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# **“THE CLUB ON THE HILL”: FOOTBALLING PLACE AS AN ARENA FOR SUSTAINABLE AND ETHICAL ACTION**

## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** Places have deep-seated meaning and serve to shape our social grouping and practices. Sporting stadia are a highly influential aspect of many people’s lives that drive the inexorable journey toward team affiliation, immersive experiences, intense loyalty, and the creation of an enduring, local identity. This paper explores how the nature of a sporting place has been shaped to change the practice of football as a sport, as a business and as entertainment. It uncovers how Forest Green Rovers (FGR) differentiates itself from the historical and socio-economic roots of football and utilises numerous novel sustainability initiatives to reimagine a new type of football place, club, and fandom.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Over a two-year period, we employed multiple data collection methods, engaging in participant observation, interviews, and focus groups, at FGR and related events. A thematic Data Analysis was conducted to pinpoint and extract key areas surrounding the unique structures, practices and reinforced behaviours that have developed in FGR.

**Findings:** The findings show that FGR’s place operates as a central location through which stakeholders, ideas, resources, and practices have been disrupted and reimaged around the principles of sustainability. This fundamental shift in FGR’s place, changing its composition, character, and reach means that FGR can be conceptualised as a novel place synonymous with new global social movements.

**Originality:** This study presents unique insights into the World's first socially and environmentally conscious football club. It examines the construction and operation of the place that facilitates its actions which go beyond what has been seen and maybe expected from commercial sporting institutions.

**Keywords:** place, veganism, football, sustainability, stakeholders

## INTRODUCTION

This paper critically explores how football and the place where it is played can provoke a change in social practises at both a local and global level and how a sporting place, from both a cultural and physical perspective, can be shaped to alter the nature of football, club culture, and fandom. After an extended period of immersion at Forest Green Rovers (FGR) and their home ground, the New Lawn Stadium, we suggest that by differentiating itself from the historical and socio-economic roots of football and utilising various novel sustainability initiatives, FGR have reimagined a new type of football that has far reaching global consequences.

Organisations and the places in which they operate are important in supporting and legitimising local behaviours that have sustained and extensive global consequences (Low and Davenport, 2009; Samuel, Peattie, and Harman, 2020). The concept of place is socially significant (Eyles, 1985) indicating that a space is imbued with meaningful experience (Coffin and Chatzidakis, 2021; Visconti et al., 2010). A person's sense of place is nostalgic and topophilic (Tuan, 1974), often constructed around concrete or abstract objects (Perkins and Thorns, 2012).

Urban places, such as sporting grounds, have a particularly influential historical role in shaping social practices (Barnett *et al.*, 2011; Amin, 2004; Mansvelt, 2005; Glennie and Thrift, 1992, Samuel Peattie and Herman, 2020). For example, the professional football clubs of St. Pauli (Germany) and Cosenza (Italy) have both developed places that socially support marginalised people such as refugees, people from impoverished communities in Africa and those from the LGBT community (Jones, 2019; Vinas and Parra, 2017). These clubs, and lower league clubs such as Forest Green Rovers in the UK, have strong sustainability agendas, and promote activist and environmentalist groups (Vince, 2020; Vinas and Parra, 2017).

However, globalisation has marked a major paradigm shift in place understanding and function and has unquestionably had a significant impact on our social actions and interactions. The global society that has evolved has fundamentally changed the relationship between the individual and the place they interact within (Harvey, 2000; Massey, 2005). It has redefined our senses of place and self, and extended our potential beyond the local (Amin, 2004; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). As a result, place is no longer always locally bound but instead emphasises global attachment, identity, and responsibility (Massey, 2005). This is reflected in the growth of new global social movements and transnational advocacy networks that increasingly provide an alternative participation mechanism for activists (Peattie and Samuel, 2018). The key drivers for the creation and evolution of ‘places’ have not substantially changed but instead have evolved to embrace the global as “the local place becomes one potential arena for action to change the global” (Massey, 2007: 184). Subsequently this paper seeks to understand how a footballing place may provoke social and environmental change?

## **FOOTBALL PLACES**

At the heart of football is the notion of geographical identity and intrinsic passion (Lee, 2021). However, it is ‘place’ identification and branding that drives the inexorable journey toward team affiliation, stadium immersion, intense loyalty, and the creation of an enduring, local identity (Rookwood and Millward, 2011; Warnaby and Medway, 2013). The circumambient area of a given team provides the locus, catalyst, and inspiration for support with this a phenomenon played out *ad nauseum* throughout the world (Russell, 2017). Geography is at the heart of football’s emotional connection and the spaces where football is dramatically played out over 90 minutes providing a sense of ‘home’ for the faithful (Baker, 2021). ‘Home’

grounds are sacrosanct (Edensor and Millington, 2008). They are spiritual enclaves that facilitate intimacy and shared experience (Gorman-Murray, 2009) that cannot be found or gratified anywhere else (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2015). Stadia are evaluated like family (Bale, 2000). They live, breathe, entertain, care for and offer sanctuary for those willing to attend (Gaffney, 2009).

However, football is never far from critique and scrutiny (Brunzell and Söderman, 2012), and despite the reverence and ecclesiastical lens afforded stadia, they have become synonymous with so called ‘deviant’ behaviours (Winands and Grau, 2018). Such behaviours have been said to include violence, right-wing politics, racism (van Sterkenburg and Spaaij, 2015) and gender exclusion (Schlesinger and Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2012). Stadia have been seen as the structural bed for hooliganism and disorder (Dunning *et al.*, 1982; Frosdick and Newton, 2006) with the capacity to nurture both spontaneous and organised acts of violence (Spaaij, 2007).

To address or counteract concerns with competitive violence (Roversi and Balestri, 2000), clubs have implemented technologically and commercially advanced solutions to tackle safety, accessibility, and ensure income generation (Church and Penny, 2013; Paramio *et al.*, 2008), as well as to actively subdue overt masculinity (Chiweshe, 2014). These approaches follow the globalisation thinking that applies one size fits all approaches (Church and Penny, 2013). And in football, this has resulted in the creation of stadia that are increasingly homogenised, standardised, concrete bowls (Church and Penny, 2013; Steadman *et al.*, 2021), often accused of lacking character and idiosyncratic qualities. While fandom is found and nurtured in these environments, they have not been able to successfully overcome the ongoing challenges faced by football in eradicating or changing deviant behaviours.

## **FANDOM**

Traditionally a fan has been conceptualised as an “enthusiastic devotee of some particular sports consumptive object” (Hunt *et al.*, 1999: 440). “Fandom, in the sport of football, is a major component of the way the game is played, displayed and sold aesthetically to the prospective audience across the globe” (Davis, 2015: 422).

Fandom reflects unique social structures that allow like-minded individuals to participate in an event (Dionísio, Leal, & Moutinho, L, 2008). Fandom provides affiliation and, in a sporting context, a distinct point of differentiation from others (Burton *et al.*, 2019). Fan identities are socially constructed (Funk *et al.*, 2012) and seminal in maintaining a psychological contract with all the club’s stakeholders (Burton *et al.*, 2019).

The notion of football fandom has become a social phenomenon given its associations with all things masculine and has come to be viewed through a lens of curiosity and fear (Herd, 2017). However, football’s commodification has impacted on fans and the generic fan has been replaced with a gestalt framework that separates levels of fandom into the immersed, the transient, the segmented and the global. These degrees of fandom are predicated on big business (Tapp and Clowes, 2002). Various typologies have emerged and have done so for the best part of five decades to capture the unique nature of fandom across a myriad of sports and cultural backdrops (see Chorbajian, 1978; Fujimoto and Harada, 1995; Sutton *et al.*, 1997; Tapp and Clowes, 1999).

However, postmodernism has ostensibly blurred the lines of fandom (Giulianotti, 2002). There is a seminal shift from what has been categorised as hyper-masculinity (Richards & Parry 2018) at the heart of the game and leagues to a new framework where the rationale for following a team and game attendance is multifaceted, value-

laden, and potentially unique. Consequently, the football consumer market should “therefore not be viewed as one homogeneous mass displaying identical consumer behaviour” (Junghagen, 2018: 338).

## **FOOTBALL AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE**

A key development in football over the past few decades has been its evolution from a popular sport into one that is also a tool for social change, involving a variety of entities such as governments, the private sector, charities, and NGOs (Cárdenas, 2014). By utilising assets such as the financial might and power of football and harnessing a club’s physical and cultural strength, it can be used as a tool to achieve substantial changes in the local community and beyond (Fitzpatrick et al, 2020). Projects such as “Gamechanger” in Scotland and Community Trusts at Charlton Athletic football club and Brentford football club have contributed to local communities in areas such as health, education, social inclusion, and community integration (Fitzpatrick et al 2020; Walters and Chadwick, 2009). These initiatives highlight both the economic and social roles of football clubs placing specific importance on the role of stakeholders, social responsibility and strengthening the bonds between a club and its local community.

The importance of a football club’s relationship with its fans and community cannot be understated. While football can be a catalyst for unity and positive social change, it also has a reputation for generating division and exclusion (Cleland, 2015). That being the case, football, and often it’s power structures, has also been responsible for the emergence of various resistant social movements. These are conscious, organised, and sustained efforts to change some aspect of society, utilising extra institutional means (Millward, 2011). Some of the more notable football related social movements are the European Ultras, In Britain, StandAMF has emerged to protest against the



commercialisation and profiteering in football, while fans of Liverpool FC (SOS) and Manchester United (Green and Gold) have collectively mobilised to protest how their clubs are managed and run (Hill et al, 2018; Millward, 2011). Because these clubs are so important to the fans and their personal identities, and shape their everyday lived practices, any structural changes can prompt one of three responses among them. The first is “Legitimising”, whereby structures remain unchallenged and supporters either agree with the changes or are apathetic towards them. Secondly, “Resistant Communities”, such as those highlighted above, may emerge when social actor’s positions in society are weakened by structural changes. Finally, a “Project Identity” is a group’s vision of a new reality and may emerge as an attempt to revolutionise or reform. This can manifest itself in supporters attempts to buy clubs or even to establish a new club (Castells 1997; Millward 2011).

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT – THE PLACE**

Founded in 1889, Forest Green Rovers (FGR) is an English football team, based in League 2. Their sustainability ethos has drawn considerable attention from the sporting world and beyond, with their football ground, the New Lawn Stadium, challenging assumptions, and conventions surrounding football stadia. In 2011 the club installed 180 solar panels enabling the stadium to generate 25% of its own electricity. In the same year, work began to make the pitch, which is fed on seaweed and mowed by a solar powered robotic lawnmower, the first organic pitch in the world (Forest Green Rovers FC wins award for 'organic' pitch, 2012). Along with its use of renewable energy sources, it has introduced a player’s kit produced from bamboo, and the stadium is meat free, making it rather a unique footballing place. FGR has received many green business awards, while FIFA (football’s governing

body) has recognised it as “the world’s greenest football club”. It is the first football club to sign up to the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), and The United Nations has appointed its owner as a Climate Change Ambassador (Euractiv, 2019). FGR encourages a family-friendly atmosphere and values at the ground and has become world-renowned for its vegan-only ethos and practices (Euronews, 2019), being the world’s first football club to receive the Vegan Trademark (The Vegan Society, 2017; Euractive, 2019). Consequently, FGR represents a radical shift from ‘traditional’ footballing venues (Sustainability in Sport, 2021).

## **METHODS**

The methodological approach for this study was influenced by Creswell’s (2004: 39) understanding that “Place provides the conditions of possibility for social practice.”

Thus, over a two-year period, the researchers employed multiple data collection methods, suitable to capture both the sustainable /ethical practices employed at FGR’s place and the resulting social-spatial interactions that play out within their confines (Perkins and Thorns, 2012).

The research design sort to become immersed in FGR’s place and its day-to-day activities (Benkwitz and Molnar 2012) affording the lead researcher an ability to become acquainted with FGR, its stakeholders and the social norms it’s place encourages. To fosters such rapport and to develop deepening relationships with FGR (Heath, Williamson, Williams, and Harcourt, 2018) the lead author negotiated access to the club after several meetings with the then CEO and the Community Development Team and gained final approval for the study was granted by FGR’s Board of Directors.

Following the lead of Blumer (1969, pp 39) this study subsequently sort to *'lift the veils that cover the area of group life that one proposes to study'* by getting as close as possible to the lived experience of those involved. To develop a thorough understanding of FGR, the place and how ensuing social practices were developed and adopted, it was necessary for the researchers to become absorbed in the research space (Peattie and Samuel, 2018; Hemingway and Starkey, 2018). As such qualitative data collection took a multi-phase approach to capture 'insiders', views, interactions, interpretations, and actions while at FGR (Blaikie 2000).

### ***Phase 1 Participant Observation***

Attending FGR Matches and Events: Participant observation for this study was influenced by Bray (2008) who suggests that this approach to data collection helps develop an understand of activities, behaviour, and beliefs from within its naturalistic habitat, in this case FGR's place. The lead researcher attended a total of twenty-seven FGR home games over a period of two years, and also participated in nine FGR community events. From attending matches the research process involved going 'native' and positioning oneself within the social process of FGR's place. This process helped view the empirical world from experience as opposed to mere observation, helping the research to 'get close to this life to know what is going on' Blumer (1969.38). During this period a reflective journal was completed that aimed to document 'what was happening' regarding sustainability and ethics at FGR (2006.21). These reflective journals were additionally augmented by observations and field notes taken when actively engaged in the other FGR events attended.

### ***Phase 2 Semi Structured Stakeholder Interviews: Management, Workforce, Fans and Community.***

Semi structured interviews were designed to take around 15-20 minutes, using open-ended questions to draw as much narrative from FGR stakeholders as possible. The questions followed Charmaz (2006) lead, and the wording of each question was designed to enabling the interviewee to reflect upon their complete experiences of time spent at FGR's place. To achieve this, questioning began with 'tell me,' 'could you describe,' 'how did,' and 'what do you think,' (Charmaz 2006.30-31). Questions designed in this way helped the built a detailed picture of the 'participant's views, experienced events and actions.' (Charmaz 2006. 29). Subsequently semi structure interviews were conducted with twelve FGR management and board members, twelve members of the workforce, twenty FGR football supporters and seventeen members of the local community Forest Green and Nailsworth. The interviews generated 32.5 hours of recorded material that transcribed into 76,889 words of data.

### ***Phase 3 Focus Groups: Visitors to FGR***

Three focus groups consisting of a total of sixteen visiting football fans were carried out. This approach enabled participants (who were first time visitors to FGR) to call upon each other for individual views and opinions and, as such, provide rich insights into the complex sustainability and ethics issues to which they were exposed (Krueger and Casey, 2020; Morgan, 1996). Initiating questions were formulated to explore participants' experiences and what they had taken from their visit. The question format followed the recommendations of Samuel and Peattie (2016) and were designed as open-ended guidelines for the enquiry. Focus groups generated 2.4 hours of recorded material that transcribed into 7,235 words of data.

All interviews, and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and supplemented with the investigators' observational field notes (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006) taken from phase 1 of the data collection process. By employing various data collection

approaches, the researchers captured rich information that allowed a comprehensive examination and inquiry of the most pertinent thoughts and actions of FGR stakeholders.

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

A thematic data analysis was conducted, utilising an iterative process to refine and develop topics, while initial results guided further research (Guest *et al.*, 2012). Once all data was gathered, each researcher conducted an autonomous thematic analysis, to pinpoint and extract key areas surrounding the unique structures, practices and reinforced behaviours that have developed in FGR and the space it occupies.

Principally, the transformative nature of place was analysed for its influence on football, fans, and the club. Throughout the period of investigation and analysis, the research team, with the study's participants, cyclically reviewed the interpretations of the research to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive appreciation of the data (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006; Sandelowski, 1993).

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Like many football clubs, FGR's place is historically rooted (Massey, 1994).

Although they have only played at the New Lawn Stadium since 2006 and are currently in the process of building a new stadium, their past is inexorably linked to the local area and the deep sense of history associated with it. Since their foundation in 1889, they have been known as "the friendly club on the hill" (Barnard, 2014 p.2) and this source of identity and deep social sense of space (Eyles, 1985; Perkins and Thorns 2012; Creswell 2004) highlights the strength of their localised topophilia (Jones 2019; Tuan 1974).

Given the dramatic changes that FGR have undergone in recent years, pursuing such a strong emphasis on the principles and practices of sustainability, our data would suggest a disruption has transpired within the established socio spatial interactions that take place within its container space (Amin, 2004). As such, the findings of this paper are developed around the principle that FGR's place operates as a central location through which a community of stakeholders, networks of people, ideas, resources, and practices (Perkins and Thorns, 2021; Warnaby and Medway, 2013) have been disrupted and reimagined around the principles of sustainability. Such disruption has resulted in a fundamental shift in FGR's place, changing its composition, character, and reach (Amin and Thrift, 2004). This opens the door to a potential category realignment and the possibility of another type of football (Vinas and Parra, 2017):

*I suppose it's just run differently...like I say, with the sustainability and the green, you know, eco-friendly and that. When I think of Forest Green Rovers that's probably the biggest thing I think about. (FGR Employee)*

The following findings and discussion demonstrate how FGR's place has given agency to a variety of practices that have facilitated a reimagination of football stadia, clubs, and fans (Tapp and Clowes, 2002; Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2002; Junghagen, 2018). FGR's place realignment over the past decade has been driven primarily by their chairman and owner, Dale Vince. The impact his provocative leadership has had on FGR's sense of place will first be addressed below. This filters down to the club's governance, which is then discussed and subsequently how football and fandom have consequently been transformed by challenging the status quo and the continuous introduction of novel place-based activities, whose systemic consequences have resulted in significant local, national, and global recognition.

## ***IDEOLOGICAL LEADERSHIP***

Evident in the findings, are the importance of the leadership and personal influence of club chairman and owner, Dale Vince to the transformation of FGR's sustainability agenda. He has been identified as a critical element in introducing the novel and authentic 'sustainability' value system into FGR and the world of professional football and it is his overarching vision that has spearheaded and influenced the reimagination of the club, its governance and fans discussed below. The lifestyle choices and commitment of Vince are evident in his personal life, and his commitment to living/championing and '*developing opportunities for people to live more sustainably*' is often an important reference point for club staff and fans. Dale Vince thereby emerges in the data as synonymous with 'green values', 'veganism', 'sustainability' and with a 'strong personal conviction to save the world':

*I suppose that's all in tune with his beliefs he's very, principled. I suppose he's a bit militant about his own values and good luck to him as well. (FGR Supporter)*

*I mean obviously having Dale Vince is a different type of owner that is much more hands on than a lot of clubs. And he goes to the press a lot. And obviously 'cause he's got the things that he wants to talk about. So that does have positive effects and negative effects in that a lot of people don't like him because he comes across as preachy. And when, but for us he's, I mean he's preaching about something good so like I don't care that he's doing it. (FGR Supporter)*

This has resulted in many indicating that FGR's place has been built as a 'personification' of Dale Vince, without whom the conditions for sustainable social practices would never have been implemented (Creswell, 2004).

*We've got a very different chairman haven't we and different owners? And not everybody has sort of bought into his vegan values and all the rest of it but, whatever, it's got to be better than having one of these Chairman's that's get rich quick. Kind of get the feeling that he's got a long-term plan here. That's in tune with his own philosophy about life I suppose. (FGR Supporter)*

*Without Dale it wouldn't be where it is now would it? (Local Journalist)*

*I mean I admire the chap, I think he sets a very good role model for being an employer. (FGR Supporter)*

His commitment to developing the club into 'the world's greenest football team' is well-respected and admired by most, with many commentating with a sense of pride on the value of the message the club is sending out to the world of football, sport, and business. The fans, for the most part, have taken his sustainability ethos to heart leading to them accepting and legitimising the changes that have been put in place at the club (Castells 1997; Millward 2011). Meaningful experiences are what makes FGR distinctive and highlights its sense of place (Coffin and Chatzidakis, 2021; Visconti *et al.*, 2010) and Dale Vince's work is an empirical validation of Creswell's (1996) assertion that place meaning is created by people with more power than others to define and construct it.

### ***VEGAN FOOD AND SUSTAINABILITY SPONSORSHIP***

The data reveal several significant points relating to FGR's place-bound governance and the sponsorship on display at their ground. The sponsorship from products and services that are either local or related to sustainability are recognised and perceived to dominate FGR's landscape. This 'sponsorship code of conduct' is recognised by



many as an authentic demonstration of the club's commitment and holistic approach to sustainability. Sponsorship brands that are visible and available to try, for example Quorn and Oat Ly (both available from the food stall) and Faith in Nature (hand wash in the toilets), are noticed and commented upon in the data. Arguably, while these sponsors are identified as a positive, it could also be viewed as nothing more than an attempt by FGR and the sponsor to work symbiotically to 'authentically' project both the organisation's and the brand's sustainability credentials. The novelty of seeing sponsorship promotion that is '*good for the environment*', along with those that are potentially controversial (such as the activist group Sea Shepherd), does not go unnoticed and has resulted in further endowing FGR with place meaning (Tuan, 1977) and commitment to sustainability, while also helping to reinforce what socio-spatial interactions are appropriate at FGR (Perkins and Thorns, 2012; Creswell, 1996). The vegan philosophy has been received as an affirmative act that FGR stakeholders are keen to indulge in, support and share. There is also significant evidence to suggest that the availability of vegan food and drink at FGR has also acted as a gateway to changing attitudes to this '*type of food*' and subsequently many of FGR's stakeholders recognise their experience of vegan food while at the club has operated as a tipping point into reducing meat consumption. Many are now following full or part-time vegan diets both as individuals and as a family unit in their home life:

*I'm not a converted vegan or anything, but definitely eat less meat you know and probably shop a bit more ethically as well but I think the whole world is going a bit that way now, we've woken up haven't we. (Local Journalist)*

*I find that when I go shopping now I rarely buy meat. (FGR Staff)*

*Some players have found the benefits at the training ground have taken veganism into their home life. Me personally I eat a lot less meat than I used to,*

*being at the stadium and at the training ground it has just gradually progressed coming into my home life. (FGR Team Player)*

The message that a vegan diet is 'good for the environment' also appears to be gaining traction among FGR's fans and staff. The data show that, for many (because of their interactions with FGR), they now understand the link between their 'diet' and climate change:

*I'm not a vegan eater or agree with all this stuff, but I buy into all the stuff about the greenness, I think that's great, I think it's fantastic. (FGR Supporter)*

In contrast, there is a suggestion in the data that by '*having no real choice other than these products*', some fans have felt forced to try certain brands for the first time.

However, they have gradually enjoyed them to the point that they have since introduced them into their '*family and our shopping*'. Thus, these brands, like vegan food, are also showcased by FGR, and as such are tried by their stakeholders in secure '*a safe place*' (Tuan, 1974):

*Well, we do, I mean we've learnt that there's such a thing as corn vegan chunks. And we thought there was only vegetarian. So we have gone out and looked for them. (FGR Supporter)*

It is the combinatorial effect of multiple initiatives that appear to lend credence to the authenticity of FGR's commitment to sustainability and result in some supporter's adoption of modified social practices (Windrum *et al.*, 2016). These include experimentation with vegan food, better understanding of the practices of clean energy and other such things as improving the ecology of playing surfaces:

*By having groups come and enjoy the community stand, they'll sort of enjoy the food, they'll see all the charge points, they might become intrigued, so it's, even those little touch points I think can have quite a big impact. (FGR Employee)*

## **FANDOM**

In a sport recognised for its machismo and a host of unsocial behaviours (Winands and Grau, 2018; Dunning *et al.*, 1982; Frosdick and Newton, 2006), the participants reflected Junghagen's (2018) suggestion that fans should no longer be viewed as one homogeneous group. Many were keen to express their observations of an entirely different type of fan and socio-spatial experience at FGR. They described it as respectful, family-friendly, and suitable for children and parents to enjoy all the experiences involved in watching football:

*We are also very strong on our family values. We have a sense of kindness about how we approach things we have genuine family values. (FGR Management)*

*The club is very tight knitted, and my family come to most games, and they are always treated with respect, that for me is a big thing. (FGR Club Captain)*

The club's commitment to creating a safe environment is reflected in its 'young ambassadors' program and its capacity to bring children's voices and activities into the club. There was a strong sense of pride and value in the programme. Recognition of the club's values and respect for children was expressed through its dedicated spaces in match day programmes, the club's official website, and 'ambassador blogs' and other forms of communication:

*So I suppose the positives are lots of children. It's because we're young we don't seem to have many of the hardcore noisy behind the goal traditional laddish behaviour. (FGR Supporter)*

*Also the community and the eco side of it is very different...how welcoming it is for people. And then your families can sit together in the family area. (FGR Staff)*

*Some expressed these operational and cultural shifts as the promotion of 'feminist values' in a toxic, male-dominated industry: talking to away fans that's one thing they notice is that we are approachable and friendly. (FGR Staff)*

*I really felt like the fans I met were friendly and proud and happy to talk about the fact that they were a green club. I suppose I learned that even a football club can be run ecologically, and it can influence social and ecological values in the people who go there. (Focus group 1)*

However, despite the number of positives associated with these practices and belief systems, a word of caution was still present in the data. For example, some said that these changes have led to a less vociferous place (Herd, 2017) where the atmosphere at games was rather muted compared to other football grounds in the same league. Such a perceived decline in the atmosphere at football matches is not unique to FGR (Steadman *et al.*, 2021) however, it has led some to think that the club's friendly and welcoming stance was '*detrimental*' to creating the hostility that is considered necessary to give teams '*home advantage*' in a very competitive sport (Fiske, 1992):

*Funnily enough the manager complains...normally when you go to a football match there's a hell of a racket going on behind the goal and there's a lot of perhaps loose language and all that sort of thing. We're a bit too namby-pamby and too many kids there. Kids and grannies. So we don't make a lot of noise. So we're inclined to sit there. (FGR Supporter)*

*A group of Southampton fans were observed arriving at the ground for the 'Leasing.com Trophy' game early in the 2019/2020 season. Twelve of them emerged from an official supporters' bus, draped in their team's colours (red and white) with several other large groups following. As one of the groups started to shout their usual chants at the FGR fans, one of their number remarked, "they don't do that here" and "we should keep it down". They subsequently fell silent as they filed into the FGR ground. (Ethnographer's Notes)*

The above observation was considered a significant behavioural modification and predicated on what the place meant symbolically in terms of FGR's approach to the game. Realistically, FGR's home ground shouldn't hold any contemporary relevance or pertinence to an away fan (beyond the fixture) and arrival in a car park at a sporting event should result in a cacophony as tensions and excitement build, but on this occasion the opposite was manifest and observed. This marks a considerable change in what may be regarded to be the hallowed social practice of singing, chanting and slogans of rival football fans (Fiske, 1992).

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has discussed how a footballing place can provoke change and attract global recognition by challenging historical conventions and assumptions associated

with the spaces in which the game is played. FGR is a local club deeply rooted in history but with a contemporary global outlook, thus it does not exist in isolation but operates in a wider global context, demonstrating a spatial extension to its relevance. In this way “the local place becomes one potential arena for action to change the global” (Massey, 2007 p.184). As such, FGR can be conceptualised as a novel place synonymous with new global social movements which increasingly provide an alternative participation mechanism for activists (Colás, 2013; Gilbert, 2012).

The ideological leadership of FGR Owner, Dale Vince has led to structural and social change within the club and local community but has had far reaching, global consequences. The club has gained favour internationally while Vince has been appointed a UN climate change ambassador. The New Lawn Stadium has been visited by groundsmen from a variety of international sporting stadia (St Georges Park, Wembley, Wimbledon Tennis and Real Bettis) with the intention of adopting some of the novel and sustainable practices that have been implemented at FGR.

The vegan philosophy of the club has influenced both fans and players, while some have altered their diets as a result. It also generated an element of football tourism whereby people who would not normally be associated with football or the club have visited to experience the vegan only menu and to learn from a new way of engaging in spectating professional sport.

Regarding the club’s fans, FGR have placed importance on inclusivity. The New Lawn stadium is respectful, family-friendly environment and it is evident that the club’s community level initiatives and young ambassadors’ program have led to positive social change within the stadium, in the makeup of the crowd and also how they behave and interact with one another and the team. Thus, making FGR’s place a friendly and inclusive arena where all are welcome and respected.

FGR has reimagined its sense of place, demonstrated by its commitment to the sustainability and ethical agenda. Through various place-based initiatives, in and around the New Lawn Stadium, this local. “Small club on the hill” has embraced its responsibility to people and the planet, transformed its identity and extended its reach internationally (Massey, 2005). By introducing practices that address environmental and climate issues with global significance, the club has generated a sense of systemic consequence in stakeholders, by that we mean FGRs practices while obviously helping the local environment are also linked to helping the planet as a whole, thus at once making FGR both a local and global place. Further evidence of this can be seen in the organisation’s external global validation from FIFA as “The world’s Greenest Football Club”, and the United Nations (UN) label of the “World first Carbon Neutral Football Club” and the Chairman’s recent appointment as a UN Climate change ambassador.

The ability of the club, through the determined leadership of Dale Vince, to make material alterations to the practices and infrastructure of the club and the environment for playing and experiencing football, by choice-editing staff and visitors’ options, has been of the utmost importance in gaining momentum in support of the changes. Eliminating the option of buying products with a poor environmental or social record has dramatically altered the culture of the club and FGR’s achievements in improving its social and environmental impact are widely respected among its fans, residents, and global institutions. The range of initiatives that have been employed has resulted in substantial change in the club to the extent that it is sometimes perceived to have taken precedence over the club’s primary and historical purpose that are playing and winning football matches. However, it is unquestionable that FGR has developed a new type of football, one that shows us how a reimagined (through the lens of

sustainability) socio-spatial infrastructure can result in new practices, new responsibilities, and new identities for those who shape and occupy its place. FGR's efforts to shape social practices through changes in the material and immaterial artefacts of place are about to manifest in the ultimate challenge to the club's topophilic importance.

To further raise the profile of sustainability in sport and continue their efforts to 'save the world', the club is embarking upon an ambitious project. They are relocating their grounds nearly ten miles away, to "Eco Park" a purpose built (almost entirely of wood) new facility, hailed as "the world's greenest stadium" (The Guardian, 2021). Literature has indicated that relocating a club's stadium may contribute to feelings of a lost community and a sense of dislocation (Steadman *et al.*, 2021). So, although demonstrating a commitment to their ideals, and once again achieving a global footballing first, it is not known how the existing fans who are still deeply rooted in the club's history, and its local community who benefit from its community programmes, will react to this force for topophilic erosion.

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