Everybody’s Neighborhood Stadium: Memory and Baseball in Newark, NJ

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It starts with a shout, “You have to be kidding me!” Then another, “What! No way!” Then you hear from the upper deck something that is R-rated. The decibel level increases, it is ascending rapidly, soon the noise blankets the whole stadium and in that moment it could not be clearer, in all the variations of words encircling the stadium there’s agreement, the umpire is legally blind. There is no universe where a man with sight would call him safe at second.

Something happens when you are in a stadium. It’s as if the outside world is suspended and life’s concerns shift. Here, you live and die by the swing of a bat, the arm of a pitcher, the glove of a fielder, and the eyes, 20/20 or not, of the umpires.

On what was once a meadow situated on the lowlands bordering the Passaic River in the Ironbound section of Newark, a neighborhood defined by its railroad tracks and industrial buildings, and also for its primarily European immigrant inhabitants, on that lot of land there was a baseball stadium.¹ From 1936 to 1948 this stadium was home to two minor league baseball teams; the Newark Bears, an all white New York Yankee farm team and the Newark Eagles, a member of the Negro Leagues. It was inaugurated as Davids Stadium, it had a short stint as Bears Stadium, and it finally settled on Ruppert Stadium.

In the era of Jim Crow, in Newark, a city that is often defined by racial unrest, Ruppert Stadium was shared space. It was a space that brought citizens from all ethnic groups to its doors, well, its turnstiles. It was one of the few spaces that all Newark residents could call their

own; their own neighborhood stadium. If stadiums function as a space where one reality
disappears and another is created, Ruppert Stadium produced a space where one could
temporarily transcend the racial and ethnic inequality that existed in the city, and reside within in
the community created within those stadium’s walls.

In 1999, thirty years after those community walls were torn down, a new stadium went up. Bears and Eagles Riverfront Stadium is located at 450 Broad Street, sandwiched between Route 21 McCarter Highway and Interstate 280, right in Newark’s Downtown. This new stadium was built with the hope that a new community would be fostered. It would be a stadium built in the legacy of Ruppert Stadium. It would be a space where the entire city could not only physically come together, but also share in the communal camaraderie that comes with having a hometown team. Ruppert Stadium was not officially sanctioned as a segregated space, but operated by in large as one. The majority of the city came for Bears games, and the African-American spectators, on Bears off days or away games, came to the ballpark to see the Eagles. This new twentieth century stadium would not be segregated or rotated, it would truly be shared. As then Mayor Sharpe James stated on opening day, “Let history say that we started with two separate teams. Now we will have a team that will mirror both the Eagles and the Bears, brought about by black and white, Republican and Democrat, urban and suburban, athlete and non-athlete.”\(^2\) The city imagined that this stadium would act as both a remembrance of a Newark that loved baseball, and also of a city with a deep and united sense of community. The city of Newark through this stadium attempted to regain that sense of community, and by doing that, take another step away from its tumultuous past.

Here we have two stadiums. One remembered as a sacred space, a space that allowed for ownership and transcendence from the outside world. It was a space that served as a community focal point. And the other, who in a little over ten years, is considered evidence to the city’s poor planning, their economic stupidity, and as a structure completely out of sync with the needs of the city. This new stadium has failed in both its ability to foster a community within the city, and in the basic ability to bring people to the ballpark. Juxtaposing these two stadiums has left me with a lot of questions. What memories are trying to be invoked with the building of this stadium? Do these memories hold any resonance well over sixty years later? And why has it been such a failure?

I would like to think about these two stadiums as what Christopher Gaffney in *Temples of the Earthbound Gods: Stadiums in the Cultural Landscapes of Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires*, describes as more than structures in an urban landscape. Stadiums are “related to larger political, economic, and social processes…and are barometers of these changes and that by looking at stadiums as places and spaces of cultural process, sites and symbols of dynamic social interaction, [they are a way to] gain unique insight into who and what we and others are.”

Using this model, we can see how memories of Ruppert Stadium, in both the social or collective memory and/or the personal are being shaped and memorialized through this new stadium. The new Bears original owner, the city, and the larger county have attempted to recreate the past through the invocation of the collective memory of baseball in Newark in the 1930s and 1940s. The way memory was strategically deployed as a means of community renewal and urban revitalization can be seen as a way to see both the history of the city and the changes that have taken place in Newark over the eighty year span since the first stadium went up.

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In order for you to get a sense of why people thought it was a great idea to invoke the memory of the Bears, Eagles, and of Ruppert Stadium, I would like to give you a quick overview of the three. As I said before, Ruppert Stadium had two other names. The one that stuck was given to the stadium by its most famous owner, beer baron and former owner of the New York Yankees, Jacob Ruppert. The stadium was completed in 1926 and was demolished in 1967. During the twelve years that the two teams shared the stadium, there were a few years that the Bears were the sole inhabitants, the Newark Bears won two Junior World Series and appeared in two others (they also won in 1932 before the Eagles arrived in Newark). The 1937 Bears are widely considered to be the greatest minor league team in history, having taken over first place on May 16th and stayed there for the rest of the season. They finished with a 109-43 record, 25 ½ games ahead of second place Montreal. After winning the 1937 championship, the team arrived at Newark Penn Station and was welcomed by 5,000 fans and a brass band playing “Happy Days Are Here Again.” To understand what the team meant to the city, I defer to acclaimed sports writer for The Star Ledger, Jerry Izenberg, for he captures the city in the Bears heyday. “On summer nights you could pick a block in the city - any block - and in a world without air conditioning you could hear the sound of Earl Harper's play-by-play through the open windows, walk the length of that block and not miss a pitch.” The Bears were what the whole neighborhood was talking about, more the whole city. In season, the city was tuned in to what was considered to be the most important event of the day, an event they hoped ended with a box score with the Bears victorious.

The other hometown team, the Newark Eagles, won the Negro League World Series in 1946 and finished in at least third place 10 out of 12 years they played at Ruppert Stadium. Five players and the owner of the team, Effa Manley, are in the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. The Eagles are often described not only as a great baseball team, but as an integral part of the African-American community in Newark. Ministers after blessing their congregations would wish them a good time at the game they knew they would soon be attending. Hall of Fame Newark Eagles’ pitcher Leon Day said, “Sunday in Newark in the 1930s and 1940s was church, and a doubleheader...Everyone dressed to the nines. The ballgame was the centerpiece of Sunday...We were the backbone of Sunday, no matter where we were playing.”

Famed poet and writer Amiri Baraka in his autobiography described his experiences as a young African-American in Newark watching the Eagles: “In the flying around the bases and sliding and home runs and arguments and triumphs there was more of ourselves in celebration than we normally ever permitted. It was ours.” Who wouldn’t want to capture the sentiments held for these two teams?

Residents of Newark in the 1930s and 1940s considered the Bears and Eagles not simply as baseball teams. The team, its players, and even the stadium were beloved members of the community. It is not surprising that the city of Newark would want to recreate that affection. But more importantly than reigniting love, the city also saw the opportunity to seize on a history, and in Newark where history can be reduced to riots or urban violence, this was a chance to seize upon a less contested and more jointly celebrated version of the past.

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8 Records of Professional Baseball Teams that have played in Newark, New Jersey <http://www.luckyshow.org/baseball/trunkmakers.htm>, also see Mayer, DiClerico, and Cvornyek among others.
This brings us back to the new stadium. Bears and Eagles Riverfront Stadium is not spoken about with the same endearment as Ruppert Stadium. Not far from where Ruppert Stadium once stood in the Ironbound section of Newark, there were plans to build a baseball stadium that would also include the construction of a 12,000 seat soccer stadium. The residents of the neighborhood fought passionately against its construction and won. The compromise was that Essex County, the larger New Jersey County that includes Newark, would help fund a stadium downtown, off of McCarter Highway, and in exchange the city would allow construction of a county jail within the city limits of Newark. This agreement would build a stadium and save the county $300 million in fines from Federal courts for overcrowded county jails. A real win, win.

What started out as an estimated cost of $22 million, more than any other minor league ballpark at the time, ended up costing the city of Newark and Essex County $34 million, with city and the county, regardless of whether the stadium is occupied with a team, each paying $1.2 million per year to pay down the debt through 2029. Not that it really matters if it is occupied; as of late 2011 the Bears owed well over $800,000 in rent and were forced to establish a monthly payment plan. It was touted as a lynchpin for Newark’s Downtown redevelopment; it would be an addition to The New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the Rutgers Business School, and the Prudential Center. It was suppose to be a money generating enterprise for Bears ownership, to

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the City of Newark, and Essex County. Of course, it has turned into an economic black hole. Not an uncommon conclusion when it comes to urban renewal projects in Newark.

That is just the stadium. Rick Cerone is a former New York Yankee catcher, original owner of the new Newark Bears, and a Newark native. The original Bears are historically described as “the jewel” of the Yankee Farm system, and Cerone’s initial plan was to get a major league affiliation for the new Bears, even going to George Steinbrenner in an attempt to revive the Bears as a New York Yankee farm team. This was an explicit attempt to build on the nostalgia of the old Bears, as well as build a connection with current Yankee fans in an area. In fact, when the Yankees sold the Bears it was widely believed they did so because they did not want the competition. Loyalty held, and when the Bears left, most converted their love to the Yankees. In an interview Cerone claims that he said to Steinbrenner “Let's be partners in Newark,” and Steinbrenner said, “I'm not interested in minor league baseball. A year or so later, he did the deal to put a minor league team in Staten Island.”16 It is not clear whether Steinbrenner did not believe in the Bears ownership or in Newark. As with the building of the Prudential Center, the reputation of Newark as a dangerous city has been blamed for fans not coming in from the suburbs to support teams based in Newark and the same is thought to be true with the Bears. The team without the Yankee affiliation became an original member of the Atlantic League of Professional Baseball which is primarily composed of teams within New Jersey, teams that have consistently over the years outdrawn the Bears.

In 2003, Cerone sold the Bears and the list of owners and subsequent court and bankruptcy cases after that sale is too long for me to list here. But an article that appeared in 2011 in the local Newark newspaper can give you a sense of the Bears trajectory. The headline:

“Now Playing: A Comedy of Errors: How Court Battles, Unpaid Bills, and a Would-Be Reality Show Sidetracked a Franchise,” the highlight of the article: “Doug Spiel and Danielle Dronet, co-owners for the past year, want to create a reality TV show built around the Bears and their own family, which they say is like a modern-day "Brady Bunch." It would be called "The Real Spiel," and if the plot goes as planned, the show will be picked up by a network, bring fans back to the stands and help rescue the team.”17 According to Ms. Dronet there is some definite interest, but I wouldn’t save space on your DVR by deleting Jersey Shore just yet.

The team, the stadium, even the mascots, fuzzy bears named Ruppert and Effa, the names of the original owners, are all direct references to the historic teams. So, why has the purposeful invocation failed to hold any resonance within Newark today? Before I can start to answer that, a short story about how much resonance it doesn’t hold.

This summer a group of co-workers and I took the short walk from the Rutgers-Newark campus to Bears and Eagles Riverfront Stadium to attend a game and enjoy Thirsty Thursdays, that is 50 cent beers. We paid our $5 and were told we could sit anywhere, and they meant it, we could sit anywhere. We chose the first row behind home plate. We were five people in the company of maybe 200 other spectators in the 6,000 seat stadium. I might be generous in my estimation. That night as I walked out of the stadium I passed under the stadiums “Ring of Honor” and I saw the name Larry Doby, a Hall of Fame center-fielder and first African-American player in the American League. It was missing a D. With the looks of it, some other letters from some other Hall of Famers were not far behind. I thought to myself, what happened here? Where is the magical lore for either of these teams? Where is the memory the city told me was within these new walls?

In a predominately African-American city, maybe the residents do not want to see the Bears, a name they could associate with a white team. I did mention that Larry Doby was in the Ring of Honor at the new stadium, and he is among other Eagles players to be memorialized in the ballpark. But equal recognition of Eagles history was not a part of the initial plan. The Ring of Honor was dedicated in 2007, and worse, the original name of the stadium was simply Bears Riverfront Stadium. It took three years for ownership to rename the stadium so that it included the Eagles. Jonathan Schuppe writes in Newark’s *The Star Ledger* “more than a symbolic bridging of past racial divides, or a nod to Newark’s former life as New Jersey’s baseball capital. It was an attempt to generate more enthusiasm about the present-day Newark Bears.”\(^\text{18}\) Aha! There was the problem; they were invoking the wrong memories!

Robert Cvornek in a paper he gave at the Cooperstown Symposium in 2001 entitled, “Your Bears to Our Bears: Race, Memory, and Baseball in Newark, New Jersey” discusses ownership and racial identity within these two stadiums. He ends his paper with this quote, “only time will tell if the symbolic inclusion of the Eagles and the recognition of the team’s legitimate claim in Newark’s contested baseball history will generate the additional support needed to pack the 6,000 seats at Bears and Eagles Riverfront Stadium.”\(^\text{19}\) I can tell you, it doesn’t.

There are more powers at work here than a name when trying to figure out why fans have not embraced the new Bears. Rick Cerone had intended with is his team and his stadium to invoke the memory of the Bears of his father’s generation, of his father’s childhood neighborhood, where the Bears broadcasts echoed through the streets where kids were played.

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stickball. The torchbearers of those Bears are not filling the stadium, so another memory, a memory of the Eagles was tried on. The Eagles, with a legacy of black heroes, of a segregated team that was arguably better than their white counterparts despite not having their resources, a championship team, that was more than accessible to a community. Over a decade later, and each year brings less and less fans, so much less that in 2011 the team left the Atlantic League and joined the Canadian American Association of Professional Baseball so they could play in a league with a shorter schedule allowing more time for community events and rentals to bring in revenue. With all of this said, all I can think is a city was willing to pay $34 million for a memory, did they bet on all the wrong ones?

I return back to Christopher Gaffney and *Temples of the Earthbound Gods* because his description of stadiums as “monuments, places for community interaction, repositories of collective memory, loci of strong identities, sites for ritualized conflict, political battlefields, and nodes in the global system of sport” is seeming a list of all the elements that are lacking in regards to Bears and Eagles Riverfront Stadium, except for the political battlefields. This may be the reason the stadium cannot bring fans in, even on Thirsty Thursdays. Eminent Newark historian Clement Price describes Newark today as “a city that over the last fifty years became increasingly disjointed. Its civic culture was extremely compromised. The riots took its toll on the city with respect to neighborhoods and a sense of cohesiveness in the city.” The memory of Ruppert Stadium has far less to do with baseball then it does with the community it created, both within its walls, but also within the actual neighborhoods. Baseball, the teams, those were the

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community connectivities. When using memory for profit, one must make sure you tapped the right mystic chord.

Jerry Izenberg wrote “Today’s groundbreaking is about the healing of an emotional soul of a city.” He ends with “There used to be a ballpark in this town. Today, they will start to build another. If you don’t understand why, then you don’t understand what has happened to this city.” Memory built this stadium. The memory of a segregated city in the era of Jim Crow, the memory of riots, the memory of white flight to the suburbs, the memory of violence and crime that this city cannot shake, the memory of a community, and of course the memory of a stadium being in everybody’s neighborhood. Memory built this stadium, but cannot fill it.

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