

Architecture and Tradition Inspire 'Retro' Ballparks



Rendering of the new Mets ballpark

When the all-new Mets Ballpark opens in 2009, its handsome brick exterior and dramatic entry rotunda will make baseball fans feel as though they're walking into historic Ebbets Field, once home to New York's long-departed Brooklyn Dodgers.

That's because the new 45,000-seat, open-air stadium is being designed in an architectural style that recalls an earlier era when baseball was still "the nation's pastime" and tradition ruled. Unlike the modern concrete and steel exterior of Shea Stadium, which it replaces, the Mets Ballpark façade will employ familiar, "natural" materials such as brick to achieve this look.

"The Mets new ballpark...will merge the intimate feel of old, classic ballparks like Ebbets Field with the amenities of today's modern sports facilities," explained New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg when the stadium plans were unveiled.

New York is not alone in seeking to restore nostalgic warmth and glamour to its major league venues. In the past decade, other professional teams have built similar tradition-inspired "retro" ballparks, most of which evoke the urban ballparks of the 1920s and '30s. Common themes among them are manual scoreboards, old-fashioned signage and natural grass instead of artificial turf on the fields.

The trend began with the construction of Oriole Park at Camden Yards in

Baltimore 14 years ago. Since then, PNC Park in Pittsburgh, the Great American Ball Park in Cincinnati, Jacob's Field in Cleveland, SBC Park in San Francisco, Coors Field in Denver and Miller Park in Milwaukee have all risen from the ashes of baseball's halcyon days to mix the new with the old — to the delight of fans today who flock to them in record numbers.

"Certainly, the trend in the last 15 years has gone towards what is commonly known as retro ballparks," says Philip Bess, Graduate Director and Professor at the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture. "What the newer stadiums have in common with the older ones is that they're being built in cities rather than suburbs, and there's an attempt to make them look like traditional buildings."

Many of these ballparks front on city streets in neighborhood downtowns, near apartment complexes, public transportation and within walking distance to local restaurants, pubs and shops.

"Certain kinds of materials, brick among them, connote durability," Bess says. "There's something appealing about it because it's taken from the earth and it doesn't go through a lot of transformative process. It's not manufactured like steel and not a combination of things like concrete."

Apparently, the impression of age and durability is a big hit with fans. The major league's two oldest and most revered stadiums, Boston's Fenway Park, built in 1912, and Chicago's Wrigley Field, which opened two years later, have steadfastly maintained their original, old-time brick facades and outfield walls — a factor that only reinforces their appeal.

For more information about brick in architecture, visit the Web site of the Brick Industry Association at www.gobrick.com. **HP**