

---

# Sport and Culture Through Architectural Criticism

DAVID J. KAMMER  
University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87108

Over the past seventy years the modern concrete and steel major league baseball stadium has undergone significant change in design, location, playing conditions and spectator amenities. A consideration of the architectural evolution of the ballpark during this period and of popular and critical responses to these changes offers the interdisciplinary scholar a valuable perspective for viewing not only the institutional growth of the sport but also the ways in which the sport reflects changing values within the society at large. It provides the baseball historian with an opportunity to draw upon analytical methods most frequently used by art historians; it provides the art historian with an opportunity to broaden his often limited field of inquiry to encompass popular elements of the culture.

Several sport historians have examined the institutional history of baseball, and some have noted the many ways in which the sport reflects American cultural values. However, they view the stadium, the sport's most visible artifact, only in passing. Art historians and other cultural critics including Mumford, Panofsky, Arnheim, and Trachtenberg, have shown the importance of building to understanding the culture that erected them. Though their semantics vary, all suggest viewing architecture on more than one level. Perhaps most persuasive of these many taxonomies is a relatively recent one advanced by Wayne Attoe in a work entitled *Architecture and Critical Imagination*. Suggesting three levels of architectural criticism -descriptive, normative, interpretive - Attoe further advocates that critics need to broaden their horizons when considering the meaning of architectural criticism, that

a more generous, more democratic appreciation of the words holds a greater potential for exploring the full relationship between any society and its buildings. Thus, when considering architectural responses to any structure, particularly one that houses mass spectator entertainment, one needs to consider popular responses to that structure as well as traditional architectural criticism. In, doing so, popular periodicals, the sports page of newspapers, *The Sporting News*, and even congressional inquiries into professional baseball become as important as architectural articles in newspapers and professional journals in determining the complete range of responses to changes in the ballpark.

The construction of the Yankee Stadium in 1923 is a case in point. The culminating structure of the first generation of ballparks, the stadium embodied the best building technology available. Meant as a showcase for professional baseball in New York, it has emerged as a symbol for athletic greatness in the American mind. Its construction introduced a scale of both size and grandeur never before seen in professional baseball. Privately financed, as were all the parks to that point, the stadium's location reflects the importance of mass transportation to the sport during the early decades of the century. Its chief architect, Bernard Green, drew upon his experiences with several earlier ballparks to introduce many innovations including the mezzanine, widespread use of inclined ramps rather than steps, and greater use of cantilevering. Players, fans, owners, and sports writers all noted these descriptive features of the new park. The stadium was generally praised for its pleasing lines and fan comforts but condemned by some for the gentle angle of its right field power alley fence, too easy a homerun target for Babe Ruth. Such responses reveal the sense of standards, or normative criticism, as to what a park should or should not be, given an historical sense of the game. Interpretations of the significance of the stadium began at once. Not only was it seen as "the house that Ruth built," it was also seen as a symbol of the popularity and stability of the sport. Frequently likened to the Colosseum of Rome, the stadium's architectural grandeur was seemingly heightened by the success of the Yankee teams playing in it. The process by which a place comes to represent a society's values and hold a culture's legends reveals much about that society. By noting how Yankee Stadium assumed an almost shrine-like position in the popular mind, one can better understand the role that baseball played in the American mind.



Gerry Glassford and David Voigt - there must have been something intriguing here.