

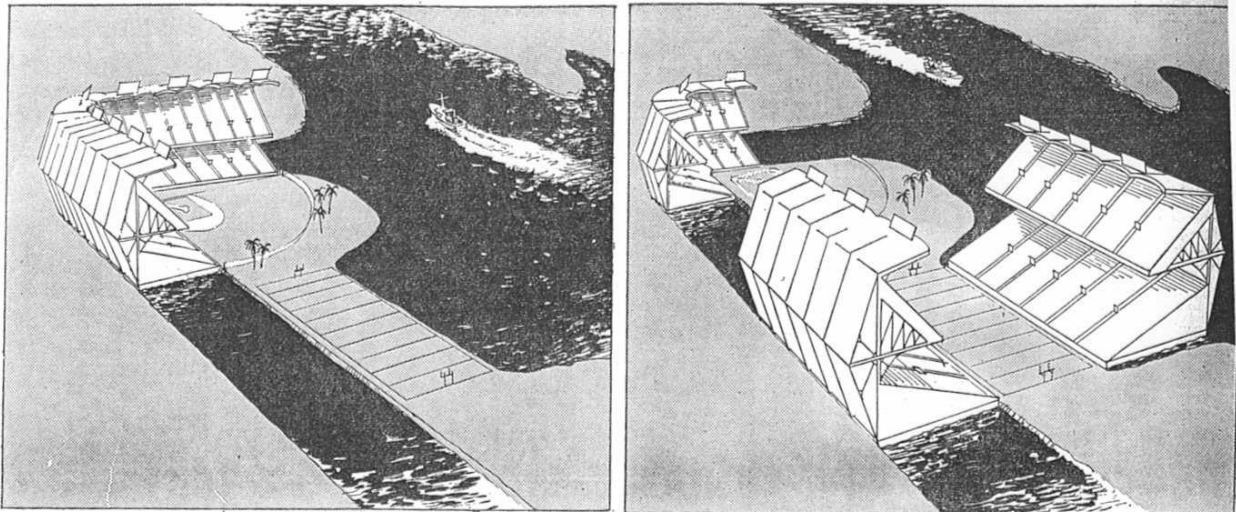
“A Floating Stadium for San Diego”

The floating stadium would be perfect for San Diego, particularly if it was located in Mission Bay. It's the first novel idea in stadium-building since the dome.

--Barron Hilton, October 1964.

Hotel magnate and San Diego Chargers' owner Barron Hilton was excited. A creative proposal from the local firm Boyle Engineering suggested a new sports stadium for San Diego that would float in the waters of Mission Bay. Hosting football, major league baseball, and aquatic events, the stadium would seat over 50,000 fans on a site near Fiesta Island.

The Boyle engineers planned a stadium with three huge sections. The center section—a grandstand, seating about 13,000—would be landlocked. Two wings, seating 20,000 each, would float on pontoons and could be easily maneuvered into various configurations to support the spectator requirements of different sports.



A “sea-going stadium” for seaport city? *San Diego Union*, June 11, 1964

For baseball, the two wings attached to a center grandstand. For football, the wings would be disengaged and floated over to cover both sides of a separate playing field. With other configurations fans could watch water sports on the bay. Requiring only eleven feet of draft, the sections would move easily. “As a stunt,” one engineer suggested, “we could have them pulled by circus elephants.”

The price tag appeared cheap: an estimated \$20 million--about the same cost as a conventional stadium. It was “the most daring, yet practical concept in stadium building since Houston discovered the dome,” enthused Jack Murphy, the respected sport columnist for the *San Diego Union*.

San Diego's need for a large, multi-purpose sports stadium was critical. After several years in the cramped quarters of aging Balboa Stadium, the Chargers were considering a move to Anaheim, and the minor league Padres were hopeful of a promotion to the big leagues--possible only if San Diego built a new stadium.

A feasibility study commissioned by the city and county and released in November 1964 examined several potential sites for the project dubbed the "All-American Stadium." Westgate Park, the Mission Valley home of the Padres, was quickly eliminated; the experts from Western Management Consultants judged the property too expensive to expand. A Kearny Mesa site appeared more promising, with good highway access and open areas for a large facility with lots of parking.

The highest marks went to Mission Bay. The site was already City-owned so property costs would not be a negative factor. Temperate weather by the ocean was favorable; after studying long-term weather patterns the consultants scoffed at fears of chilly game nights common to San Francisco's Candlestick Park.

The most impressive feature of the Mission Bay site was the flexibility of the buoyant, multi-purpose stadium. The consultants praised the unique use of flotation to move the tiers of seating to accommodate different sports. The location also took advantage of the features of Mission Bay Park, particularly the viewing of major aquatic events such as boat racing.

The San Diego press corps was convinced. Jack Murphy, who had championed the successful Westgate Park in 1958, wrote, "In the long run, the floating stadium would be cheaper to maintain, there's better parking and it would be a bigger tourist attraction than the Houston dome." Barron Hilton made his endorsement clear, declaring the floating stadium "the finest home for a football team that I can imagine."

With sentiment clearly favoring a floating arena in Mission Bay, the city selected the architectural firm Frank L. Hope and Associates to prepare a second feasibility study that would nominate one site for the All-American Stadium. But the new study, released on March 9, 1965, expressed doubts about the popular idea. "Every time we go through the floating concept we find new problems," said architect Frank Hope.

The biggest problem was simply cost. Hope calculated the final price tag of a floating stadium would exceed \$41 million--over twice the original estimate. Troublesome expenditures included \$7 million for the pontoons needed to move the floating sections and \$4 million for foundations. The engineering costs would raise the price to more than \$500 per stadium seat. Hope recommended instead, a 50,000 seat multi-purpose facility in Mission Valley that could be built for \$300 a seat for a final cost of only \$23.5 million.

"It will be a conventional stadium," conceded Jack Murphy, "conventional in the sense it won't float." But the San Diego City Council was reluctant to let go of the stadium on water. "I still think the idea has a lot of merit," said Councilman Jack Walsh. "I wouldn't give up on the floating stadium right away."

Entranced by the uniqueness of the idea, the nationwide publicity the city would garner, and the economic spark it could provide for developing Mission Bay, the Council unanimously directed Frank Hope to revisit the Mission Bay stadium.

But when Hope reported back five weeks later, the findings were the same. The city could expect “extremely high costs” in several phases of construction. The council unanimously endorsed the Mission Valley stadium on April 28, 1965.



In the fall, San Diego voters approved a \$27 million bond measure to build the conventional, multi-purpose facility. San Diego Stadium was completed in less than two years, hosting the Chargers in the stadium’s first game on August 20, 1967.

Construction of San Diego Stadium.

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2011), p. 124-126.