Thick Skin
BBVA Compass Stadium is heating up the city in more ways than one

BY COLLEY HODGES AND EMILY WINTERS

Houston’s soccer team, the Dynamo, completed its season undefeated at home with a 3-1 victory over D.C. United in front of a packed house of 22,101 fans in the new BBVA Compass Stadium. When Kofi Sarkodie scored during the second half, a woman in a bright orange burka rose to her feet. Latinos high-fived Brits, and Anglo Texans roared. The sun had dropped low enough that only about a quarter of the stadium was blinded by the direct sunlight that usually punishes fans and players, but the excitement over the team, its stadium, and the surrounding neighborhood is only just beginning to heat up.

On the southeast side of the stadium, buried in Walker Street, a set of burnished black railsdead-ends into the sidewalk. The short section of track, bracketed by the stadium and the start of the Columbus Tap Rail to Trail, is a reminder of the industrial heritage of the neighborhood, recently rebranded as East Downtown or EaDo. That heritage defines the stadium, both as a source of its design and as part of the area character that the stadium is intended to transform. The stadium is a study in boundaries, both urban and architectural, and it is playing a major role in the revitalization of EaDo.

BBVA Compass opened in May 2012 as the only downtown major league soccer-specific stadium in the U.S. At a total cost of $95 million, it is one of the most economical modern soccer stadiums anywhere. In spite of the limitations of its cramped site and tight budget, the stadium has already been a catalyst for change. Abandoned brick warehouses and restaurants south of the stadium form part of Houston’s original “Chinatown,” and to the northeast one of the city’s oldest Hispanic neighborhoods provides a ready-made fan base. Bordering the stadium to the northwest, sprinkled among the industrial blocks to the southeast, are new residential complexes marketed primarily toward young professionals. As infrastructure and development continue to expand, the stadium forms a fulcrum between old and new.

The stadium is an attempt to break through the traditional boundary of East Downtown development: Highway 59. The highway runs parallel to the stadium’s long axis, elevated and two blocks away, but still shading its sound onto the site. Several additional transportation routes help further to define the stadium’s context. Eventually expected to be one of the primary means of traveling to and from the stadium, METRORail’s East End Line, estimated for completion in 2014, profiles the northeast side of the site. To the east, within sight of the stadium, a cluster of rail lines cuts across the city grid, and the hiss of METRO buses can be heard as they periodically stop along the #50 line running down Texas Avenue and Dowling Street. The lack of nearby parking encourages the use of public transportation, though the majority of fans still seem to park west of 59 and walk to the stadium, passing under the freeway in a steady stream of Dynamo orange. The bustling bars with “Go Dynamo” marquees along their route show early sparks of the urban revival expected for the area. Even the edges of the stadium’s site dissolve the divide between stadium and street, as the landscaping and pavement gradually ramp down and fade into the concrete sidewalks.

“The architecture of the stadium itself also involves the dissipation of boundaries. Its iconic, tesselated aluminum mesh skin perforates the traditional barrier between the interior and exterior of a building. The 50 percent open surface passively cools the concourse and allows sight lines, as well as a minimal amount of air, through to the field itself. The skin doesn’t provide a significant sound barrier, and on game days the surroundings echo with the action of the stadium, but the faceted aluminum panels successfully connect the building to its industrial surroundings and to the sport it hosts.”

“We had this concept of soccer as athletic and almost poetic,” says project designer Jeff Spear of Populous, the international firm responsible for BBVA Compass as well as Minute Maid Park, Reliant Arena, and the Toyota Center. “The musculature of the players—how do you translate that to the outside? You have to make your decisions wisely about where to spend your money, and the skin was actually really economical.”

Though its striking form and function have initiated renewed interest in the area, the stadium has already received its share of criticism. The 12-acre site dictated the building’s solar orientation and its 70-yard-wide pitch, small by major league soccer standards. The minimal roof, consisting of two 75-foot overhangs on the long axis and a 125-foot canopy over the south end zone, leaves roughly half of the 22,000 seats exposed to the sun. That, combined with the stifling stillness within the stadium’s bowl, has earned it the nickname “The Oven.” Spear acknowledges the problem of insufficient shade, but again says it was a matter of economics. “It was a compromise. Originally there was more roof, but as the numbers came in as to how much the owners could spend, it got pared back.”

Ultimately, the nickname seems more of a commentary on the Houston climate than on the building itself. As a venue for soccer, the stadium has been praised for its outstanding sight lines and the intimacy resulting from the full-spectrum seating’s short setback from the field. The end zone roof and seating distribution also make the space flexible enough to host a variety of other events, including Texas Southern University football, rugby, boxing, and concerts.

The limited budget could have produced a cheap traditional design. However, as Spear points out, soccer is a growing sport in the U.S., which boasts plenty of baseball and football stadiums, but does not have the precedents the rest of the world has to draw upon for soccer stadium design. BBVA Compass thus had the freedom to take on a more contemporary look. In addition to its aluminum skin, the building’s orange polycarbonate entrances and illumination during nighttime events make it even more of a beacon.

For better or worse, the stadium is inseparable from Houston. It is subject to the region’s climate and it responds to the city’s urban boundaries. But it is also serving as a transformative force for the area. In the end, the stadium’s national influence may not be in innovation, but in approach. ‘The dictates of a growing sport, tight urban site, and limited budget—combined with the lofty goal of revitalizing a cutoff industrial section of town—has produced a functional spectacle: one that is designed to acknowledge the heritage of the area while facilitating a revitalized future.”

“These things—say what you will about them—do actually help develop areas around them,” says Spear. “And Houston’s now being held up as having the next model for that kind of budget facility.”