Out on a Wing: Reading Frontier Field

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Abstract

Beyond the seemingly obvious historical, architectural, and situational aspects of a ballpark, what are other dimensions that can be routinely explored or perspectives that can be repeatedly adopted to read a ballpark? Drawing inspiration from Mortimer Adler’s classic *How to Read a Book* and following the insight of semiologist Christian Metz, who questioned the notion that the meaning of films is transparent, I correspondingly note that a ballpark “is difficult to explain because it is so easy to understand.” Simply, while its design and purpose appear to be forthright—to situate baseball games and to orient fans’ views—a ballpark evades easy interpretation. Its semantics and syntax are much more complex. They include rituals and signs in multiple languages ranging across verbal and visual media and appealing to aural and olfactory senses as well. Because a ballpark is not static space, its design and rituals generate a range of unanticipated meanings beyond their intended function.
The Peculiarity of Ballparks

Baseball parks have the potential to fuse the ordinary with the extraordinary because they are both uniform and potentially eccentric. As ballpark architect Philip Bess has noted, “Baseball is peculiar among American team sports in that the form of its playing field is both precisely defined and indeterminate: a 90-degree arc within which are juxtaposed a strictly regulated ‘infield’ and an ‘outfield’ of potentially infinite extension.” So reading a single ballpark, like that of Frontier Field, becomes an exercise in exploration, not determination. While the genre of ballparks might be recognizable, like the genre of the novel can generally be identified, so too the plot, theme, and style of one ballpark might be as distinct from another as the difference between the novels of, say, John Updike and John Grisham.
Distinctions of Frontier Field

Rochester’s Frontier Field provides a representative Minor League ballpark for beginning a sample reading of ballparks throughout the country:

What qualities does Frontier Field share with other minor league ballparks? How are these common ties communicated? What distinguishes Frontier Field from other minor league ballparks? How do these distinctions reflect the values and history, the character and identity of Rochester?
Frontier Field’s late 20th-century construction hardly places it in the full traditions of ballparks in Pulaski, Virginia, and Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Some historic ballparks were built as WPA projects and others preserve distinct historic elements.
Pulaski, Virginia

The original entrance

Fans provide seats
Williamsport, Pennsylvania

The early 20th century ballpark features an original wall.
The sites of ballparks range from bay fronts and river fronts to prairie dugouts and mountains’ feet, from residential neighborhoods to industrial parks, and from rural pastures to urban centers.
At the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Salem, Virginia
Frontier Field’s Urban Setting
Architectural distinctions often feature unusual seats or accommodations, ranging from home-style balconies to rooftop bleachers to traditional skyboxes.
Luxury Suites in Frisco, Texas
Museum Restaurant and Rooftop Bleachers in Columbus, Ohio
Frontier Field’s Traditional Skyboxes
Gracious staff and stimulating art greet fans upon entry to the ballpark and often establish an ambiance blending aesthetics and manners.
Entry statues pay tribute to pitchers and slingers in Clearwater, Florida and Corpus Christi, Texas.
Frontier Field’s greeting is personal and honors Morrie Silver
“Horsehide” Sculpture

Using the leather medium of fielders’ gloves and catchers’ mitts, this sculpture creates an aesthetic baseball ambiance inside the front gates at Frontier Field.
... and a Red Wing in flight protects the entry to the souvenir store
... while a Red Wings’ emblem in relief distinguishes the concession area
In the concourse other artistic works emphasize the floral identity of the city.
Ballpark instructions regulate fan conduct represent and express community values.
At Frontier Field
a common ticket warning is posted
Frontier Field’s unique seating area

NUT FREE ZONE

The grass knoll beyond this sign is a Nut Free Zone. Please do not enter this area with any peanuts, tree nuts, crackerjacks or any other product containing nuts.

The Red Wings are not monitoring this zone, but we kindly ask that you respect this rule as allergies caused by these products can be extremely harmful or even fatal to other fans. Any fan found to be in violation of this rule will be asked to leave the Nut Free Zone immediately.
Past stars are honored in a Hall of Fame, and exemplary local sports figures are memorialized in multiple ways.
Red Wings’ Hall of Fame
near the team offices in the first base concourse
Rochester’s sports leaders honored with tribute bricks beyond the third-base concourse
Frontier Field’s artistic tributes to Joe Altobelli and Cal Ripken
Some ballparks offer standard fare of hot dogs, hamburgers, popcorn, Cracker Jack, sodas, and such, while others, like Frontier Field, feature local favorites.
Different dogs distinguish Frontier Field’s offerings
and a Rochester deli favorite
makes fans feel at home
Restaurants and bars often display baseball themes and local brews like Frontier Field’s “10th Inning” watering hole.
Frontier Field distinguishes its concessions with an Allergen Free stand
Billboard advertisements feature local enterprises and occasionally create unintended messages by their unusual placement in the ballpark.
A religious advertisement above the entry to Eastwood Field in Niles, Ohio
The size of the billboard gallery in Hickory, NC is inversely proportional to the ballpark’s capacity.
The new scoreboard at Frontier Field appears compressed by the billboards.
While the bullpen in Ashesville, NC perhaps enjoys prayerful support.
In Richmond, Virginia, a urologist’s ad is placed in the Men’s room.
And at Frontier Field, the dugout seems to boast insured protection
And a rainbow hints that the pot of gold lies beneath the scoreboard at Frontier Field.