

THEORY AND BALLPARK DESIGN IN BASEBALL'S GILDED AGE

Gilbert Chesterton, in a brief essay on the practicality of theory, noted that a defense of theoretical thinking

exposes one to the cheap charge of fiddling while Rome is burning....There has arisen in our time a most singular fancy: the fancy that when things go wrong we need a practical man. It would be far truer to say that when things go very wrong we need an unpractical man. Certainly, at least, we need a theorist....It is wrong to fiddle while Rome burns; but it is quite right to study the theory of hydraulics while Rome is burning.

"Rome, burning" has been the state of the baseball stadium art for more than thirty years; and is, of course, directly related to the ill-conceived theories and destructive practices of Modernist (sub-) urbanism. The new Comiskey Park represents only slight relief; it is to a serious theory of baseball park design what the silliest historicist excesses of Post-Modern architecture are to the theories of Colin Rowe and Leon Krier, and "succeeds" for the same reason that PM has succeeded--because its clients believe that it will help sell their product.

Architects, if we are to avoid demonstrating Philip Johnson's contention that architecture is but a variation of the world's oldest profession, need good theory. We especially need theory that identifies the nature and purpose of architecture with respect not only to its intrinsic "internal" goods, but also to the common good. This is an inherently tricky task, however, and not only because of a lack of consensus about "the common good." It is also because architects have immediate obligations to clients, whose foremost concerns may not include--and may even conflict with--a concern for the public realm.

This dilemma is particularly acute in the design and construction of new baseball parks. This is in part because: a) virtually all such buildings today are publicly financed; and b) virtually none of them generate revenues sufficient both to pay for themselves and to profit the tenants for whom they are built. But it is also in part because both the public agencies who commission and finance these buildings, and the owners of the teams who create their programs and for whom they are built, conceive a formal (i.e. "suburban") model for such buildings that guarantees conflict between the legitimate economic and aesthetic objectives of both teams and public agencies. This places civic-minded architects in the aforementioned dilemma, one that will not be resolved until architects begin to articulate to themselves and their clients both the problems with the existing suburban model and an urban alternative to it.

This is not the place for a detailed account of the features of that alternative model, an earlier version of which is thriving even today at and around the intersection of Chicago's Addison and Clark Streets. But it is worth noting that attempts to articulate its features have been occurring for more than a decade, and coming from at least two different directions. From a relatively small segment of the design community has emerged a renewed general concern for the practical and aesthetic virtues of traditional urbanism. From the larger community of baseball fans has emerged a renewed appreciation for, and detailed accounts of, the character and qualities of old ballparks--features directly related, we now understand, to their location in traditional urban settings. This has made possible the positing of a new model for ballpark design, one that is "traditionally urban," but that also takes into account contemporary realities such as parking and luxury seating requirements. The features of this model would include:

- 1) treating the ballpark urbanistically, as a public building the shape and playing field of which is shaped and constrained by a network of streets and blocks;
- 2) distributing rather than concentrating its associated parking;
- 3) attempting to encourage a variety of uses, including retail and commercial, in the vicinity of the ballpark;
- 4) diminishing the scale of the ballpark by locating non-essential program functions in buildings adjacent to rather than within the ballpark;
- 5) paying close attention to the cost and aesthetic implications of the ballpark section, particularly with respect to seating intimacy and the treatment of vertical circulation; and
- 6) discreetly handling class-related issues by neither monumentalizing luxury seating nor building it at the expense of good seats for the middle- and working-class fan.

Because corporate "sports facilities" architects tend to define themselves first and foremost as members of a "service profession" (which is their polite way of saying that for their fee they will do whatever their clients tell them), they have not generated, and are unlikely to soon embrace with conviction, such theoretical concerns. That the best recent ballpark work (in Buffalo, in Baltimore) has been done for clients who have insisted that *some* of the aforementioned issues be addressed is telling. What remains to be seen is whether new ballpark design will be (as it is not yet) solidly grounded in good urban design, or whether it will continue to be defined in terms of image and nostalgia--the hulking new Comiskey Park and its pre-cast arches in a giant parking lot.

Architects who deal in architectural theory necessarily have long-term objectives, because it is impossible for architects to eliminate completely the tension between our immediate obligations to clients and our theoretical aspirations. In the realm of ballpark design, a serious engagement by architects and their clients of the issues outlined above might resolve some of that tension. But this will happen only if there is some reciprocal interest in these issues from the public agencies who typically pay for and build new ballparks; and especially from Major League Baseball (MLB), the 700-lb gorilla for whom new ballparks are built. That public agencies should be so interested is clear; that MLB should be so interested is less obvious, because its financial interests are already being addressed by tax-payer funded suburban model stadiums made ever so appealing by the architectural applique of nostalgia.

Indeed, professional baseball has never been more popular, in spite of an apparent increase of disaffection between players and fans commonly attributed to the latter's resentment of the former's rising salaries. But baseball's moguls have rarely been known for taking the long view; and both among the smaller population market teams inside baseball (the Milwaukeees, the Seattles, the Cincinnatiis, and the Pittsburghs); and generally, for different reasons, to observers outside baseball, there is concern that the economics of baseball may be out of control. Assuming that the escalating salary structure of MLB has not topped out of its own accord, it is

possible to imagine a couple of plausible scenarios for the very near future. One is that baseball will regulate its economy internally, by means of features such as salary caps and revenue sharing. The other is that baseball will at last, and against its will, be subjected to the regulation of the marketplace, a condition that they have heretofore managed to avoid by their exemption from federal anti-trust laws--an exemption sustained by the now virtually unsustainable fiction that MLB is a sport rather than a business.

If we are indeed approaching an era of limits in the economy of baseball, and in the public sector's willingness to subsidize that economy, architects ought to have ready specific ideas about how to design less costly and more intimate ballparks that are both good for baseball and much better for the formal and economic order of cities. This will necessarily reintroduce the notion of physical constraint into ballpark design. Major League Baseball is a noble creation; but, as the new Comiskey Park demonstrates, MLB needs to be constrained if it is to dwell among civilized people. Such constraints, whether internal or external, should be liberal, allowing baseball to do best that which baseball does; but constraints there must be. We want to admire 700-lb. gorillas for their grace and strength and power, not be terrorized by the fury of their passions.

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