



When completed, the retractable roof of the Ballpark at Union Station will, at its highest point, rise 242 feet above the playing field — 38 feet higher than the highest point in the Astrodome.

Fair or Foul?

BY JIM ZOOK

SUPPORTERS OF THE BALLPARK
AT UNION STATION CLAIM IT
WILL HIT A HOME RUN
FOR DOWNTOWN. BUT
SOME CAUTION IT
COULD STILL TURN
OUT TO BE A
FOUL BALL.

Regardless of whether you get the close-up view from U.S. 59, the skyline perspective from the inbound lanes of Interstate 10, or merely a glimpse on the horizon from the South Loop, the emerging Ballpark at Union Station is a captivating sight. The steel span that will support the stadium's retractable roof bears the shape and scale of a humpback whale, surging skyward from the depths of the northeast corner of downtown. The concrete underbelly of the stadium is taking shape, a tangible sign that the first pitch will be thrown just a year from now. Amid the constant clang-clang-clang of progress, the army of construction workers and steady stream of onlookers seem to personify Kevin Costner's most famous cliché from the movie *Field of Dreams* — "If you build it, they will come."

For Houston's ballpark, though, Costner's line demands a critical addendum: "When the game's over, will they have reason to stay?" Business leaders sold the ballpark to the community as a sure ticket to economic revival for the east side of downtown — the exact same

argument used 15 years earlier to justify building the neighboring George R. Brown Convention Center. Still, though the convention center had failed to deliver on its promise, supporters of the November 1996 stadium referendum insisted the \$250 million ballpark would become a hub for a bustling commercial and residential district. "You are a part of something that will change Houston and Harris County," Astros owner Drayton McLane Jr. told a crowd of supporters on election night. McLane's comments marked a dramatic change of heart; only four months earlier, he had told the *Houston Chronicle* that a move downtown "could be a big mistake for me."

Setting aside the Astros' prospects on the field, what will be the lasting image of the Ballpark at Union Station in the eyes of Houstonians? Will it be viewed as a major public asset that anchors the rebirth of one of Houston's oldest neighborhoods? Will it trigger growth that extends the loft projects and urban cityscape now emerging around Market Square? Or will it spawn development that ignores the context and replicates the



The retro quality of the Ballpark at Union Station's design can already be seen in the arches (right) that will fit beneath the retractable roof.

© 1999 Hester + Hardaway



© 1992 Jeff Goldberg, Esq. Photography/Courtesy of HOK Sport

Baltimore's Camden Yards was one of HOK's first retro stadiums.



© 1995 Thomey Labaree/Courtesy of HOK Sport

Coors Field in Denver, one of HOK's more recent stadium projects.



Rendering/Courtesy of HOK Sport

The Ballpark at Union Station, as projected for April 2000.



Rendering showing the Ballpark's roof in its retracted state. Fully extended, it would cover the playing field.

cheap construction all too common in the suburbs? Worse, will it become a financial black hole that funnels millions into the pockets of McLane and his players but offers little added value to the city before and after games?

Any new stadium represents such a massive undertaking that it can be studied on several levels. For now and in the years to come, three issues will merit particular attention — its architectural contribution to the cityscape, its power as an engine for growth and development, and its value as a public asset. Since the picture has yet to be filled in on any of these issues, all of them are ripe for exploration.

One certainty about the Ballpark at Union Station is that it is already a hulking presence that stands to grow even larger. A telltale sign of a modern-day ballpark is the amount of land it consumes when compared to its predecessors, multi-use stadiums such as the Astrodome. The Ballpark at Union Station complex (including the station building) will cover just over 15 acres — 59 percent more space than the 9.5-acre Astrodome structure. And when closed, the ballpark's retractable roof will loom 242 feet above the playing surface, 34 feet higher than the Astrodome roof. Yet the Astrodome seats 12,000 more people for baseball. How can that be? One answer is that all the added amenities demanded from a modern ballpark — the luxury boxes, bigger clubhouses, larger press boxes, a kids' play area, escalators and elevators, the 262-seat Diamond Lounge behind home plate, retail areas, seated restaurants, and the structure that supports the retractable roof — devour a tremendous amount of space. In addition to covering more turf, these features drive up the overall cost of the ballpark considerably.

Part of the Ballpark at Union Station's scale stems from its location. Whereas the Astrodome's size is minimized by its position in an ocean of parking within a 260-acre complex, the ballpark's presence is magnified by the density of downtown and the stadium's proximity to the elevated freeway. That sense of bigness is an intentional aspect of the design, says Earl Santee, the ballpark's lead architect with the Kansas City-based firm HOK Sport. "The verticality of downtown Houston, there are some strong influences of that on the ballpark," Santee says. "How the building addresses Texas Avenue is important from an architectural and an

urban design standpoint. ... The regional aspects include the use of granites, brick, things that are common to the context of the site. We hope that will make it a good neighbor."

The behemoth of stadium design, HOK Sport's portfolio includes more than 350 athletic facilities, including most of the major league ballparks built over the last ten years. The HOK look is captured in the firm's characterization of "ballparks" as different from "stadiums" on its web site — a distinction that harkens to an era long before Astroturf, the designated hitter, and other modern encroachments that rile baseball purists. Its ballparks make heavy use of brick, masonry, and neo-traditional design elements to create a nostalgic aesthetic, while also serving the ravenous revenue needs of team owners by incorporating skyboxes and amenities for holders of "personal seat licenses" in prime sections of the stadium.

HOK's initial foray into the neo-traditional style of ballpark — Chicago's new Comiskey Park, which opened in 1991 across the street from the site of the 80-year-old Comiskey Park on the city's South Side — was considered a disappointment. Fans and critics blasted the new facility because many seats (particularly in the upper deck) are farther removed from the playing field than they were in the old Comiskey Park, sacrificing much of the intimacy that endeared fans to the turn-of-the-century model. The numbers tell the story: hampered by a mediocre White Sox squad last season, Comiskey's attendance ranked 12th among 14 American League teams.

But in the wake of the Comiskey disaster HOK hit a home run with Baltimore's Camden Yards, which opened in 1992 to national acclaim and triggered the current vogue in retro ballparks. The style has proven wildly successful: Last season, teams playing in HOK-designed stadiums in Baltimore and Cleveland boasted the top two attendance figures in the American League, while the top-drawing National League team was the Denver Rockies, playing in HOK-designed Coors Field.

Of course, unlike Chicago's Comiskey Park, the Baltimore and Denver ballparks are both located in popular downtown areas that offer restaurants, bars, and other attractions. That raises the question of whether the ballparks led to the success of their surrounding areas, or whether the success of the surrounding

areas fed the success of the ballparks. More to the point, it raises the question of whether retro is the only way to go.

That's particularly pertinent in Houston, a city more known for looking to the future than to the past. Still, Santee maintains that the Ballpark at Union Station is not simply a retread of earlier HOK projects. "In the building that fans will experience, we tried to create an aura of Houston that existed when the station was there," he says. "We created a glass wall and a steel roof structure that has its own image, and it will stand there in reflection of the glass, steel, and the contemporary nature of downtown Houston. There is a contrast there that hopefully will satisfy all the purists."

The selection of HOK as the architects for the Ballpark at Union Station seems to have been motivated by the same thinking that inspired the *Houston Chronicle's* former advertising slogan — "the biggest newspaper in Texas has to be the best." HOK's past success seems to be the sole criterion used to select the firm — which, courtesy of the Sports Authority's legislative exemption, was done without a public bid process — for one of the most expensive public works projects in the history of Harris County.

When McLane was first clamoring for a new facility, the Astros retained HOK to study possible renovations of the Astrodome, as well as to perform preliminary work for a stadium in northern Virginia, should the team relocate there. By the time the Harris County-Houston Sports Authority took control of the ballpark project in late 1997, McLane had paid more than \$3 million in fees to HOK. The Sports Authority reimbursed McLane for those costs, and since McLane's demand for a new facility by the 2000 season made speed crucial, any thought of holding a design competition went out the window.

"In the final analysis, [HOK] was doing enough other stadiums and they had the experience," says Sports Authority Vice Chairman Billy Burge. "The feeling was that we wanted something similar to Camden or Coors with the Union Station facade, and HOK did both of those facilities."

Sports Authority spokesman Chris Begala stresses the economic soundness of the authority's contracts with HOK and the lead contractor, Houston-based Brown & Root. Begala says no other stadium deal in the country stipulates a guaranteed maximum price or a guaran-

teed completion date. In addition, the retractable roof carries a ten-year guarantee for its design, fabrication, installation, maintenance, and operation. "If it's not on time or under budget, other people will be on the hook rather than the taxpayers," Begala says.

While the contracts offer the public a degree of financial assurance, the sentiments about the stadium design are less inspiring. Regardless of the ultimate success of the Ballpark at Union Station, the failure to consider a range of design schemes is troubling, and would never be considered for another public works project of similar importance. Too, the seemingly blind acceptance of the prevailing trend in stadium design shows Houston's leaders to be, in this case, followers. It's a dramatic change from the creation of the Astrodome, which, for all its faults, was a bold idea. The Ballpark at Union Station may turn out to be wildly popular, but it will never be seen as wildly original.

Still, hope runs high among downtown business leaders that the ballpark will pull the boomlet in residential and entertainment development around Market Square several blocks to the east. Competing visions of what constitutes appropriate development, though, have already created problems. And while there has been a spate of speculative real estate transactions in the blocks surrounding the ballpark, no evidence of commercial or residential development is yet visible in the area.

"My sense is that on the real estate development side, the action will come a little slower than most people think," says Bob Eury, president of the Houston Downtown Management District. "Smaller [developers] are going to lead the market. There are big fish out there looking, too, and the big fish may arrive at some point."

The experiences of other cities with new downtown ballparks offer some important lessons to anyone who thinks a ballpark is an economic cure-all for any neighborhood. Denver's Coors Field and Baltimore's Camden Yards gave a modest boost to growth in downtown neighborhoods that were already on the rise, whereas the Ballpark at Union Station sits across a gulf of largely undeveloped property six blocks east of Market Square. Though the Ballpark at Union Station will certainly pump some life into downtown's most desolate area, it could also easily underscore the relative



For fans in the upper decks, the Ballpark at Union Station should provide a stunning view of downtown Houston.

isolation of the neighborhood if property owners decide parking lots make the most economic sense.

"The area has a historic character that we'd like to see preserved, and we'd like the in-fill development to be compatible with the existing buildings, on a scale and in proportion to those buildings," says Ron Pogue, canon missionary at Christ Church Cathedral and immediate past chairman of the Downtown Historic District. In the blocks immediately north and east of the site, a handful of vintage buildings offers great potential for the sort of lively, pedestrian-oriented entertainment and loft development that is driving growth around Market Square. The Eller Wagon Works building at Franklin and Commerce, the Purse & Co. furniture warehouse at Chenevert and Ruiz, and the old Maxwell House warehouse at Preston and St. Emmanuel are among the fabulous old buildings that offer the potential for authentic renewal.

Still, Pogue and others admit to a sense of uneasiness about the direction that growth may take around the ballpark. The real estate speculation makes it difficult to predict what mix of development will ultimately emerge. In the hope of influencing the nature of that development, the Houston Downtown Management District is seeking legislative approval to expand its boundaries to include everything inside the elevated freeway perimeter. The addition of the ballpark and the adjacent warehouse area north of the site to the management district could provide important services to property owners, while the assessment charged to businesses and property owners operating within the district could serve as a deterrent to cheap development.

Too, the first phase of the city's \$35 million Cotswold project, which is due to be completed in time for the ballpark's opening day, will add street and sidewalk enhancements — including vintage street lights and diagonal, on-street parking — along Texas Avenue from the Theater District to the ballpark. Meanwhile, the Downtown Historic District is writing a set of voluntary development guidelines to encourage development on a scale that encourages pedestrian traffic and fits within a warehouse district. The guidelines will include sections on renovation of existing buildings, design of new structures, and streetscape issues.

And yet, concerns about what may or may not emerge linger. One of the first

questions that comes to mind involves Houston's paramount development concern — parking. Some fear the ballpark will become surrounded by parking garages, although market forces make this scenario unlikely. When the ballpark opens, Eury says, an estimated 15,000 parking spaces will exist within a nearby area equal to the size of the Astrodome grounds. Transit services can bring downtown workers from more remote sections. While this plan may seem radical in a city where valets make good money working in strip malls, it follows the lead of Denver and Baltimore, which have relied heavily on pre-existing downtown parking facilities.

A more likely impediment to development is exorbitantly high land prices, says Reggie Bowman, a downtown real estate broker who has negotiated several deals in the area in recent months. Bowman says some prime properties are being held captive by owners who are asking too much, which was a problem that hindered development in Midtown for many years. "The biggest thing that will affect things around the ballpark is whether investor expectations will exceed reality," Bowman says.

An uncertainty that lurks for property owners is the fear of condemnation raised by the recent dust-up over the World Trade Center property. Sports Authority Chairman Jack Rains coveted the property, which sits catercorner from Union Station at the corner of Texas and Crawford, for a park that would serve as a verdant gateway to the ballpark. However, when its owner, the Port Authority of Houston, put the property up for sale, the Sports Authority chose not to bid on it. After the building was purchased by a group of investors led by Rockets star Hakeem Olajuwon, Rains publicly hinted that he might invoke the Sports Authority's power of eminent domain to wrest control of the prime parcel.

Eury, who credits Rains' vision of a park as "trying to do the right thing," says several property owners told him the condemnation threats created at least a short-term chilling effect on development in the area. Rains declined to answer questions on design and development issues around the ballpark, deferring to Santee and Burge.

The World Trade Center dispute, which dragged on in the local media for several months before Mayor Lee Brown weighed in on the side of Olajuwon and

the other investors, points to the problems caused by the absence of land-use policies. High land prices will serve as a check on certain types of development, but no ordinance exists to prevent such out-of-context development as strip malls or the suburban-style, gated, auto-centric apartment complexes that are consuming large chunks of Midtown. Given that the area in question is a virtual blank slate, the massive public investment in the ballpark would seem to justify special considerations to encourage the kind of development that people seem to want in the area.

"There's no way to ensure that it's done well," says Barry Moore, a University of Houston architecture professor and an author of the historic district's guidelines. "Houston should put in place development guidelines to create a wonderful neighborhood where there isn't one, but I don't think we can do it. The only people who have a stake in it sell the dirt, make millions, and move to New Mexico."

Does it have to be this way? Business leaders in another pro-developer city, Denver, credit limited land-use controls around Coors Field as a contributing factor to the rebirth of a downtown neighborhood that is considered a national model.

Coors Field sits on the boundary of Denver's Lower Downtown District, known among the locals as LoDo — a bustling collection of renovated warehouses that's home to more than 60 restaurants and night clubs, 17 art galleries, and more than 1,300 housing units. But barely a decade ago, LoDo resembled the current, rundown condition of the northeast corner of downtown Houston.

The rebirth of LoDo began with the formation of the Lower Downtown District in 1988, three years before the decision was made to build Coors Field. The City of Denver reports that taxable sales in LoDo grew an average of 22 percent per year in the early '90s. Thus, a critical mass of commercial and residential space had taken hold in LoDo before Coors Field opened in 1995. Since then, growth has continued at a slower pace, and it has dispersed over a broader area.

"One of the misnomers about LoDo is that Coors Field made LoDo," says Bill Mosher, president of the Downtown Denver Partnership. Mosher credits an intensive and, at times, contentious series of public hearings on a host of issues —

including parking and traffic, economic development, and the look and design of the stadium — with effectively integrating Coors Field into the surrounding neighborhood of low-rise warehouses.

The debate, which was fostered by a series of public hearings hosted by the Mayor's Task Force on Baseball, led Denver to take several unusual steps that were crucial to the project's success. Foremost among them was a moratorium on the creation of parking lots within two blocks of Coors Field. When the ballpark opened, Mosher says, fans grew accustomed to using the 26,000 parking spaces that existed within a 15-minute walk. Only 5,500 parking spaces were added to serve a stadium that holds just over 50,000 spectators.

"At first, we thought that [moratorium] was pretty stupid," Mosher says. "[But] what it did was it took all the fuel out of an overheated market, and let everybody see what was happening. In fact, there was not much demand for parking. That was another thing that was good for the surrounding neighborhood. As a result, there's new housing, new retail, new business development going into that neighborhood."

Denver's experience offers some lessons to Houston, particularly in the aftermath of Rains' heavy-handed attempt to steer development according to his own vision. The type of development that downtown backers hope will emerge around the ballpark is still new to Houston, limited to a handful of projects around Market Square. And the lack of a publicly-backed urban design plan for the ballpark area raises a level of uncertainty that may serve to deter investment.

Though Houston Planning Director Bob Litke points to the Cotswold project as evidence of the city's involvement, one official involved in the ballpark's development, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, questioned the extent of the benefits that Cotswold will provide. "Cotswold is happening because of [Mayor] Brown, and it is important to the streets around the ballpark," the official says. But, he adds, "Wouldn't it make sense to not just build sidewalks and parking, but to make sure that there's private investment along those streets as well?"



The most remarkable element of the Ballpark at Union Station may come to be the speed with which it is built. Only 18 months after the Sports Authority



The Ballpark at Union Station is projected to cover 15.1 acres. The Astrodome covers 9.5.

came into being, construction of the ballpark has reached the halfway mark. The success in staying on schedule to meet the April 2000 deadline set by McLane reflects an impressive rallying of the troops by city leaders. Unfortunately, it also underscores the degree to which owners of pro sports teams now hold their host cities hostage to their financial demands.

The rise of the ballpark is sure to lead to another loss for Houstonians that will be much talked about in the coming year. The Astrodome — the landmark that symbolizes Houston to the world — faces an uphill battle to survive. The contrasting histories of the Dome and the ballpark speak volumes about the times in which they emerged.

As the first-ever domed stadium and the "Eighth Wonder of the World," the Astrodome was a truly Texan creation. It marked the start of the transition of the city's image in the eyes of the nation from a cow town to Space City, even though Judge Roy Hofheinz and his business associates fired pistols at the groundbreaking. As it turned out, the Astrodome is a perfectly awful venue for watching baseball — too cavernous to be a hitter's park, too vast to feel intimate, too synthetic to engender the adoration of the fans. But it was ours.

If the Ballpark at Union Station is anything like Camden Yards, it will be a transformative experience for Astros fans. As a former resident of Washington, D.C., I made regular treks to Baltimore because simply visiting Camden Yards offered as much appeal as the games played there. The return of outdoor baseball to Houston will replace the sterility of the Astrodome with the sweaty, natural aura that makes baseball the national pastime. And yet, Houston will give up a defining piece of itself in the process. Whether the city can muster the vision to replace it with a new destination remains to be seen. Santee appreciates the challenge of replacing an icon. "Is [the Ballpark at Union Station] another eighth wonder of the world?" he asks. "I couldn't tell you. That's a test of time." ■