



BOXING CLEVER

Selling suites isn't what it used to be – but with some creative thinking, venues are still able to turn a profit

As corporations and companies continue to downsize their suite commitments across the board, venue owners and operators are working closely with architects and suppliers to develop innovative approaches that encompass less inventory, new technology and better amenities to meet changing customer demands.

Event rent

"In general, in the US, about 8,000 corporations control the 12,000 suites in the four major sports here," estimates Bill Dorsey, chairman of the Association of Luxury Suite Directors (ALSD). "By going to a per-event suite model, for sports and entertainment, the number of customers who can access suites grows exponentially."

One of the more innovative approaches is being offered by SuiteAgent, a subsidiary of Los Angeles-based PrimeSport: "Since we launched last September," notes Scott Spencer, operating manager, "we've worked

with nine US venues to improve access and awareness of luxury suites on a game-by-game basis, emphasizing that if we can meaningfully increase the number of per-event suite customers, venues will emerge from the recession with a larger customer base."

SuiteAgent signs the contracts with the teams/operating companies directly, not the venues, and there is no up-front fee; they get a commission if suites are sold. One of the key value propositions is that suites are sold at the same price as the team with no mark-ups. "Venues have become increasingly flexible and creative in finding ways to add value," adds Spencer. "It's not uncommon to arrange a tour of the field before a game, or the complimentary use of a conference room for a meeting." As an example, at the NCAA Final Four in Indianapolis, legendary basketball coach Hugh Durham gave a chalk-talk on strategy in one of the Lucas Oil Field suites right before the championship game that was a big hit with the fans, and the company that rented the suite.

In addition to its arrangement with the NCAA, SuiteAgent is working with Atlanta Motor Speedway, Philips Arena (NBA Atlanta Hawks, NHL Atlanta Thrashers), Ford Field (NFL Detroit Lions), Edward Jones Dome (NFL St Louis Rams), LP Field, Nashville (NFL Tennessee Titans), Jacksonville (Florida) Municipal Stadium (NFL Jacksonville Jaguars), Xcel Energy Center, St Paul, Minnesota (NHL Minnesota Wild, NLL Minnesota Swarm), EnergySolutions Arena, Salt Lake City (Utah Jazz), and The Palace of Auburn Hills, Michigan (Detroit Pistons)

Join the club

"Former suite holders are finding more value in club seats," says Earl Santee, a principal at architecture firm, Populous, "looking for both flexibility and value but still wanting the all-inclusive and exclusive experience to take customers to an event. There are just not as many potential suite customers as 10 years ago."

In response, venues are converting individual suites to club lounges or large-group party suites, or reducing total suites in renovations or original plans, with practical implications in terms of cost restructuring and infrastructure impact. "The ease of which suites can be converted to other uses is dependent on at least two main factors: relationship of the suites to the structural frame of the venue; and location of suites in relation to other premium seating," explains Craig Schmitt, EwingCole principal, and senior project architect for the New Meadowlands Stadium, shared by the NFL Jets and Giants (see page 40).

Schmitt says combining suites to make larger suites is the easier of the options, as long as there is no intervening structure between the suites: "Typically there are three suites between each structural column bay in a stadium, with the column structure being incorporated into the end suite demising wall," he says. "Thus, single suites can easily be converted to double-wide or triple-

Suite rendering for the New Meadowlands Stadium, New Jersey



Above: Club seats at MLS club Real Salt Lake

Below: Coach Dunham gives a talk at Lucas Oil Field



wide party suites between column bays. In venues where the suites are located at the same level as Club seating, conversion of suites to additional Club seating is also easily done simply by removing the walls and capping the utilities.

Rossetti's principal Tim Lambert focuses on another trend, using the firm's Red Bull Arena project in Harrison, New Jersey, as an example: "Originally, when AEG was going to own and operate the MLS stadium, they wanted 60 suites," he recalls. "When Red Bull GmbH itself took over the project, they wound up with 30 suites averaging about 16 seats. These open into an exclusive 300-capacity suite-holder Club that provides a completely different – and enhanced – social atmosphere. We're seeing this new model going forward, with suites opening to premium, socially interactive areas with creative food offerings that allow flexibility in programming for the venue operator."

Rio Tinto Stadium, home of MLS Real Salt Lake, and another Rossetti project, features a suite-level 300-capacity Club that opens to an outside terrace for about 200, overlooking the field.

Meanwhile Toronto's Air Canada Centre, which is undergoing a US\$46 million renovation by Toronto architects II By IV, has decided to convert 12 of its 20 Platinum Suites (currently below the

stands with no view) into a 'Chairman's Club'. This high premium space will allow a company to buy two to ten memberships for the 120-capacity table seating, coming up to sit in Club Seats with close-to-the-action court/ice views. With an eye to filling more seats for about 180 annual major sports events, concerts and family show dates, the venue is also considering knocking out eight upper level suites at one end entirely, converting the space into a 120-capacity Group Sales Area. In the 60-suite mid-level ring, a test example will combine two suites into a larger 40-seat Party Suite.

Euro view

Europe is also adopting a 'less is more' inventory response to the current downturn: "We are seeing a real move towards more lounge space with field-of-play views and scaling back of suites in new European venues," says Martin Jennings, partner with London-based Davis Langdon LLP, which advised on the City of Manchester (UK) Stadium, originally built for the 2002 Commonwealth Games and then expanded to the current 48,000-seat home of Manchester City FC; and the Budapest Arena for ISM, the Hungarian Sports Ministry, the national 12,500-capacity indoor arena for ice hockey and concerts.



Madison Square Garden Event Level suite

MADISON REMADE

The US\$775-850 million, three-year Madison Square Garden (MSG) 'transformation' includes a major investment in suites, clubs and additional amenities at the iconic New York home of the NBA's Knicks and NHL's Rangers, confirms Hank Ratner, president and CEO, MSG.

The project, to be completely financed by MSG, includes a new entrance, arena bowl changes, and concourses featuring city views and enhanced concessions. Brisbin Brook Beynon is the architect, including all premium seating products (suites, clubs and specialty hospitality areas).

Debuting for the 2011-12 season are 20 new 8 to 12-seat Event Level Suites, all with direct access to the best seats in the house. Three design options are available, featuring formal dining tables, full bars, a waterfall and a fireplace. Also due is the new 750 to 800-capacity Delta SKY360° Event Level Club, offering exclusive dining options and views of athletes entering and exiting the locker room area.

Opening in the 2012-13 season are 58 new Lower Level Suites with 12 seats each and bowl seating. Included is a granite-topped open kitchen area with islands and counters and a full living room setting including a 12 x 8ft corporate branding wall. Also debuting is a new all-inclusive 4,500ft² Super Club, with seating in the arena and exclusive club space available for corporations and individuals.

Planned for the 2013-14 season are 18 completely remodelled 12-seat ninth floor suites, and a new 6,000ft² Party Deck on the tenth and highest level.



Air Canada Center's Chairman's Club

Other key European trends include more flexibility built into suites, with dividing partitions so that they can vary in size to meet demand for league or cup matches, as an example. On a more practical note, suites are becoming dual use with some converted into hotel bedrooms on both match and non-match days, although this presents its own challenges in terms of environment.

Examples include the 30,000-seat MK Dons (FC) Stadium in Milton Keynes, UK, which has a limited number of non-match day hotel rooms/suites, and Ricoh Arena, home of Coventry FC (UK). The latter has a 71-room Silk Suites Hotel integrated into the stadium that offers a combination of pitch-view rooms, service apartments and suites. Pitch-view rooms, starting at £60 a night, offer uninterrupted views of the stadium bowl, with shower. WiFi-enabled work desk, tea/coffee facilities and a double bed, with late arrival and early check-out available on match days.

Business focus

Marketing focus is another distinctive Euro trend: "When designing a suite," observes Bill Mannarelli, vice president, ICON Venue Group, Berlin, "we try to give the suite holder every opportunity to use the suite as a marketing tool, mixing business

with pleasure. In England and Germany, suites have been around for a while and this concept is fairly familiar. In Italy and Turkey, where suites are absolutely new, it will take some time for potential suite holders to understand the business."

Mannarelli says the key difference between the US and Europe is that suites are standardised like a hotel room in most US stadia, while in a European venue each suite owner fits out their own facility according to the company's corporate identity and branding. Working with AEG,

with the economy in mind, ICON reversed this trend and introduced a standard suite design for The O2 in London and O2 World Berlin, with O2 World Hamburg to follow shortly.

Since suite sales represent the second most important revenue stream behind a naming rights deal in Europe, with inventory control in mind, for new arenas ICON typically concentrates only on those suites in the horseshoe that maintain sightlines to all sporting and concert events. In The O2 in London and the O2 World Berlin, the suites behind the stage were sacrificed during the planning phase and replaced with a restaurant to create added value to the suite holder's hospitality package.

Additionally, while most European football stadia have glass partitions due to the weather, many indoor arena suites unfortunately have similar partitions that simultaneously kill the acoustics and alienate the suite holders. With the firm's current work throughout Europe, ICON is trying to reverse this mistake and has been successful with arenas in London, Berlin, Istanbul and Ankara.

"Suite designs also need to adapt and be responsive to local cultures," notes Mannarelli. "Where we are introducing suites into a marketplace devoid of luxury suites, we need to

LUXURY SUITES

find the right balance from what we know works in the US and Europe, and also dovetails with local sensibilities. In Europe, that ranges widely from place to place and typically involves different expectations concerning food and drink. We are most successful when we apply a standard design and intelligently integrate the local cuisine.”

Techno drive

Technology continues to play an important role: “Venue suites have always been at the forefront of new technology,” observes ALSD’s Dorsey. He points out that the first flat-screen TVs were introduced in the stadium/arena marketplace, many companies use suites for experiential test product marketing and more teams are focusing on retaining their fan base by offering in-suite entertainment and information they cannot watch on their home TVs.

“Technology is playing a bigger role with in-suite TV programming, in-suite ordering for merchandise as well as food and drink, connecting with in-game stats and more in-suite advertising as a part of the game presentation,” adds Populous’ Santee. “Most interesting is that suites are still somewhat of a wired technology, with a dramatic shift to wireless systems for cellphones, iPads and other new devices. We could not plan a new suite without thinking of these more interactive wireless devices for in-stadium contacts.”

However, not everyone is rushing to join the technology bandwagon: “For Air Canada Centre, we are spending over US\$46 million in upgrades, including new HD videoboard,” says Robert Hunter, executive vice president of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment. “There are a lot of interesting products out there for suites but we’re not convinced that technology is what the suite owner wants – we don’t want to take away from the excitement of the game! We’re pretty aggressive on spending money to enhance the suite experience and we monitor what the industry is doing on the technology side.”

Going forward, Hunter offers the following outlook: “We are seeing some positive signs in the economy, with the challenge to get back to where we once were. With attention to great value and over-servicing the client, we’re optimistic that we’ll start to see some former suite clients getting back into the market.” ■

Author

Freelance journalist **Steve Traiman** has been covering the sports industry for over 10 years

JOINT VENTURE

As the only NFL stadium shared by two teams, the US\$1.6 billion, 82,500-seat New Meadowlands Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, presents some unique challenges for suite sales. Initially the Giants and Jets, equal stadium co-owners, sold the suites jointly, meaning purchase of both teams’ pre-season and home games. If not completely sold after a certain period, the co-branding sales agreement allowed the teams to sell them individually for their respective games, as they are currently being sold.

The teams brought in celebrated interior designer David Rockwell who conceived the suite interiors, then worked with 360 Architecture to develop them to a schematic level, with EwingCole developing the final drawings and specifications, including all engineering coordination for construction.

Craig Schmitt, EwingCole senior project architect, notes there are 222 suites on four levels, all along the sidelines to justify the premium prices. Suites on levels A and B and on the main concourse have outdoor seating, with indoor seating in Level C suites with an operable window glazing system. Levels A, B and C

typically have 33 or 39 suites along each sideline (66 or 78 for each level), except for Suite level C that has the press and coaches booths. Seating is for 12-30, depending on the location.

The 20 presidential-type suites on the west side of the Main Concourse are unique with a very small living space, and all share an adjacent high-end Commissioner’s Club, complete with a celebrity chef cooking display station.

Suite buyers were offered a traditional interior with lots of dark wood panelling and trim, or a contemporary interior with a brighter, more modern aesthetic look; one layout with the kitchen in the rear, the other with the kitchen forward, on the field side. “Thus far, 90% of the buyers have chosen the kitchen in the rear with the traditional interior finish,” says Schmitt.

A typical suite is about 450ft² and includes multiple flat-screen LCD TVs, wet bar and refrigerator, kitchen cooktops and overhead, electric heaters above the lower Level A suites. Premium amenities include a private access road to VIP parking, private suite holder entrance and lobby, and private suite level washrooms.



90% of suite buyers at New Meadowlands have opted for ‘traditional’ interiors