integral part of Arsenal’s history, which is why he is still a much talked about member of the history of Arsenal Football Club. A particularly poignant way to memorialise the past of the club is shown through what is called the “Highbury Shrine” which was “erected in November 2009” and “features a team line-up that includes every Arsenal player and manager to have graced the Highbury turf between 1913 and 2006”. This type of memorial ensures the legacies of the heroes of the past are a mainstay, and they will continue to be immortalised forever.

The history of some of the clubs greatest ever players is memorialised with what is called “Heroes Together”, which celebrates 32 of the most iconic and legendary players in the club’s history. These 32 players are connected across the outer walls of the stadium. Along with the shrine, by paying homage to the greatest ever players in the club’s history, it shows an effort from the club to not forget any of the players from previous generations and the current day, and evokes memories from the old stadium that continue to foster the history of the club.

The memory of monuments, and how they are memorialised is something that can prove to be critical and even destructive in terms of the end result. This shapes whether something

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comes to be memorable or just a small fragment of a prolonged history of any person or entity in human history. What this particular club has done is, what I would consider, a successful and effective depiction of their history and cultivating it in such a way that future generations carry the torch in telling the story of their football club and that their history is never forgotten.