



Daubed in a bright orange façade, the Houston Dynamo's new 22,000-capacity BBVA Compass Stadium brings colour and energy to the city's industrial downtown area – yet a sense of intimacy for fans inside

Photograph courtesy of C. Lyon Photography

“It’s not as opulent and grand as an American baseball stadium might be. It’s compact, maybe a bit austere, a bit teutonic” *Jeff Spear, Populous*

BBVA Compass Stadium, Houston **STADIA STATS**



Location: Texas Street, Houston, Texas, USA
Opening: May 2012
Cost: US\$95 million
Capacity: 22,000 (7,000 lower sections)
Tenant: Houston Dynamo
Owners/Operators: AEG/Golden Boy Promotions and Brener International Group
Features: 33 main suites located fewer than 10 rows from field; two party suites located in south-east corner; 94,000ft² of aluminium panels used in exterior skin; playing surface is Tifway 419 Bermuda grass; main video board is 25 x 40ft HD screen

The continuous exterior surface surrounding the stadium creates a dynamic sense of enclosure and an intimate soccer atmosphere

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

“The Dynamos wanted to create a real soccer atmosphere during their home games,” reveals Ladislav Keleman, president of Seda Seating, the Burlington, Canada-based company that supplied the stadium’s distinctive seats. “So we arranged for the president of the club to take in some of the European stadia that feature our seats so he knew what to expect.”

The Dynamos specified different types of chairs for each price level and ticket value, the basic being a gravity-fold seat and the most luxurious a full-sized upholstered lounge seat. “The gravity-fold chair was selected because of its very low maintenance and durability,” Keleman continues. “It was designed for the European soccer fan and has passed rigorous testing. With a heavy steel frame, they are installed individually, making them almost impossible to damage.”

In the club sections, the chairs have foldable armrests and steel cup holders welded to the sides. Of the 22,000 seats installed, 19,350 are in general seating areas, 1,450 are in club sections, 360 are in suites and 215 are in the presidential suites.

“Every aspect of the seating has been customised for the BBVA Compass Stadium,” Keleman says. “From the colour of the general seating to the design of the suite chairs, everything has been designed to be low-maintenance, durable and comfortable, while incorporating the team’s brand and supporting the desired atmosphere.”

Although the Houston Dynamo have been a Major League Soccer franchise since 2006, with origins dating back to the MLS’s founding in 1994 (as the first San Jose Earthquakes franchise), 2012-2013 marks something of a relaunch.

For its first six seasons in Texas, the Dynamo played home games at Robertson Stadium on the University of Houston campus. But with the opening of BBVA Compass Stadium – the new 22,000-seat facility in downtown Houston – the 2011 MLS Cup Playoff finalists can put down the roots to grow an economically successful and community-loved franchise for the long term. And with the opportunity to hold a variety of entertainment and sporting events beyond the Dynamo’s 20-game home schedule, the expectation is that BBVA Compass Stadium can help regenerate the surrounding former industrial area.

The power of the Dynamo

“We wanted the stadium to tell our story, for our brand to be imprinted,” reveals Chris Canetti, the team’s president of business operations. “When you come here, you leave not just having come to a nice stadium but having felt the Dynamo experience. Without question, we wanted to create a venue that could hold multiple events: soccer – only simply wasn’t practical so we had to include other events to make it work financially.”

An international soccer match pitting El Salvador and New Zealand ended as a 2-2 draw in May while the USA’s rugby team went head to head (and lost 30-10) against Italy. The stadium’s first concert this August, starring country duo Sugarland, unfortunately had to be cancelled due to scheduling problems however. But Texas Southern University plays home football games at BBVA Compass Stadium and it will also host high-school games, which – as highlighted on the popular TV drama *Friday Night Lights* – have a massive cultural following in Texas, arguably more than anywhere in the USA. “The high school games will sell out the stadium,” Canetti adds. “Ultimately, we’d like to have about 40 events a year. The climate allows us to do things almost year round. You figure a base of 26 events annually, and the plan is to add 10 to 15 more.” The stadium includes a flexible 5,000ft², located in south end zone with demountable seats and a full rigging grid on its canopy.

When the Dynamo opened the stadium on 12 May – after just a 15-month construction period – the



BBVA COMPASS STADIUM



Houston crowd showed its appreciation. “A lot of the time when you look forward to something for a while, it doesn’t quite live up to expectations,” suggests Darrell Lovell, who covers the Dynamo for *MLSsoccer.com*. “The Houston Dynamo players and fans have been looking forward to the opening for nearly six years and everything went as planned when the Houston Dynamo delivered a 1-0 win over DC United to usher in a stadium they can truly call their home. The play on the field and a big goal from Brad Davis set the scene, but the fans took a star turn. The sold-out crowd was loud throughout and accentuated big moments with applause. The noise was memorable when the goal came.”

The Dynamo, co-owned by former Olympic boxing champion Oscar De La Hoya, have been a successful franchise over the years, winning the MLS Cup in their first two seasons in Houston (2006 and 2007) and finishing as runner-up to the Los Angeles Galaxy in 2011. As a result, attendance has been substantial, averaging more than 18,000 in 2006, although declining in years since. De La Hoya’s presence also helped quell a controversy over the team’s original name, the Houston 1836, which referred to the year of the city’s founding but also the year Texas won independence via its war with Mexico – not a pleasing symbol to the team’s fans of Hispanic and Mexican ancestry. The name was soon changed to Dynamo.

Prime location

Located on a 12-acre site, the stadium is situated in downtown Houston just east of the central business district, across Highway 59 in a former

PARTY ATMOSPHERE

Despite its modest budget, plenty of thought went into BBVA Compass Stadium’s VIP and premium seating. There are 33 main suites, all located fewer than 10 rows from the playing field and sold on three-year licenses. “The view from these areas is breathtaking,” feels the Dynamo’s president of business operations Chris Canetti. “I don’t recall being in too many suites anywhere with these kinds of views.”

There are also two ‘party suites’, which are sold on an event-by-event basis and connected by sliding doors to be expanded into one large suite. Additionally, there are around 1,000 club seats. The Dynamo also created the President’s Club. “It’s the most elite we have,” Canetti adds. “One of the best features about our premium stuff is that the suites are nine and 10 rows off the field, overlooking the pitch at midfield, with comfortable chairs and connected directly to the Stadium Club restaurant. We sold that out in a manner of weeks last summer and all those folks have access to the club, which is open throughout the events. And there’s both exterior and interior space; the exterior is a beautiful deck that overlooks midfield.”

(Top) At a cost of US\$95 million, US\$60 million of which was absorbed by Dynamo ownership, the project comes in at less than half the price of Livestrong Sporting Park or Red Bull Arena

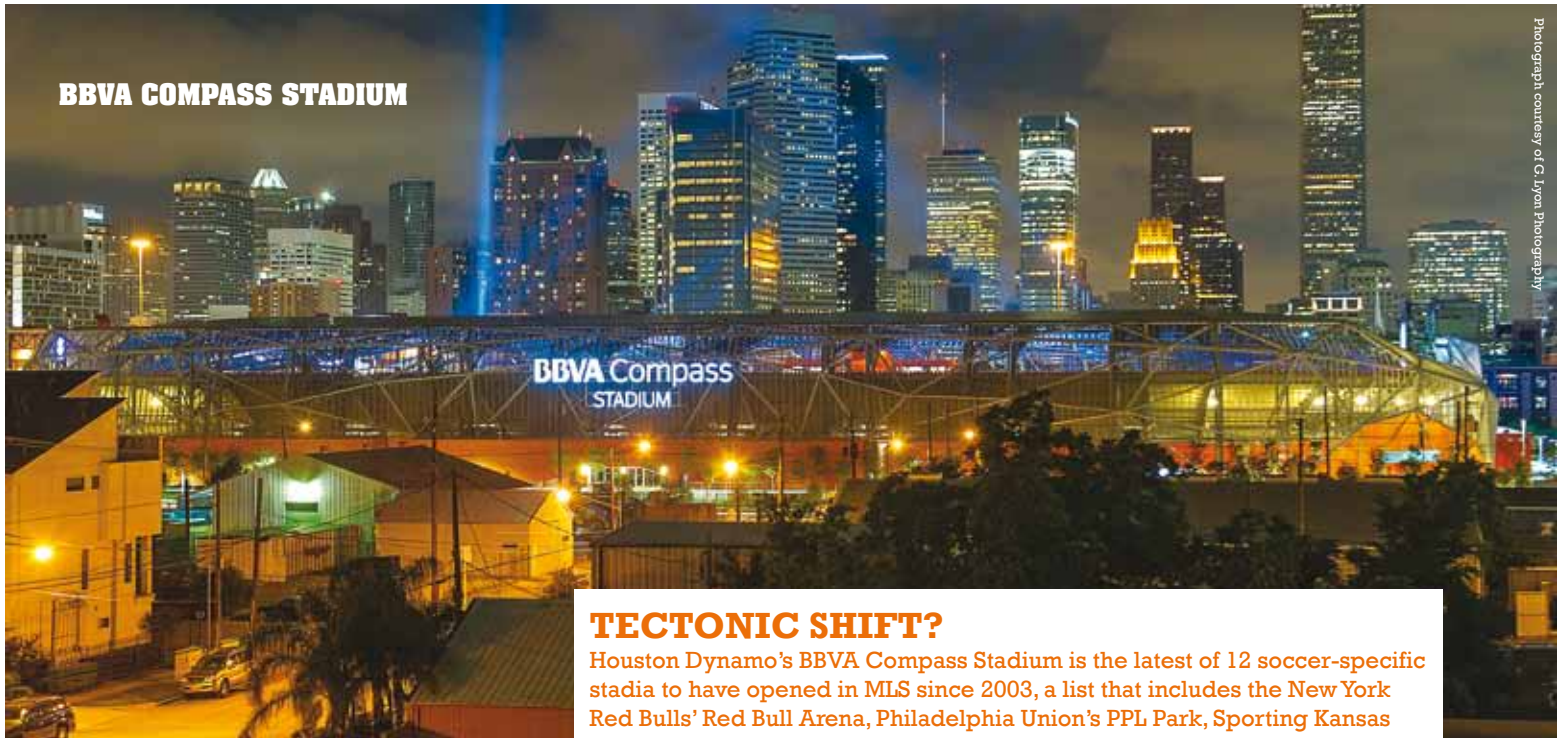
industrial zone burgeoning as a mixed-use area today. “There’s one street in particular where there’s a new housing complex right next to the site: you turn a corner towards the stadium, and suddenly you see this shimmering aluminium façade with the orange really striking you,” reveals architect Jeff Spear of Populous, the stadium’s designer. “The scale is pretty sympathetic to the housing units next to it. And you think to yourself, ‘Now I’ve arrived at something special.’” Being downtown has also altered the Dynamo’s demographic of fans attending games, making it younger.

Soccer stadia in several South American and European countries – particularly the Barclays English Premier League, a fans’ favourite in the USA – often place fans right on top of the action, adding to the visceral thrill of a game already unburdened by the countless timeouts and (if you’re watching on TV) commercials of other major sports such as American football, baseball and basketball. “The challenge is to make it great for the fans, to keep them coming back,” explains Spear, who also worked on Livestrong Sporting Park, home to MLS side Sporting Kansas City. “We actually made the rake of the seats steeper than a pure sightline analysis would tell you, which was really to obtain the best seating environment for the fans and make them feel connected. They really wanted a European style of stadium. It’s not as opulent and grand as an American baseball stadium might be; it’s compact, maybe a bit austere, a bit teutonic.”

“We wanted to create a very international feel to the building, with people right on top of the action”

Chris Canetti, Houston Dynamo

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Striking a blend

The stadium is defined visually by its silver aluminium mesh façade, which encloses the field in an origami-like pattern via 94,000ft² of folding, breathable panels. “We left it in its native colour, primarily because that part of Houston traditionally was an industrial area,” Spear says. “We didn’t want it to look like a warehouse, but we embraced that notion of a metallic building. This shimmering metal skin is breathable as a result of the climate, but it also helped create that industrial feel. It’s very urban. And we’ve got orange polycarbonate as the accents for the gates and the functional spaces such as the concessions that broke out of the skin. Orange is a big part of their milieu. The colour is very striking, and the contrast between the orange and the aluminium is pretty cool.”

Spear refers to the façade’s shape as a ‘tessellated’ pattern, a graphics term for the repetition of a geometric shape with no overlaps and no gaps. Part of it is functional, allowing the façade to extend 75ft over east and west sidelines for shading. Yet aesthetics informed the decision as well. “Part of the genesis was we didn’t want bland straight up and down façades,” the Kansas City-based architect continues. “The canopies on the side and the north façade with the video board – it’s all one whole as opposed to a collection of parts. It’s a little bit of a nod to the play of the game and the motion on the field. And the metal mesh gives it a little bit of transparency. It also helps promote airflow, but it gives it more of an ephemeral quality. It changes from daytime to night-time. Part of that origami-shaped pattern relates to the landscape, too. It’s a way of making it a highly integrated composition.”

The building will seek LEED certification from the US Green Building Council. A majority of the points on the LEED scorecard were earned by

TECTONIC SHIFT?

Houston Dynamo’s BBVA Compass Stadium is the latest of 12 soccer-specific stadia to have opened in MLS since 2003, a list that includes the New York Red Bulls’ Red Bull Arena, Philadelphia Union’s PPL Park, Sporting Kansas City’s Livestrong Sporting Park and Portland Timbers’ Jeld-Wen Field.

The next MLS team to move into a brand-new home will likely be the San Jose Earthquakes [Montreal Impact in Quebec are currently expanding Stade Saputo from 13,000 to 20,000], which is working with 360 Architecture on a proposed 18,000-seat stadium near Mineta San Jose International Airport. Although not all is signed and sealed as yet – local residents are still opposed to the plans, which are meandering their way through the city permitting process – Earthquakes’ owner Lewis Wolff nevertheless expects construction to be completed in 2013.

He’s so confident, in fact, that in 2010 the Earthquakes’ Nutrilite Training Facility, including a training field was built adjacent to land intended for the new stadium.

Corporate suites will be close to the action, uniquely at field level in an attempt to replicate the intimate atmosphere of the side’s current Buck Shaw home. Original plans didn’t allow for any suites, although the latest concept now includes 12 luxury boxes on either side of the sideline featuring a bar and lounge area with HD TV and full catering, VIP parking and even a private entrance to the stadium.

BBVA Compass Stadium is only a short walk from the heart of downtown, just under the Eastex Freeway from Minute Maid Park and Toyota Center

diversion of construction waste from landfills by recycling steel, glass, concrete, masonry, drywall, cardboard and wood. BBVA Compass Stadium was built for a relatively modest budget of around US\$95 million, too, in part because it avoided an overabundance of programmatic elements. There are full-service concessions stands throughout the stadium as well as local vendor booths in the south end zone, for example, but no elaborate restaurants or a team museum. “They had a pretty tight budget and we had to spend those dollars wisely,” Spear says. “But it’s striking what they’ve got down there for what they have spent. I think it’s a model for stadia moving forward. If you look at what we achieved with US\$95 million, Kansas City and New York were more than twice that amount but they’re not twice the stadium.”

“We got what we wanted: to create a very international feel to the building, with people right on top of the action and create an authentic experience,” concludes the Dynamo’s Chris Canetti. “Really that’s where the money was spent. It’s an efficient, economical project.” ■

Author

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