

# Lost in Hockeytown

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Joe Louis Arena (JLA, or simply “The Joe”) is hallowed ground in Hockeytown. Since relocating from Olympia Stadium in 1979 to this downtown riverfront arena, the Detroit Red Wings emerged from the lamented “Dead Wings” era, reaching the postseason each of the last twenty-two seasons (the longest such streak for any franchise in major American sports) and winning four Stanley Cups.

The arena itself, home to one of the most robust and energetic fan bases in all of hockey, deserves some credit for the Red Wings’ success. The widely acknowledged elasticity of Joe’s wood-backed boards—a unique feature among all other NHL venues—gives the Wings a distinct home ice advantage. It’s not surprising that the Wings hold the NHL record (set during the 2011–2012 season) for the longest home winning streak (twenty-three games).

For the last thirty-five years, the Joe has been a great venue to watch a hockey game, but its days are numbered.

On February 4, 2014, the Detroit City Council approved a deal that would transfer roughly forty-five blocks of land in the Lower Cass Corridor neighborhood to the Detroit

Development Authority. This entity will lease the land to Olympia Entertainment (at no cost), enabling the construction of a \$450 million arena with assurances of \$200 million in additional funds towards spin-off real estate developments in the district. Over half of construction costs are expected to come from public sources.

At the time of writing, Olympia Entertainment's plans for the new arena district are vague. But the project has captured the attention of local media, sparking public discussions about local hiring requirements and the potential gentrification of the Lower Cass Corridor.

But surprisingly little attention has been paid to Joe Louis Arena and its fate.

According to some reports, the state will foot the bill to demolish the Joe shortly after the new arena opens, but no firm guarantees exist. (It took the city eight years to demolish Olympia after the Wings relocated to the Joe).

A proper evaluation of JLA's successes and failures is necessary to inform the design and construction of a new facility and determine the fate of the riverfront site that the Joe currently occupies.

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From prehistoric times when Native Americans settled in Southeast Michigan to the present day, one of Detroit's defining features and most valuable assets has been its riverfront.

During Detroit's industrial heyday, the western portion of the riverfront currently occupied by JLA and Cobo Center was heavily utilized as a transshipment point where raw materials were conveyed from lake freighters to railroad cars.

By midcentury, the west riverfront was seen by city planners as an area with great potential for redevelopment. The zeitgeist in major American cities was to restructure downtowns into regional entertainment destinations in order to combat the exodus of residents and tax base to rapidly developing suburbs. Detroit was no different.

In 1947, the Detroit Chapter of the American Institute of Architects contracted the firm Saarinen & Associates to develop a plan for a new civic center in downtown's west riverfront district. Most elements of this plan were largely incorporated into the city's 1951 Master Plan, which called for a widened Jefferson Avenue, a county-city municipal building (the Coleman A. Young Municipal Building), a "large landscaped plaza" on the riverfront (Hart Plaza), "a convention hall and a civic auditorium" (Cobo Hall and Cobo Arena), and a "downtown expressway loop" (the John C. Lodge Expressway) that passes underneath the convention center and connects with Jefferson Avenue. The near west riverfront of today looks remarkably like the conceptual drawings of the 1951 plan.

This period of massive scale downtown redevelopment coincided with the early stages of Detroit's long-term population decline. By 1960, when Cobo Center was completed, the city had 180,000 fewer residents than in 1950, experiencing its first loss of population since its founding. Many of these residents, however, had not left the metro area and still used downtown as an occasional playground.

The 1973 Master Plan continued the course set by the 1951 plan, prescribing further redevelopment of downtown into an entertainment destination. Special attention was given to the riverfront:

The plan is designed to assist the city in making maximum use of its riverfront resource and to capture more fully the potential of the Detroit River as Detroit's most outstanding natural resource. A major objective of the city is to encourage and facilitate the development of the riverfront by *uses which derive a particular benefit from a riverfront location*. [emphasis added]

The plan is also the first document to suggest the development of a sports stadium near the civic center:

Special commercial-residential areas are indicated just east of and west of the Civic Center . . . These areas should be developed with a major office headquarters complex, an international gateway, or *a major spectator sport facility of regional significance and supporting uses such as hotels, restaurants, major institutions, medium-rise offices, and apartments*. [emphasis added]

It is clear from these excerpts that planners expected the arena to have a harmonious relationship with its riverfront location and generate economic spillover for the rest of downtown.

By 1977, Mayor Coleman A. Young's administration was set on developing a new downtown arena for the Red Wings to retain them in the city. The Wings were playing in an aging Olympia Stadium, located on Grand River Avenue at McGraw, about three miles outside of downtown, and, according to Young, were threatening to move to the suburbs if the city did not build the team a new facility.

Young's administration identified a site along the west riverfront adjacent to Cobo Center that was occupied by underutilized warehouses, railroad yards, and docks. These impediments were demolished to make way for JLA, the final piece required to realize the vision for Detroit's downtown civic center set forth in its past two master plans.

Joe Louis Arena opened in 1979, and the Red Wings signed a thirty-year lease to make the Joe their home. Olympia Stadium was abandoned and eventually razed. Named for legendary Detroit boxer Joe Louis, the "Brown Bomber," JLA is one of only three current NHL venues not named for a corporate sponsor.

Joe Louis Arena is emblematic of the type of urban redevelopment project favored by the administration of Coleman A. Young: massive, modern, and expensive (see also: Renaissance Center, Millender Center, Riverfront Towers, Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant, People Mover). It also was a major investment in downtown development, perhaps at the expense of neighborhood stabilization and core service provision.

As a way to showcase Detroit's downtown transformation on a national stage, Mayor Coleman A. Young, a lifelong Democrat, succeeded in attracting the 1980 Republican National Convention, where Ronald Reagan, a man Young once referred to as "Pruneface," accepted the GOP's nomination inside of Joe Louis Arena.

In his autobiography *Hard Stuff*, Young writes:

Although Detroit was and is an overwhelmingly Democratic city, and although I have traditionally been at cross-purposes with the prevailing ideology of the Republicans, as a champion of the United States Constitution and the spirit of bipartisan cooperation, I fully supported their right to assemble and spend lots of

money in our hotels, shops, and restaurants. I also appreciated what the national exposure could do for the city's image, which was still characterized by the '67 riot and out-of-date murder charts. And I was thrilled to see Joe Louis Arena enjoy such a conspicuous and honorable christening. At the same time, the convention was an event that I find difficult to index historically. To this day, it sticks in my craw that Ronald Reagan was nominated in the damn building that I put myself on the line for.

The choice of JLA as the site of Reagan's nomination acceptance speech was oddly fitting. Though Detroit was the largest majority African American city in the United States and had not elected a Republican mayor in decades, the Wings' fan base was and is dominated by suburban whites. Many of the people who packed the Joe on game days would come to be known as "Reagan Democrats" for their role in helping the Gipper win the White House. The 1980 GOP convention was appropriate symbolism, for it soon became evident that the Joe was designed for Detroit's visitors, not its residents.

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Some have argued that Detroit has lacked effective planning over the last half century—that the city has failed to get things done. The large-scale redevelopment of downtown and the near-west riverfront, however, has been immense in scale and anything but ineffective. The planners succeeded in setting out a vision that would take shape in glass, concrete, and steel. Whether the effects of this thorough implementation have been good,

whether, the '73 Master Plan made “maximum use of its riverfront resource,” is another question entirely.

After the 1980 GOP convention, Joe Louis Arena would be used primarily as a venue for hockey and other large-scale entertainment spectacles like concerts and wrestling matches. The Red Wings play forty-one home games in a given season and a handful more in the event of a playoff run. Approximately twenty-five other sporting and entertainment events are held at the Joe throughout the year. Despite these uses, there are hundreds of days each year during which the arena sits idle.

Many variables determine an arena's true worth. The Joe's interior adequately provides everything necessary to enjoy a game or show, though it lacks many of the amenities and design features found in newer stadiums (e.g. LED screens and “gourmet” restaurants).

A sports venue's value to society, however, goes beyond a slick interior, ticket sales, and a winning franchise. We must also consider an arena's potential to enhance the liveliness of the city beyond its walls. Sadly, JLA's exterior is an unqualified disaster. It has glaring aesthetic shortcomings and lacks synergy with the rest of Detroit's central business district.

A basic concern of every fan attending a sporting event is arriving at his or her seat easily and on time. In the Joe's case, this process is needlessly troublesome.

The authors have experienced this difficulty firsthand. At one point, living about a mile from the Joe, it seemed silly for us to drive to games. Unfortunately for us, walking and cycling clearly were not primary concerns for JLA's designers. There is no obvious pedestrian route from anywhere in Detroit. Way-finding signage is all but nonexistent. The only hope for a first-time attendee is following the throngs of more seasoned fans who have learned the idiosyncrasies of approaching the Joe on foot. Coming from downtown, fans can make their way circuitously around Cobo or head away from the Joe several blocks south to the Riverfront or north to Howard Street and cross the Lodge freeway. A rarely used alternative is through the Jefferson/Lodge tunnel, which has a narrow sidewalk that stinks of exhaust and feels hazardous as traffic zooms by.

Pedestrian helplessness is the result of an infrastructure that itself seems to be confused; the modes of transit surrounding the Joe are poorly integrated. A skein of vertical silos and horizontal concrete tubes litter the landscape. The Jefferson/Lodge freeway creates a moat-like impasse directly in front of the Joe's entrance. The path is made less certain by the constant intrusion of walls, fences, bollards, and gratings.

Traversing any route by foot involves navigating a dystopian, gray-washed hardscape where the actual earth is entombed below several feet of concrete. Peeling paint and cracked concrete add to the sense of chaos. On days when the Joe doesn't host an event, a sense of disquiet and abandonment pervades the district not dissimilar to the depopulated “Zone” in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*.

Veteran fans and clever businesses have developed their own methods to cope with the Joe's lack of pedestrian access. Of course, a fan can pay fifteen dollars on top of his ticket and park in the nearby structure owned by the city and operated by Olympia Entertainment. One of the rare occasions the People Mover reaches capacity is before and after a Wings game, when patrons park in paid lots along Broadway or some other street with easy access to a stop.



Some choose an ad hoc transportation service provided by a bar or restaurant. Nemo's, a classic Detroit sports bar, offers free parking and round-trip shuttle service to the arena for a small fee. Nemo's is indeed within "walking distance" from the Joe, but no simple route exists—it's simpler and safer to board a bus.

In addition to being the hub of an impractical infrastructure, the Joe is also the locus of an uninspiring west riverfront district. Unlike the handsome barn-style brick structure of JLA's predecessor Olympia Stadium, the Joe is nothing more than a big white box in a sea of concrete. It resembles an industrial warehouse more than a sports venue, making for pitiful aerial footage during TV broadcasts. The monotony is striking.

The building's designers' indifference to aesthetics extends to its riverfront location. The Joe's bland presence cuts off views of Detroit's defining natural feature. Newer arenas such as Consol Energy Center in Pittsburgh incorporate glass atriums in their designs to make the most of their surroundings. JLA's architects, the Smith Group,

did not heed the clear advice of the drafters of Detroit's '73 Master Plan to "[make] maximum use of the riverfront resource."

Despite its aesthetic and infrastructural shortcomings, JLA makes the city money. 10 percent of all spending at the Joe goes into city coffers. According to an article in *Crain's Detroit Business* published in August 2011, Detroit "collected \$2.1 million from its share of concessions, suite leases and ticket surcharges, the rental fee and another \$1.4 million from parking fees." This is not an insignificant sum for an insolvent city; however, a major sports arena should provide other indirect benefits.

Unfortunately, the economic benefit of the Joe is limited by its design, particularly its flaws in pedestrian access. In his book *Major League Losers* (the title implies his conclusion), Mark Rosentraub critiques conventional wisdom on the value of sports venues. He measures their economic worth as "people from outside the city or county attend[ing] a game and spend[ing] money they would not have spent in the city or county for some other type of entertainment." Rosentraub assumes that individuals will budget a set amount for entertainment that remains constant regardless of what they spend it on.

Since a good percentage of the fan base is suburban, each Wings game presents an opportunity to capture outside spending. Unfortunately, local businesses receive little to no boost from the Red Wings apart from the clever few that offer shuttle services. JLA's spillover effects are inadequate given the Wings consistent success and loyal fan base.

The Joe's disconnect from the city incentivizes fans to purchase the fifteen dollar parking voucher rather than navigate the unfriendly terrain. When patrons park at the Joe Louis structure, they watch the game from opening face-off to finish. Then they leave. There is no incentive to arrive early or linger afterward. There are no storefronts, restaurants, or bars (i.e. opportunities to spend money) within eyesight of the Joe. This is the greatest of the Joe's many failings.

The Joe is so disconnected from the rest of the life of downtown that one can rightly ask why it was even built there.

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In the article "Cities and the Financing of Sports Facilities," Adam Zaretsky writes, "When studying this issue, almost all economists and development specialists . . . conclude that the rate of return a city or metropolitan area receives for its investment is generally below that of other projects."

Despite economic indicators, America has an infatuation with building the most advanced sports venues. Construction costs regularly run into the hundreds of millions and can only be afforded by the agglomeration of many rich investors or through significant municipal subsidies. The Joe was paid for entirely by the city of Detroit at a cost of \$30 million, significantly less than what it costs to build stadiums today, even when adjusted for inflation.

Sports franchises perpetually demand newer venues and subsidies to build them, threatening to move if their demands are not met—and they often are. Medium to small markets are the victims in this "sports war," as Rosentraub calls it. Cities build expensive new stadiums and often abandon the old ones. Stadium subsidy critic Charles Mahtesian describes America as suffering from "throwaway stadium syndrome."

The Pontiac Silverdome, former home of the Detroit Lions, is one such example. Since the Lions moved to Detroit's Ford Field in 2002, the Silverdome has hosted some one-off events such as a monster truck rally, an international soccer exhibition match, and a welterweight boxing bout. According to a *Metro Times* article, as of 2009 the Silverdome cost the city of Pontiac \$1.5 million in upkeep annually. Since Pontiac was over \$100 million in debt at the time—and has since gone into receivership of the state—the city decided to sell the stadium at auction with no minimum bid. The Silverdome, once the largest NFL stadium and built at a cost of \$55.7 million (unadjusted for inflation) in 1975, sold for an embarrassing \$583,000. In the absence of a buyer, the fate of a vacant stadium is demolition, as was the case for Olympia and Tiger Stadiums in Detroit. Neither of these sites has been redeveloped.



What will become of the Joe once the Wings vacate? In the near term, Detroit will be saddled with a facility that has poor ties to commercial zones and would prove exceptionally difficult to adapt for purposes other than professional sports and major entertainment events. The State of Michigan has reportedly pledged funds to demolish the Joe once the new arena opens, but there are no guarantees when this will happen.

It's difficult to propose a worthier plan than demolition. Current plans for renovating neighboring Cobo Center do not include the potential of utilizing an abandoned Joe Louis Arena or the land on which it sits.

Already a cause of considerable pedestrian confusion, the problems created by aging, unsightly, and intrusive infrastructure around the Joe will also need to be

addressed upon the Wings' departure. These walkways and parking structures are open only during the evening of events at JLA. This infrastructure, essentially a part of JLA itself, will be rendered immediately obsolete and need to be torn down along with the Joe, adding to the already considerable expense.

We can only hope that the designers of the new arena are cognizant of the many reasons why Joe Louis Arena fails.

