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Yankee Stadium Without Tears

by Tom Angotti
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The City Planning Commission recently spent a whole day listening to testimony on the [proposal](#) by the Yankees to build a new stadium in the Bronx. Neighborhood residents came out in droves and the construction unions sent their troops. After a flat no vote by Bronx Community Board 4, a conditional approval by Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion, and an upsurge of protest by parks advocates, it remains to be seen whether the Yankee project will meet the fate of the failed Jets stadium in Manhattan that went down to defeat last year. The City Planning Commission will soon cast its vote.

While city planners give the impression they are neutral guardians of the public interest, when it comes to sports stadiums emotions always seem to befog the faculty of reason. Stadium plans bring out the fans and their rivals. Team owners appeal to home-town boosters, and elected officials wear the team T-shirts to prove their loyalty. After the cheering is over, however, planners have to do what they are charged to do by the city charter: look at the costs and benefits, and what makes sense for the health and welfare of city residents.

The Dodgers Are Dead

In the interests of full disclosure, I confess that I'm not just a dispassionate planner. I grew up a Brooklyn Dodgers fan. This branded me for life as an advocate for the underdog and may explain why I wound up specializing in community-based planning. I will never forget the elated feeling when my dad took me to see Pee wee Reese and Roy Campanella play in a stadium only a short trolley ride from our apartment.

On the other hand, I'm not at all nostalgic for the Dodgers. They're gone and will never come back, neither as a minor league team or a basketball franchise. Jackie Robinson Houses now provides needed housing where Ebbets Field used to stand, and so be it. I may never come around to really liking the rich man's team from the Bronx, but in today's baseball world is there any team that isn't managed by and for the pin-striped suits?

Fine. No nostalgia for the Dodgers and no more Yankees-bashing. Now I can just think like a city planner and judge the Yankee proposal in terms of 21st century New York and its needs. The main criterion for judging the proposal should be how it meets the city's needs for sports and recreation, which are essential elements of public health. Too often planners look at stadiums as commercial facilities and job generators, and fail to connect stadium planning with planning for parks and recreation.

The Yankees and the Parks

To start with, there seem to be some good things about the stadium plan. While the Yankees will take 22 acres of parkland, they and the city will replace it with 28 acres, including several spanking-new ball fields. Their designs make at least some connections with the surrounding neighborhoods, which long have been neglected by Yankee management, and the Yankees are throwing some of their super-profits back into the neighborhoods.

On the other hand, the parks seem to do more for the Yankees than they do for Yankee fans living in the Bronx. Charles V. Bagli and Timothy Williams recently raised these questions in their [New York Times article](#).

New York is buffeted by epidemics of diabetes, obesity and childhood asthma as opportunities have shrunk for kids to play in parks and on streets and sidewalks. As the population grows and new housing gets built, the city has no plans to add significant public spaces and parks. Instead, as the Parks Department budget is continually gutted, commercial uses are welcomed into parks to help pay for maintenance. New "open spaces" are more often private, decorative malls than active places for public gathering. For example, the proposed Brooklyn Bridge Park is now becoming a commercial and residential waterfront enclave. The Jets were encouraged to build a stadium in Flushing Meadows Corona Park. And the alternative locations considered by the Yankees were both in Bronx parks: Van Cortlandt Park and Pelham Bay Park.

In the Bronx, the big parks tend to be in the north, while the largest concentrations of population and chronic asthma and obesity are in the south. City schools have ridiculously few facilities for sports and recreation. Too many New Yorkers find their only relationship to sports is sitting in front of a TV instead of going out for a pick-up game at a local park. Professional sports don't help, but rather encourage more passive, immobile (albeit noisy) spectators. Ball parks serve high-priced junk food. But when I was a kid I could watch Duke Snyder hammer a home run out onto Bedford Avenue and also play stickball on streets that weren't flooded with cars.

Oops, I'm lapsing into nostalgia!

Back to planning, the real question is how much will the new Bronx park space encourage active recreation (that actually burns calories) by the people who need it? It's not just having the open space but making sure it's accessible and programmed for the people who need it. The old parks are intensively utilized for a variety of active and passive recreational activities and there's certainly need for improvement. But the new parks seem to be largely for organized team sports serving young athletes, mostly male, from throughout the city and region, leaving the local kids to fend for themselves. For the locals, some of the new parks are going to be hard to get to. One is to be on a waterfront cut off by an expressway. The two proposed rooftop parks could pose access problems.

Another health issue has to do with parking. The Yankees propose 4,500 additional parking spaces. This will lead more people to drive to games and fewer will take mass transit. Since the stadium is surrounded by neighborhoods that have some of the highest childhood asthma rates in the city, shouldn't dependence on auto use be decreasing? And where is the bicycle network?

Stadium Jobs, Public Subsidies and "Faith-Based Economics"

What about the new jobs that will be created? Here the discussion seems always to go back into the emotional realm. In his recent book, "Job Scam," Greg LeRoy summed up the results of just about every economic study on stadium economics: "The projections made by team owners and their paid consultants in support of stadium subsidies are little more than vague or arbitrary promises about job creation and economic stimulus. These cost-benefit analyses rest on faith-based economics: proponents ask the public, in essence, to believe that the subsidies will pay off."

Much has been said about the more than \$200,000 million of city and state subsidies backing the Yankee plan, but I've not seen any projection of the long-term costs to the city of housing the team. The Yankees will pay no rent, property taxes or taxes on construction. How many billions of dollars of lost revenue will that add up to over a 40-year period? Will Yankee charity and the minimal spinoff for local businesses make up the difference?

Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion wants a written Community Benefits Agreement to seal the deal for local jobs. This is a bit late in the game, and if it does happen, once the construction is done the Bronx may be left with not much more than a handful of seasonal low-paying service jobs, maybe even less than the present level.

No matter. You gotta believe!

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