



Why football ecosystems need hospitality thinking

« Stone by stone »

Norman Cescut
Chief F&B, Retail and Hospitality Officer

5 min read

I. Why I joined The Football Factory, and why I believe the next transformation in sport will happen around the game, not only on the pitch

When I first started engaging with The Football Factory, the project was built around three strong and clearly defined pillars: Football, Real Estate and Technology.

At first glance, it could have seemed quite far from the professional path I had built around hospitality, food & beverage, retail, franchising, real estate, destination development, and the creation of concepts and formats.

In reality, the distance was only apparent.

Over the years, I have worked on restaurants, hotels, airports, shopping centres, and mixed-use developments. Different environments, but all facing the same challenge: how to transform a product or a place from a purely functional space into something that becomes relevant in people's lives. Something that have to have economic sense for the entrepreneur, works efficiently for the operator, and is chosen, experienced and remembered by the customer.

Through my experience, combined with continuous research, studies and travels, I came to understand that this very same challenge is becoming increasingly relevant in sport, precisely because of the transformation the industry is going through.

And that helped me recognise the contribution I could bring to The Football Factory: to help connect Football, Real Estate and Technology and translate them into one economic, operational and experiential ecosystem.



II. Football creates attention. Value grows through what we build around it

Sport has an extraordinary characteristic that very few other industries can replicate: it naturally creates emotion, identity, rituals and belonging. Many clubs therefore start from a level of attention and cultural relevance that other brands spend years trying to build.

In sport, people do not simply buy a product. They identify with a hero, a story, a community and, very often, something that passes from one generation to the next.

That is an enormous strategic advantage.

For a long time, as we know, the industry focused the monetisation of that relationship within a relatively narrow perimeter: ticketing, sponsorship, media rights, merchandising and player trading.

These remain, and will remain, fundamental revenue streams.

But today they no longer represent the full opportunity.

What could happen if the relationship between a club and its community extended beyond the ninety minutes? Before, during and after the match. On days when there is no event at all.

And why not, even beyond the stadium itself?

This is where hospitality stops being only an operating category and becomes a strategic framework for designing experiences, relationships and behaviours.

For me, hospitality is a transversal concept. It cuts across Ho.Re.Ca., Retail, Real Estate, Entertainment, Wellness, Tourism and Sport.

It means creating more reasons for people to arrive earlier, stay longer, participate more, use different services and return more often.

Seen from this perspective, a stadium can stop being simply the place where a match is played and become the anchor around which a destination develops, one where restaurants, hotels, shops, gyms, academies, medical services, education, entertainment, events, residences, coworking and community spaces can coexist.

Not as a simple collection of independent buildings and activities.
But as one ecosystem.



III. The difference is not in the assets. It is in how they are connected

If sport creates attention and demand, Real Estate provides the physical platform, and technology enables connection, knowledge, personalisation and

efficiency, then the ambition is to create the conditions for them to reinforce one another, together with the other assets of the destination.

Because too many projects already combine sport and real estate; a growing number of clubs are investing in technology; and several stadiums are evolving into mixed-use developments; so innovation does not necessarily come from simply owning these elements.

The real and necessary evolution it comes, and this is where the revolution really happens, from how they are connected, activated and governed.

This is the principle behind my work for the Football Citadel: an architecture designed to connect Football, Real Estate and Technology with Hospitality, F&B, Retail, Community, data and operations.

Without integration, these elements mostly generate separate experiences and separate transactions, but with the right architecture, they can become an integrated system of experiences, operations, economic flows, relationships and decisions, perceived by people as one seamless destination.

Each interaction can then contribute to improving the next one.

That is the point at which data and artificial intelligence become truly powerful. Not because collecting data has value in itself, but because once a solid business and operating architecture is in place, AI can make the destination more useful, and more efficient.

IV. My role is not “restaurants, hotels and shops”

When I joined The Football Factory as Chief F&B, Hospitality & Retail Officer, I realised almost immediately that my contribution could not be described only by the three words in my title.

Those are not simply functions to be inserted into the Football Citadel. They are some of the main interfaces through which people experience, use and activate the destination.

My work therefore begins long before selecting an operator or designing a restaurant. It is about contributing to the business and operating architecture of the Football Citadel through the lens of Hospitality, F&B, Retail and the Destination Economy.



It means being involved in strategy, concept definition and masterplan development so that assets are not conceived as isolated functions, but as parts of a coherent, economically sustainable and replicable system. Because people do not belong to any single asset, they experience the destination as one place.

That's why it's crucial to design the system before the space.

The quality of each individual asset is therefore essential, but on its own it is not enough.

The more complex part, and this is where my role becomes especially relevant, is to first define the concept, and then build a format or system in which every element is capable of working independently while, at the same time, remaining integrated, coherent and connected to the whole.

Each asset must therefore have its own economic and operating logic, clear responsibilities and a recognisable identity. But it must also contribute to the performance and relevance of the wider ecosystem.

From this perspective, football starts with an extraordinary advantage: an emotional and cultural relevance. Our real challenge lies in what we choose to build around that relevance. And this, for me, is the most interesting part of The Football Factory: the opportunity to apply everything I have learned over thirty years to one of the most emotionally powerful industries in the world.

And I believe my work can contribute to redefining what a sports infrastructure can become

Sport creates attention.

My job is to design what happens next.