

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

The future of ballpark design will strive to satisfy fans' longings for the nostalgia of baseball, owners' needs for revenue, and communities' desire for mixed-use facilities with context.

“The future ain’t what it used to be,” said baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra, but that hasn’t stopped designers from trying to make ballparks what they used to be. As Larry King iterated in his interview with ESPN sportscaster Bob Ley regarding his recent attendance at the new \$1.1 billion Cowboys Stadium, “Stadium design has been the tightwire act of balancing revenue and nostalgia.” This is particularly relevant to the design of baseball stadiums.

National Pastime Venues: Past Their Prime?

In terms of design, the conundrum for architects is designing an increasingly modern ballpark for a very traditional game. While football stadium design has advanced in the 21st century (witness the new Cowboys Stadium in Dallas, Cardinals Stadium in Glendale, Ariz., and Soldier Field in Chicago), ballpark design has continued to be sluggish by comparison.

Part of that difference could be attributed to football’s emergence as a significant sport, competitive with baseball, as recently as the 1958 National Football League championship game between the Colts and Giants. Interestingly enough, it was played in Yankee Stadium. In its infancy, professional football was played in baseball stadiums (e.g., the New York Giants in Yankee Stadium). On the other hand, still in play are classic ballparks from the early 1900s, including Chicago’s Wrigley Field, which was designed for the long-extinct Federal League.

The venues for our national pastime do seem past their prime. Even state-of-the-art facilities for the Yankees and the Mets that opened in 2009 are modern-day clones of classic ballparks constructed in the early 1920s at Yankee Stadium (1923) in the Bronx and Ebbets Field (1913) in Brooklyn.

To see the future of baseball parks, let's begin by examining the future of baseball.

Baseball as Sport

“Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball.”

—Roger Hornsby

Baseball has long been considered America's pastime, with many people having played it (or its cousin, softball) in their youth. It is ingrained in American culture. Today, it is challenged by the increasing popularity of college sports as well as professional football, hockey, basketball, and the fastest growing spectator sport — NASCAR.

No other sport occupies the best season of the year as does baseball.

Historically, the lure of baseball is also due to its parallel with the seasons of the year. Former baseball commissioner Bart Giamatti summed up this aspect in his much publicized writing, “The Greenfields of the Mind”:

It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone. You count on it, rely on it to buffer the passage of time, to keep the memory of sunshine and high skies alive, and then just when the days are all twilight, when you need it most, it stops.

No other sport occupies the best season of the year as does baseball. It was designed to be played outdoors, and the need for good weather early in the season is accommodated by holding spring training in the Sunbelt states of Florida and Arizona. Attempts to bring the game indoors to Sunbelt states in the summer resulted first in Houston's Astrodome then the invention of AstroTurf. This positioned Houston as the cradle of the “doughnut era” stadium of the 1970s and launched an era of the covered stadium becoming more important to the status of a city than the compromises its multi-use nature represented. Because of stadium sponsorship conflicts, baseball has slowly distanced itself from these constraints. The Minnesota Twins left the Metrodome to play in a true (non-retractable dome) outdoor ballpark in Minneapolis. This move to the new Target Field represented a leap of faith and put the team in the position of being the most northern climate-challenged franchise in baseball. (The Toronto Blue Jays play in a retractable dome.)

Minor league baseball even more adroitly hits the optimum outdoor season of the year, with some short-season Class A teams playing from May through August. This schedule for America's pastime fits nicely with America's bias for the summer months as vacation time.

On the other side of the coin, the business of baseball has hurt the sport's popularity. Free agency in Major League Baseball has somewhat diminished city loyalty to teams. Players move around from team to team, city to city. Team expansion has been the rationale for expanded playoffs in lieu of a pennant race from simpler times: Commercialization rules.

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Some of my fondest memories are of sitting in a grade school classroom trying to pay attention while concealing an earphone connected to a transistor radio broadcasting a Yankees World Series game. But the days of creating a demand for the audience have been attenuated. In bringing baseball to the masses, TV in some respects has won the battle but not the war. As with other aspects of commercialization, the weakening of demand has straightened the hook for many young fans. As a young sports architect, I learned a fundamental lesson from Jerry Bell, then president of the Minnesota Twins: You have to create demand for the ticket. Most ballparks are simply too large now. In architectural parlance, they are designed for Easter Sunday — those few times a year when capacity is maxed out.

Today, it's easy to be a fan. But it wasn't all bad in the day when we had to work harder at it. I grew up in rural Nebraska, and the only way I could demonstrate unwavering loyalty to my beloved Yankees was to take my \$4.95 non-descript navy blue felt cap and decorate it with a crude "NY" fashioned from white pipe cleaners.

Another occurrence that has been detrimental to the popularity of baseball is the fallout from steroid use. Kids idolized Barry Bonds and Mark McGwire only to find the images of these star players not just tarnished but shattered by drug use. The hypocrisy of "Just say no" anti-drug programs in schools and the reality of drug use on baseball fields is traumatic, as is the discovery of lies told by revered athletes in attempting to cover up their bad habits. The 180-degree polarization this causes has had a profound impact on the development of young baseball fans. Periodically, out of the blue, my 10-year-old son asks me if so-and-so uses drugs. Compared to other "big four" governing bodies of sports — the National Football League, National Basketball Association, and National Hockey League — Major League Baseball has exhibited comparatively pathetic leadership in its dealings with this very important social issue.

Soccer remains somewhat of an enigma. It is a common fall sport for children and young people, so much so that it gave rise to the “soccer mom” culture. However, that early participation has not translated into fan loyalty as a spectator sport, and soccer has not matured in the United States in the manner many people forecast 15 to 20 years ago.

In attempting to read the tea leaves, it is interesting to note the recent substantial decline of the baseball trading card industry — a century-old institution that many Americans grew up with. Critics argue that an over-saturated market has killed kids’ interest. Others say that the game of baseball has lost relevance to youngsters, who now have myriad other entertainments and attractions to occupy their time. The late start of night baseball, whose games conclude well after bedtime, also tends to hurt kids’ interest.

Interest in the sport has historically started at an early age, which has been essential to creating the mass market that’s required to feed the events and venues themselves.

Baseball as Entertainment

Baseball is and will continue to be an important sport and pastime in American culture. However, today we are in a massive entertainment culture. And baseball, along with all other sports, is just an entertainment choice. Baseball has benefited greatly from this, as have other newer sports. The sport of baseball as an entertainment value for spectators is still strong but has increasing competition from other sports as well as non-sporting entertainments.

Another thought to put the future of baseball in perspective is the dynamics of venue vs. event.

In football, there are 12 to 16 games in a season. NASCAR has two events each year.

Major League Baseball, on the other hand, holds 162 games, and beyond that has a massive professional team support system in Minor League Baseball. There are more than 400 Minor League teams.

Baseball, then, is a sport of the masses. Literally hundreds of cities across America have professional baseball teams. Minor League Baseball provides the support system to supply Major League players, and Minor League

teams serve as local teams for towns to rally around in the lazy days of summer. Minor League Baseball hit its peak in the late 1940s post-war period with 59 leagues and more than 450 teams.

Professional baseball will continue to grow, particularly in the Minor League system. As more towns and cities want a local team, affiliated and independent leagues will grow. The future of ballpark design will then strive to satisfy longings for the nostalgia of baseball as well as the revenue needs of the owner. Minor League ballparks will feel more pressure than Major League venues to be successful entertainment options. But winning will not be the sole factor in drawing attendance.

The game-day fan experience will continue to grow and evolve. The trend of ballparks being anchors in mixed-use facilities will continue. This synergy works particularly well for baseball venues, which, because of their relatively small size and the high frequency of games, cater to local entertainment establishments and make tailgating less feasible than it is for football. Mixed-use developments provide post-game diversions to alleviate traffic congestion and provide entertainment alternatives in the event of rain delays.

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The urban design concepts that enabled Camden Yards' success have been interpolated into Minor League size cities with some great results. Designed by DLR, the ballpark in Greenville, S.C., had site constraints similar to the Fens in Boston, yet we were able to create an intimate, honestly idiosyncratic ballpark. When it opened in 2006, it was recognized by Ballparks.com as Ballpark of the Year, besting a Major League park that cost in the magnitude of 20 times more. Fluor Field in Greenville is a Class A affiliate of the Boston Red Sox. The perfect storm that resulted downtown in a smallish city is replete with a mini Green Monster that was born as an expression of site meeting use — the way it should be and the richest process of good ballpark design regardless of scale.

While many ballpark enthusiasts want to see ballparks with character, it is the honest expression of the context driving this resultant form that makes it special. Contrived field geometry results in gimmickry that baseball purists loathe.

Could it be that Minor League Baseball located in smaller town urban settings remains the true vestige of the fan experience most closely resembling the classic ballpark era?

Ballpark to Stadium to Dome to...

“The world is full of people whose notion of a satisfactory future is, in fact, a return to the idealized past.”

—Robertson Davis

If the decade of the 1990s was characterized as the steroid era, then the decade of the 1970s could be characterized as the sterile era. Baseball and football came together in a multi-purpose venue so anonymous it caused third baseman Richie Hebner to remark, “I stand at the plate in Philadelphia and I honestly don’t know whether I’m in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis, or Philly.”

Ballparks will continue to push the envelope of melding fan experience with the unique qualities ball field geometry can offer. Baseball, after all, is one of a few sports where playing field geometry is not part of the rules.

Baseball as a venue will continue to seek out its differentiation from football and other sport entertainment competitors. Baseball’s unique aspects are perhaps best articulated, albeit comically, in George Carlin’s classic rant comparing baseball to football (“Baseball’s object is to go home. I’m going home! I’m going home! In football, we’re down in enemy territory, reaching for the end zone. ...”)

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Ballpark design in the future will tend to more venues, primarily in the Minor League market, for more teams, with each venue having smaller capacities. Major League and Minor League parks of the past have been designed for Easter Sunday. The new trend is for smaller venues, such as PNC Park in Pittsburgh, which seats 38,000. Even Minor League ballparks are being designed smaller, recognizing the tendency of uncertain attendance in tough economic times. Minor League Baseball remains a true value in sport entertainment. Some owners sell grass berm seating tickets and even allow outside food and beverage to be brought in. This serves the community well in making the event available to diverse socioeconomic levels.

Ballpark as Entertainment Mall

“Fifty percent of the fans probably don’t know the name of the home team, and 90 percent don’t know or care who won — you’re basically running a theme restaurant with a cover charge. Our audience is people who eat”

—Minor League Baseball Owner

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Ballparks will continue to develop as entertainment malls for family-friendly entertainment. As ballparks have emerged to provide a concourse that encircles the baseball field, revenue opportunities will continue to present themselves to entrepreneurial owners and operators. It's almost as if the concourse becomes the midway path for entertainment diversions catering to increasing numbers of diverse age groups. In an age when it is increasingly difficult to do things as a family, the ballpark, especially the Minor League ballpark, serves as home base for family outings. There is a little bit of something for everyone: play areas for kids, video arcades for teens, and a relaxed atmosphere for mom and dad.

Technology

Baseball, by its pastoral nature and the frequency of games, is less susceptible to the pressures of the event than football or NASCAR.

Television has had a huge influence on the growth of baseball. In 1953, Gov. Edwin Johnson of Colorado warned Major League Baseball owners that televising baseball games would be a threat to the survival of Minor League Baseball. Conversely, 57 years later, one of the rationales for football owner Jerry Jones' huge video board inside his \$1.1 billion football stadium was to create an attraction that would far surpass even the most expensive home HDTV experience. The video board is part of the fan experience to get people to the game, which makes the event experience bigger than the venue, which is bigger than the game itself. This tends to highlight what Major League Baseball is competing with in the corporate environment. The major and minors are played in two different settings. Major League Baseball will continue to compete with professional football, basketball, and other sports for the ultimate in game day experience.

The December 1988, a television Major League Baseball deal with CBS and ESPN spawned revenue surpluses reportedly spent on free agents, launching a spending frenzy on players and venues. But a funny thing happened in 1994. There's an adage that says "You live by the fad, you die by the fad." TV was instrumental in bringing baseball to the masses, so it was also instrumental in the backlash of the Major League Baseball strike of 1994. No fall games, no fall classic, no World Series. While baseball in general and MLB in particular took a black eye, the winner in all of this was Minor League Baseball. Fans took to this level of play in large numbers, creating growth that unprecedented since the post-war years.

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There exists history, then, of a direct relationship between Major League and Minor League baseball attendance.

The next frontier in the future of technology will be watching HDTV in 3-D. This technology will up the ante to challenge the Jerry Joneses of the world to create even more *Wow!* factor in the fan experience.

With regard to baseball technology, fans will be able to merge fantasy baseball at the ballpark using fantasy baseball technology and the ballpark's wireless service. Fans could use real-time situations to play baseball manager and see if their skills would result in a different (hypothetical) outcome on the field.

Security

Looking into the future, one has to speculate what the effect would be of terrorism-related activity on large assembly spaces. Since Sept. 11, 2001, large assembly venues have been on a heightened advisory watch list. Logically, it is only a matter of time before a large venue or an event is the target of terrorist activity. A Super Bowl or World Series game would certainly qualify for this level of target.

In future ballpark design considerations, it is conceivable that larger facilities with retractable roofs will be adapted to care for victims of tragedies much the same way the Superdome was for Hurricane Katrina. Some facilities in London have already adopted this course of venues serving as places of refuge — a safe haven for both natural disasters and terrorist occurrences.

Design

Design for our American pastime has come a long way just in the past 50 years. As building code requirements and seating capacities increased, ballparks and stadiums were viewed as engineering challenges more suitable to civil and structural engineering designers.

The Truman Sports Complex, which opened in 1973, created an instant prototype for future stadium construction. It informed the design direction of future stadiums enough that Baseball Commissioner Peter Ueberroth led a 1985 effort to put the “park” back into the baseball venue design vocabulary. Since then, “yards,” “grounds,” “field,” and “diamond” have been added to monikers in an effort to soften stadiums' impact to the game of baseball. A rose is a rose.

Baltimore's Camden Yards, opened in 1992, set a standard of what architecturally responsible urban design could do in creating a memorable sense of place. This project marked a renaissance in the possibilities that urban ballparks could provide. The sport facility began being taken seriously again — by architects and the public alike. The so-called retro era had begun.

“The old-fashioned design of the new parks is seen not as retrogressive, but as liberating, relative to the allegedly insipid, artificial, and destructive design of the post-war stadiums,” noted Phil Gruen of the Society of American Baseball Research.

Today's ball stadium designs are struggling to be identified as 21st-century ballparks. Arenas and football stadiums more easily have made the leap to modern venues. The pressure from architectural critics will continue to push for ballpark aesthetic to better reflect 21st-century technology and culture.

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Future ballpark design will continue with a creative exploration of fan experiences — with a closeness and intimacy that Ebbets Field once had. Baseball needs designers who are passionate about the game and who continue to optimize the fan experience. Intimacy to the field of play is essential to the fan experience. This was explored in Philip Bess' 1989 book *City Baseball Magic: Plain Talk and Uncommon Sense about Cities and Baseball Parks*, which served notice to designers of their social responsibility.

The new ball park prototypes of 1973 (Truman Sports Complex) and 1992 (Camden Yards) established not only physical models but economic models as well. *I want one of those* was the banter from team owners. However, this call by owners and investors resulted in a rut for the industry. The architectural profession was not amused or inspired by the desire for more retro stadiums. Discussing the sensibilities required for the design of new baseball parks, architecture critic John Pastier noted, “Prior design of a major league stadium should be automatic grounds for disqualification.”

Camden Yards was a resounding success, but it was completed 18 years ago. The architecture profession as a whole is anxiously awaiting the ballpark of the 21st century.

The next wave of Major League Ballpark design won't hit for 10 to 15 years at least. This means that Minor League ballparks are the canvas for fresh thought.

The near future seems somewhat calm with regard to new facility construction following 20 years of unprecedented construction activity.

As the sport of baseball ages, we'll see ballparks increasingly exploring the historical background of its franchise. Baseball has longevity and a rich history that dates back to the formation of the National League in 1878. The ballpark in Greenville, S.C., for example, pays homage to one of its local sons, Shoeless Joe Jackson.

Another result of the growth of baseball in the early 1990s was the creation of minimum design standards for the reuse or new design of Minor League facilities. These standards were promulgated by the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues. As a result, since the inception of these standards in 1991, there has been a building boom of both Minor and Major League facilities. The near future seems somewhat calm with regard to new facility construction following 20 years of unprecedented construction activity.

In the end, the future of ballparks will depend on the popularity of baseball, of baseball as entertainment, and the attraction value of the baseball venue and event itself in our hyper-competitive massive entertainment culture. Looking to the future, what is it we, as architectural critics and baseball fans, want to see and experience? In the words of Alan Kay, "The best way to predict the future is to invent it."



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Stan Meradith is a senior principal with the DLR Group Sports practice, which he established in 1987 with the design of the Cincinnati Reds Major League spring training complex in Plant City, Fla. DLR Group has worked on major sports projects across the country for 23 years, with an emphasis on baseball. Meradith received his Bachelor of Science and Master of Architecture degrees from the University of Nebraska and interned with I.M. Pei and Partners. He is a speaker at sports conferences around the country and in 2009 was appointed co-chairman of the Society of American Baseball Research ballparks committee. He resides in Omaha, Neb., with his wife and two baseball-playing sons, both of whom are diehard Yankee fans.