COORS FIELD SHINES WHILE BASEBALL LOSES SOME LUSTER

April is the cruelest month lamented T.S. Eliot, and only partly because he couldn't hit the curve ball.

This April in Colorado, Rockies fans surely would agree. For this month Coors Field--the best big league baseball stadium to be built since Yankee Stadium in 1923--opens with replacement players, in the midst of the most rancorous labor dispute in the history of baseball.

This is more than just bad luck and coincidence however, for several major trends long in the making have at last collided. These include a growing obsession with money by both team owners and players, an increasing dependency on public subsidies by baseball generally, and a still fledgling national trend to create better playing facilities. The value and importance, as well as the shortcomings, of Coors Field can only be understood against the backdrop of these larger considerations.

Before my own take on Coors Field however, full disclosure is in order.

I was a paid consultant in 1990 to the owners of two different sites that were ultimately rejected as the location of the new Denver baseball stadium. I also associated in 1990 with an architectural team that competed for but did not win the Denver stadium design commission. I have been an unsuccessful competitor of the Coors Field architects (HOK Sport) for several other stadium design commissions; and have severely criticized HOK in print, most harshly for their design of Chicago's new Comiskey Park. I would love to be more involved than I am in the design of professional baseball parks; but it has been apparent to me for some time that, given my point of view and the way the current stadium game is played, that is unlikely to happen.

I have been wrong many times in my life; but I may have gotten it just right back in 1988 in the Introduction to my slender Society for American Baseball Research-sponsored book *City Baseball Magic*. There I described the paradox at the heart of professional baseball: that on the one hand it breeds excellence, hence popularity, hence profitability; but that on the other hand its financial success depends upon the ability of players and owners to transcend profit motives. In calling attention to the deficiencies of post-1960 publicly financed stadiums, we argued that both baseball and cities would change for the better if baseball were once again played in traditional urban baseball parks rather than suburban multi-use stadiums. The details of our approach included:

1) Build ballparks within networks of streets and blocks that would place physical constraints upon ballpark design, rather than on big "super blocks;"

2) Distribute parking within a 10-15 minute walk of the ballpark, rather than placing all parking immediately adjacent to the ballpark; and

3) Pay careful attention to the ballpark's cross section, for its effects on both building and land costs and the ballpark's sense of "intimacy," which may be characterized especially as the proximity of upper deck seating to the playing field.

The consequences of this approach, we argued, would be more interesting and intimate ballparks that would both cost less to build and allow if not encourage various kinds of economic development adjacent to the ballpark.

By 1988 it was apparent that baseball was on the threshold of a frenzied period of new stadium construction. The cause of this frenzy was a demand by teams for luxury seating---skyboxes and club seats---needed to generate revenues to help pay the skyrocketing salaries that the owners were unable to keep themselves from offering to players. Moreover, big league baseball has been able by various means---threatening to leave, in Chicago; threatening not to come, in Denver---not only to get the public to pay for their new stadiums, but to procure lease agreements that allocate virtually all stadium generated revenues to the teams.

Selling the idea of public subsidies to millionaires is no easy task, especially for an industry such as baseball which depends so heavily upon the hope, good will, and forgiving nature of its fans. Here however, traditionalist arguments have inadvertently played right into professional baseball's new stadium agenda.

As late as 1987 the proponents of traditional ballparks were rudely dismissed by team owners and sports architects (including HOK) alike. But even before the opening of the new Comiskey Park in 1991, the lords of baseball had begun to recognize the cash value of the words "traditional urban baseball park." Nobody bought that characterization of the new Comiskey Park; but the tremendous success of Baltimore's Camden Yards has insured that for the foreseeable future every new baseball stadium, no matter how big or how high-tech or how far from a city, will be a "traditional urban baseball park."

It is into this 1990s "traditional urban" family of new, similarly-scaled, baseball-only, natural-grass facilities (a family that includes Comiskey Park, Camden Yards, Jacobs Field, and The Ballpark in Arlington) that Coors Field--no accident that none of these venues is called "stadium"--now takes its place.

But although Coors Field shares the essential organizational layout of the new Comiskey Park---big mall-like concourses, column-free views that put upper-deck seats far away, perimeter vertical circulation---in nearly every place where Comiskey Park is an aesthetic and urban disaster, Coors Field is an aesthetic and urban success.

So why do I---and more importantly, why should Rockies fans---like Coors Field? Let me count the reasons.

Coors Field is The Ballpark at Arlington with good taste and urban context. It gets the interior details almost effortlessly right. From the small foul territory that puts lower deck seats closer to the action, to the seamless way in which the seats angle back toward the infield as they extend down the foul lines. From the deep green color of the seating and railings and fences and batters' eye and steelwork, to the single purple row of upper deck seats at 5280'. From the relative visual de-emphasis of the luxury seating, to the comparatively gentle slope of the upper deck. From the liberal use of stairs in conjunction with ramps, escalators, and elevators, to the placement and detailing of the ramps themselves. Even the controversial additional outfield seating (which

does nothing to diminish overall upper deck intimacy, since there is none) is handled with aplomb. And if the Rockies' public relations people have the good sense not to over-hype the inexpensive center field bleacher seats, the fans themselves will quickly find ways to make them their own.

On the exterior, notwithstanding a few clumsy details, Coors Field is simply the best and most urbane facade in baseball today. Its masonry "kit of parts" (sandstone, brick, pre-cast concrete, ornamental terra cotta columbines) is employed with impressive dexterity, creating both ornamental pattern and appealing rhythms of light and shadow, solid and void.

Equally impressive however is how Coors Field works urbanistically on those sides where it is built up adjacent to the Denver street grid. Entry locations are clearly marked architecturally, and are in the right places: at the corner of 20th and Blake, and on axis with the approaches from Wynkoop Street, 21st Street, and the pedestrian approach from the northeast side (right field) parking lot. Even the view from Wazee street, though not terminated with an entrance, is marked by a stair tower. Moreover, Coors Field may have the kind of positive economic impact on the Lower Downtown neighborhood that Denver has been hoping for. Already there is much new street front retail activity in the warehouse district, and the stadium will be contributing year round to that activity on Blake Street with its museum / gift shop and restaurant / brewery.

All of these features help make the exterior of Coors Field superior to any other ballpark or stadium facade today, and make more tolerable the few mis-steps: the relative formal and proportional clumsiness of the well-placed entries themselves; the commercial "pavilions" atop the entry at 20th and Blake; and the absence of horizontal cross aisles in the upper and lower decks, which are a fan amenity that also aids stadium circulation but allegedly discourages fans from shopping in the concourses.

And yet, if I may characterize Coors Field aesthetically as the best example to date of a certain type of 1990s baseball stadium---very big, very expensive, publicly funded, conceived first and foremost as a revenue generator, and marketed to fans as a "traditional urban ballpark"---a larger, rarely asked question remains: How good is the type?

Coors Field, for all its genuine merits (hell, perhaps because of its genuine merits), came in at $215M, more than twice its original estimate. Bearing in mind that a recent study cited by *New York* magazine of fourteen stadium projects revealed an average construction cost overrun of 73%, consider that Phoenix has just committed to build a retractable-domed "traditional baseball" stadium at an estimated cost of $270M. Seattle is thinking about one too. The Yankees just recently *rejected* a $600M offer by the City of New York to upgrade Yankee Stadium and environs. And Tampa and Phoenix, for only $130M each, have just been awarded new Major League Baseball franchises, and there's not even any Major League Baseball.

Is it just a coincidence that the much-hyped "ballpark renaissance" is happening as professional baseball disintegrates before our eyes? Is there no limit to how long professional baseball--assisted by sports architects, including HOK--can continue to play both fans and cities for chumps?

Consider what team owners, sports architects, and even public officials don't know but

should; or perhaps do know, but don't want you to know. Compare, for example, Coors Field to Wrigley Field.

Coors has a building footprint of approximately 13 acres, and a height of approximately 130 feet. Wrigley occupies approximately 8 acres and is 105' from field to rooftop.

A ballpark at the scale of Wrigley Field, with as many club seats and more skyboxes than Coors Field, and with a smaller and genuinely intimate upper deck about 40' closer to the playing field, could be built for 45-60% of the cost of Coors Field.

From where and what would the savings come? From lower land costs and parking requirements, and smaller quantities of building materials. From concourses and vertical circulation that would be smaller and better integrated into the ballpark's volume and structure, but no less convenient for fan movement and concession patronage. From clubhouses and training facilities that would be merely comfortable rather than luxurious.

Nevertheless, assuming both a smaller general admission capacity and little or no team-controlled parking, such a ballpark might produce only 85 to 90 percent of the revenue of a Coors Field. And so long as Major League Baseball can get taxpayers to pay for and concede the revenues from a twice-as-costly Coors Field, such a ballpark is not going to happen.

For why should owners be interested in promoting genuinely traditional and intimate urban baseball parks--unless they possessed both touchingly pre-modern civic sensibilities and a fondness for intimate ballparks at least the equal of their financial interests? And why should HOK Sport push the envelope and aggressively promote such ballparks, when to do so would at least lower their fee (which is typically based on a percentage of construction costs), if not cost them their favored position with team owners--unless they possessed some core convictions about ballparks and architecture and cities at least the equal of their financial interests?

I don't mean to be unsympathetic to the economic dilemmas and conflicts of conscience that perhaps beset even the best owners and sports architects. But the fact is that Major League Baseball is out of control. Everyone knows this; and baseball's current construction craze is every bit as much a symptom of it as its current labor conflict.

In professional baseball, money has always mattered. But we appear to have reached a cultural moment of professional-baseball-as-entertainment in which ultimately only money really matters. True urban ballparks will therefore become fashionable again when and only when there are economic incentives to build them, incentives that do not currently exist.

What circumstances might create such incentives? Call me unimaginative; but weaning baseball from its public (i.e. stadium) subsidies and injecting it with a healthy dose of free market economics would be a good place to start, and would have a bracing and salutary effect upon both players and owners alike. Among other things, we could expect to see a renewed interest in cost-benefit analyses of urban ballparks vs. stadiums if team owners actually had to pay for them.

Because of the strike, baseball may be closer to losing its federal anti-trust exemption than

it has ever been. Such an occurrence might not be so bad, since it would encourage competition and possibly lead to the creation of new professional leagues and teams. Unfortunately, there appears to be no shortage of sports-addicted cities willing to promise and give anything for a professional baseball team; so I'm not holding my breath.

Instead, this month and throughout the summer I'm going to coach and watch twelve-year-olds play baseball. And after you, dear reader, have been out to see and enjoy Coors Field, I would encourage you to go do the same. Let kids' baseball do one of those things well that professional baseball once did brilliantly, which is to relieve rather than make more severe the cruelties of April.

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