

# Stadia

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September 2010



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# HOWEVER

With characteristic self belief, Mexican entrepreneur Jorge Vergara has realised a stunning new stadium for his team, Chivas de Guadalajara

**A spectacular site, the new Estadio Omnilife has been described as 'a football stadium inside a volcano'**

Chivas de Guadalajara is one of the biggest and most historic football clubs in Mexico – and certainly deserving of an exciting, 21<sup>st</sup>-century stadium to call home. How the recently opened Estadio Omnilife came to be – and how it was designed – represent a different puzzle altogether, however. The venue is spectacular, certainly, but everything about the planning, the vision and its very unusual location might leave industry experts rather baffled.

Of course, getting any 45,000-seat stadium built in Mexico is a massive achievement. It's been more than 50 years since the country witnessed

construction of a major new soccer venue, so sceptics had reason to wonder if Jorge Vergara – who purchased Chivas in 2002 – truly could make this dream happen.

### **Park life**

Start with Vergara's ambitious notion of converting a 240-hectare portion of the 'Bosque de la Primavera' – a gorgeous chunk of wooded parkland outside Guadalajara – into a massive development that would include office buildings, hotels, a museum and residential areas.

Vergara, who made his fortune with the internationally known brand of Herbalife health products and spun his own Mexican portion of the company into Omnilife, believed that this giant project would explode into life – and that ultimately, he would build Chivas a new stadium in the middle of it. Instead, all that's been developed so far are roads and general infrastructure, so the stadium, which opened in late July with an exhibition game against Manchester United, turned out to be the first piece of the Primavera on which there was actual construction.

"It did turn out opposite to the way the development originally was planned," says Andres Vergara (no relation to Jorge Vergara), office director of VFO Arquitectos, the company that collaborated on the design of the Chivas stadium. "Now that the football facility is done and people



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## ESTADIO OMNILIFE

will be coming to the area, I'm sure the idea is that with roads and everything in place, the plan is to make the stadium the centrepiece and build other things around it."

Andres Vergara goes to great lengths to explain what might seem like a confusing partnership on the venue design: "When Jorge Vergara began planning a new building for Chivas, our company was the Mexico City office for HOK," he says. "We were not affiliated directly with HOK Sport, which is now Populous, but the main company. Since the project began, we have become an independent firm. However, it is a bit confusing because we have used Populous as our sports consultants, and the original architect brought in by (Jorge) Vergara to design the venue was Jean-Marie Massaud, a Frenchman who had an amazing vision for this particular landscape. So Massaud's idea – 'a mountain topped by a cloud' – is the exterior design you see now."

### Head in the clouds

It's not entirely clear how Jorge Vergara engaged Massaud in the project, since Massaud and his partner Daniel Pouzet had no experience at all in sports-related construction. The Toulouse-born Massaud, who has gained an international reputation for creating all sorts of objects that benefit the environment in some way while remaining economically viable, became famous designing things like furniture, bathroom fixtures and air purifiers. His next well-publicised project is a 'Manned Cloud' – a flying hotel.

Yet Massaud's vision for Chivas definitely fit the hills and woods of the Primavera. The stadium appears to sit inside a mountain, with the 'cloud' acting as its roof. "It is a football stadium inside a volcano," says Massaud. "It is not a piece of architecture, but rather a new human and economic system. The stadium is a building with low environmental impact. Its collective facilities are widened and profitable, and materialised with a strong symbol – a crucible with fertile slopes."

### Original thinking

It's fair to say that no other football ground ever has been described quite that way. "Just to hear the description, it was difficult to imagine what the stadium would be without actually seeing the site and the drawings," admits Andres Vergara. "But Massaud became an excellent partner, a very intelligent man who was wonderful to work with

– and he allowed us to use to our own expertise to turn his vision into a practical, useful sports venue. It was very important that this stadium be a success, not just for Chivas and Guadalajara [a city of six million] but for the region and for the whole country. After going so long without building any new facilities, Mexico needed to see that one of its famous clubs could do this – and be respected here and around the world," he continues.

"Naturally there were setbacks and delays – that is normal business in Mexico, but also for really ambitious projects anywhere – and there were moments when nobody would have blamed [Jorge] Vergara for giving up on this dream. But he is not that kind of man, as you can tell from all he has accomplished in his life."

Andres Vergara is careful to avoid sounding too self-serving while discussing it, but he and the VFO Arquitectos team deserve some credit, as well, for believing in the Chivas project and fighting to become involved on the design side of things. "Well, [Jorge Vergara] is a very busy man, with his companies and producing movies and so many other things," says Andres Vergara. "But yes, it felt like I chased him all over Mexico [to have VFO handed part of the design work]. That's how meaningful this stadium, and what it represents, can be for the region of Jalisco and for Mexico. We are a country that has hosted the World Cup and has a famous facility [the 120,000-seat Azteca Stadium in Mexico City], but we have stood still for so long. Here was an opportunity to show everyone that, despite the obstacles, this great club could get a fantastic new stadium built."

### Worth every penny

The original budget for Estadio Omnilife, with its unique bowl – spectators are as close to the pitch as anywhere in world-class soccer – and 330 suites spread across two tiers, was US\$100 million. But

## Estadio Omnilife, Guadalajara STADIA STATS



**Location:** Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico

**Opened:** 30 July 2010

**Cost:** US\$140 million

**Capacity:** 45,500

**Tenant:** Club Deportivo Guadalajara (Chivas)

**Owner/Operator:** Omnilife

**Features:** 314 luxury suites (170 lower level and 144 upper level), 1,496 VIP seats, four Samsung scoreboard screens (37x20ft), dedicated press area, restaurant with 160 covers, 28 concession stands, and covered parking for 812 cars.



The opening game: a friendly  
between Chivas and  
Manchester United





**Even when there is no football game, the surroundings are like a park – people can walk around and enjoy the beauty of it**



### **SELF BELIEF**

Who is Jorge Vergara and how did he possibly get an ultra-modern football stadium built in Guadalajara? After all, Mexico hasn't exactly been friendly to sports venue entrepreneurs for, well, an awfully long time. "There hadn't been a major stadium built in the country in about 50 years," says Antonio Zamora, director of business development for VFO Arquitectos, the firm that collaborated on the design of the facility for historic Chivas de Guadalajara football club. There is a much smaller stadium in Torreon and a bigger one in

the planning stages in Monterrey, but many, many facilities have been talked about and never built."

Indeed, Chivas' stadium hit several roadblocks before and after Vergara's purchase of the club in 2002 – and a spectacular baseball stadium planned for Guadalajara several years ago never even reached the groundbreaking stage. Vergara, however, is not a man who has been easily discouraged throughout a spectacular career that has seen him rise from selling tacos on Guadalajara street corners to becoming the multimillionaire owner of health-product giant Omnilife – and even an award-winning movie producer.

The 54-year-old Vergara is the Mexican version of Ted Turner, Jerry Jones and the late George Steinbrenner – or all of them rolled into one – for example, Vergara doesn't wear socks. Why? "One day when I was 11 or 12, I thought, 'Why do you wear socks?'" say Vergara. When he couldn't come up with a suitable answer, he discarded socks for life.

Footwear aside, no one disputes that Vergara has revitalised Chivas, a 103-year-old institution that includes the most popular club in Mexico – and also the only major soccer team in the nation which has never fielded a non-Mexican. And Vergara definitely sticks his nose into the club's business, sometimes causing irritation to fans, coaches and players. During one stretch, Vergara hired nine coaches in seven years, including three in 17 days.

But he also wins most big battles. During negotiations for a new broadcast deal, Vergara refused to allow Chivas games to be aired on TV until the Mexican media giant Televisa paid what was then an unprecedented fee of US\$200 million for Mexican soccer rights.

Vergara's greatest triumph was saving Chivas from financial difficulties so severe that the club was about to be sold to backers of Mexico City-based America – Chivas' fiercest rival. "(Chivas) was being destroyed," says Vergara. "They were buying and selling players with the arch-rival, which I haven't done and which I never will do. The tradition was going away."

Now that rivalry is back and sizzling hotter than ever. Fans throughout the country are quite aware that while the famous old Azteca Stadium in Mexico City continues to crumble, Guadalajara now has a brilliant new showpiece.

with various delays, rising construction costs and additions that Jorge Vergara saw were needed along the way, the final construction cost hit roughly US\$140 million.

Jorge Vergara had to pick up a healthy bill, but he's been thrilled by the accomplishment of putting Mexico back on a track towards the future: "The best part of my life was when my children were born," he says, "but this [opening night at Estadio Omnilife] had to be the second-best day of my life. The most important thing is to demonstrate that we can get things done if we really want them."

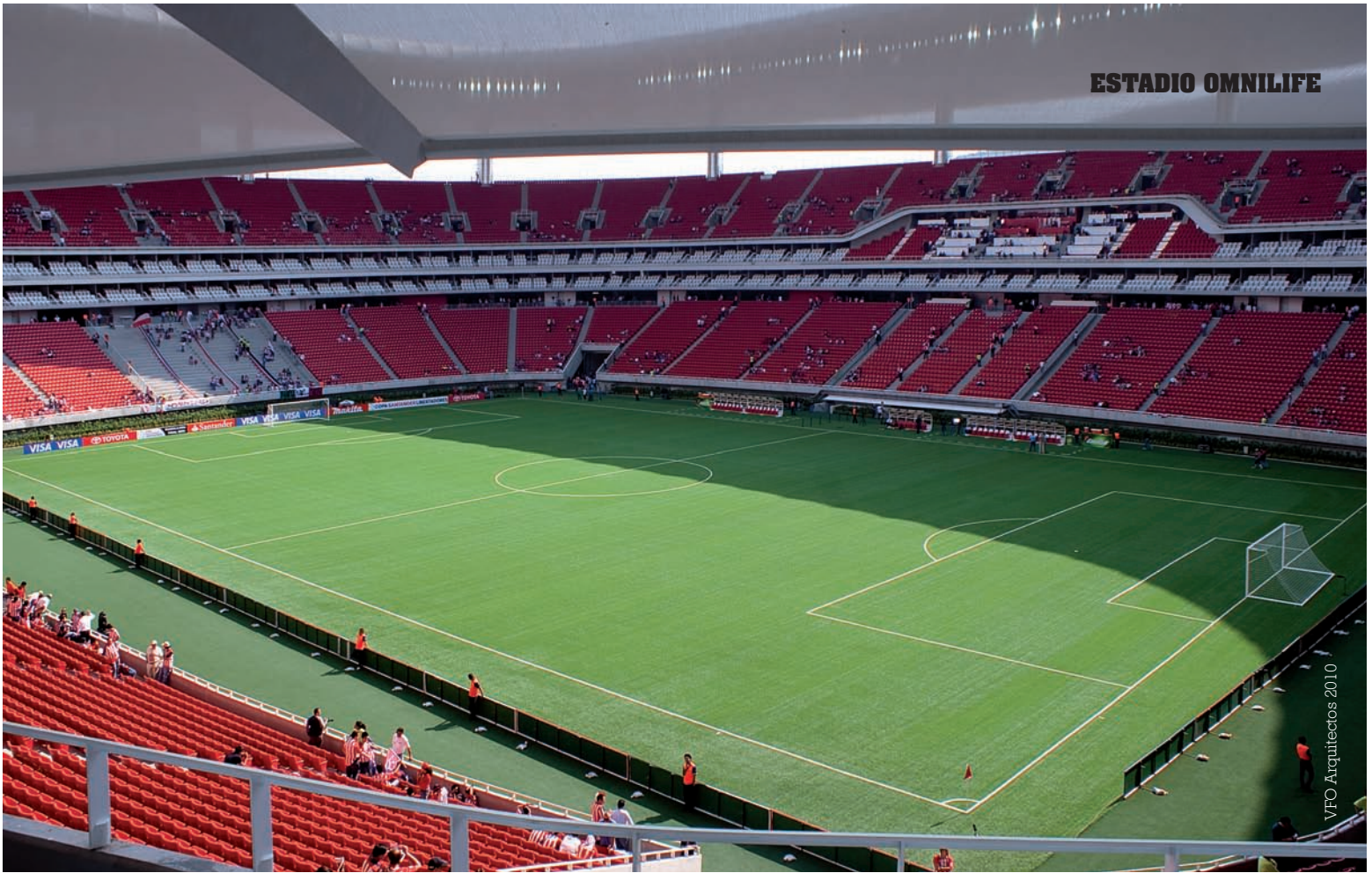
Was it worth all the trouble? "For me it was," says Jorge Vergara. "I was never anxious. I knew we would be delayed (for a little more than two and half years), and yes, that's how late we were. But to see the stadium, this beautiful building, filled with happy fans – and to watch Chivas playing Manchester United – was a night of total celebration."

### **What next?**

There is still a large empty space in the Bosque de la Primavera – all those offices, homes and hotels remain on drawing boards – but everyone connected with imagining, designing and building the Estadio Omnilife considers the effort an unqualified success. And rightly so.

"I'm confident that the rest of the project will be developed now that people see the stadium and realise what a wonderful area it is," says Andres Vergara. "In the meantime, the idea of integrating the stadium into nature already has had a great effect. Even when there is no football game, the surroundings are like a park. People can walk around and enjoy the beauty of it. Hopefully, this is the start of what might become a stadium building boom in Mexico. That is one element of what has been accomplished. At the same time, Jean-Marie Massaud's vision has become real, and it is even more remarkable now than when it was just a dream," he continues. "Sometimes projects just never happen in Mexico because people don't have enough belief, and yet Jorge Vergara and the whole concept of the Chivas de Guadalajara stadium have shown everyone what we can do. That's a wonderful thing for all of us." ■





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The new stadium features expansive concourses for easy access and state-of-the-art restaurants and bars

