

# Looking to the past for our baseball future

**H**istory is too often viewed as an obstacle to progress, particularly when it comes to old buildings. So much of Philadelphia's past already has been lost to the demolition ball for the sake of "modernization" as well as the bottom line.

Ironically, after we've leveled the bricks and mortar of an earlier era, we inevitably yearn for a return to the past. It's that kind of nostalgia — for an old-fashioned, downtown ballpark like Jacobs Field in Cleveland or Camden Yards in Baltimore — as well as the prospect of greater revenue that appears to inform the city's current thinking about a new baseball park.

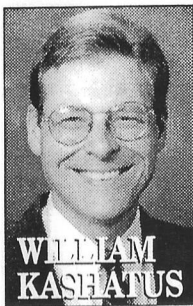
Imagine for a moment, Philadelphia's brand new state-of-the-art park at the turn of the century. A stately structure, the green cathedral would sport a roofed double-decked grandstand that would hug the infield, giving fans a more intimate experience with the game.

The dimensions would be respectable enough for power hitters — 378 feet from home plate down the leftfield line, 515 feet to center and 340 feet down the rightfield line — but still hold a special, idiosyncratic charm that would reflect the uniqueness of Philadelphia itself. A short rightfield fence, for example, that would not only afford a view of the surrounding neighborhood, but give residents a free view of the game. A large scoreboard would sit in right center,

imposing enough to prevent all but the mightiest blasts from leaving the park, but far enough away from centerfield so as not to obstruct a view of the city's skyline.

Sound appealing? It was — back in 1909, when Shibe Park (later known as Connie Mack Stadium) was opened.

Located in the heart of North Philadelphia, Shibe Park was the first concrete-and-steel stadium in the nation. Named for Benjamin F. Shibe, principal owner of the Philadelphia Athletics and president of Reach Sporting Goods, the park was a handsome facility, giving the appearance of a French Renaissance castle from the outside. Its two grandstand walls were joined at 21st Street and Lehigh Avenue where the domed tower of the main entrance stood.



On April 12, 1909, when this new "state-of-the-art" park opened, the baseball world waxed enthusiastic about it.

"Shibe Park is the greatest place of character in the world," gushed American League President Ban Johnson. "A pride to the city," insisted Mayor John Reyburn. "An enduring monument to the national pastime," wrote the Evening Telegraph

Over the years, the ballpark developed its own little quirks: home run balls that cleared the short rightfield fence, breaking the second-story windows of the rowhouses on 20th Street; obstructed views, after alterations were made to the park in 1913 and 1925; and,

of course, the absence of Sunday baseball due to the antiquated blue laws.

Shibe Park had a special intimacy. Fans felt the excitement of the game. Each contest seemed to provide another story to remember, every homer, a history of its own.

I saw only one game there, but I will remember it as long as I live. The Phillies, who then played at the park, came from behind to beat the Pittsburgh Pirates 2-1 on a Deron Johnson home run in the bottom of the ninth. But what impressed me more was the spontaneous emotion of the crowd; the unique smell of cigarettes, hot dogs and beer blended together; the way the vendors announced their presence; and sharing that adventure with my twin cousins and Uncle Stan, who had once played in the major leagues himself.

It was June 1970. By then the A's were long gone, the stadium was called Connie Mack and its days were numbered.

Visiting ballclubs called it a "rattletrap." Sportswriters joked about the "seats that made you want to stand," the scoreboard "with a hole in the middle," and the "near-coronary walking to the upper deck." Fans complained about the warm beer, cold hot dogs and lack of convenient parking. Forced to find a spot in the declining neighborhood surrounding the park, they would be greeted by local teen-agers who asked: "Fifty cents to watch your car, Mister?" Refusing would cost you your hubcaps, or worse.

Then there was the indignity of Oct. 1, 1970. After the final game was played, the fans raped the old ballpark for everything it

was worth — seats, sod from the field, pieces of the dugouts. The Phillies were lucky to get out with home plate.

"Instead of dying like the graceful, grand place it was," the Daily News wrote the following day, "Connie Mack Stadium ended its life literally shrieking in pain from the tortments of being torn apart."

In its last years, the stadium became a breeding ground for crime and waste. Neighborhood residents used it as a dump. Police routinely checked it for missing persons. Drug addicts used it as a shooting gallery, and juvenile delinquents set it on fire. Finally, in 1976, the city put the old stadium out of its misery by demolishing it. Today, all that remains is the bronze statue of Connie Mack waving his trademark scorecard, which has been relocated to Broad Street and Pattison Avenue outside of the Vet.

What I find so amusing about all the hoopla surrounding a new, downtown ballpark is the irony of it all, namely that an older generation's refuse seems to have become their children's desire. It will be interesting to hear what the Phillies and their fans have to say about the new stadium 30 years from now, if it lasts that long.

Perhaps the moral of the story is that sometimes we fail to appreciate what we have until its gone. In Connie Mack Stadium, Philadelphia had something pretty special. ■

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