



This time, Cubs can't flush chance to get a lift from Wrigley renovation

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Tuesday, February 26, 2013*

We've read thousands of words about the planned Wrigley Field renovation – another chapter in the ballpark's continuing evolution – and the byzantine politics involved.

What we really need, though, are more details of the basics of the \$300 million upgrade. Sort of like the fans' version of pitching and defense. In this case, entrance and egress, the latter in more ways than one.

For all the fancy doodads that architects' renderings might portray, the average roofer forking over \$50 or more for a ticket wants to know how his comfort is increased compared to the cramped facilities Wrigley Field has sported over a century.

The paying customer wants to know how he/she can easily get to and from his seat (which will still have some obstructed views due to the continuation of posts), and climb to the upper deck if the seat is at the equivalent of a fifth floor. Knowledge of where to more easily obtain mid-game relief other than the bullpen is also highly desired.

The plain fact is the pastoral setting of Wrigley Field -- with its ivy-covered walls, lush green field and 1937-vintage scoreboard – along with its unparalleled surrounding cityscape belies the discomfort of actually attending a game. And it's just as bad, if not worse, for those who work at the ballpark, be they players, Cubs employees or media.

Even as Wrigley Field was partially re-done over the decades, preceding ownerships never spent enough on easing the walls-closing-in nature of its supposedly Friendly



Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts has to direct his architects to take care of fans' fundamentals before their luxuries in the Wrigley Field renovation. Photo Credit Garrett Craig

Confines.

Any renovation must start with a twin design: more entrances and far wider main concourses at both ground level and in the upper deck. Right now, the main lower-deck “bowl” and upper deck have just public three entrances/exits – the main gate at Clark and Addison, and one each down the left- and right-field lines, the latter next to an exit through the Captain Morgan Club. A side door also leads into the players’ parking lot down the left field line. How Wrigley Field evolved over the decade with just these small number of gates and doors is amazing. For both fan comfort and safety, this must be doubled.

Meanwhile, the concourses have to be widened before they’re spiffed up. This task will be challenging for architects due to the small footprint on which Wrigley Field is located. The outside wall behind first base abuts right up against Addison Street. In one stretch, the sidewalk between the wall and the curb is wide enough only for two or three people across. With the team offices now moved to a building at the corner of Waveland and Clark, there’s no need to accommodate an employees’ area. The architects could concentrate internal ballpark functions in the left-field side, where there is plenty of room with parking lots outside. However, with the continuing need for improved bathrooms – we’ll get to that in a minute – off the main concourse, the designers will have their hands full in space allocation in right field.

More elevators a necessity

Early reports that the Cubs plan to increase the number of elevators in Wrigley Field also is welcome. How the team ended up with just one elevator – installed in 1996 down the left-field line – to ease access to the upper deck is puzzling. When often-thrifty team president Andy MacPhail was asked about installing an elevator in 1995, he responded, “Go to Comiskey Park.” Yet the lift was put in the following year, with several reports suggesting its construction was prompted by legal issues involving disabled fans’ ability to get to the upper deck. When another official was queried as to why the elevator and shaft were not installed years previously (regardless of the philosophy of spending), he said the team hadn’t been aware there was room for a shaft in the present location. Huh?



The Wrigley Field view from the grandstand is spectacular; the feeling of comfort in entering and exiting, and using the bathrooms less so. Photo credit [Wally Gobetz](#)

During the 1988-89 project to install lights, luxury suites and an upper-deck pressbox, the Cubs declined to install an elevator behind home plate for those who worked in the pressbox along with upper deck-bound fans. Cubs president Don Grenesko reasoned that the team did not want to pierce the roof with an elevator shaft and ruin the tradi-

tional architectural appearance of Wrigley Field. When 68-year-old sportswriter “Bus” Saidt of the Times of Trenton (N.J.) died of a heart attack days after navigating the steep ramps to the pressbox after the opening series with the Phillies in 1989, the Baseball Writers Association of America sent a letter to the Cubs about the strenuous access. Apparently, the letter was ignored.

Saidt’s death pointed to a stark fact. The ramps to the upper decks make many people except the young and the fittest stop to catch their breath going up. Those pushing wheelchairs up the ramps must have had an even harder time. Obviously realizing that problem, mechanically-minded former owner P.K. Wrigley – always infatuated with gadgets – had “moving sidewalks” installed on several ramps in 1956. But the people movers, long common on level surfaces at airport concourses, never worked well enough on an angle, and broke down. Eventually, they were dismantled and covered with concrete. Why Wrigley never added a couple of elevators remains a mystery.

While the Cubs figure out how many new elevators are feasible, they also could ease the degree of slope of the ramps for those who choose to make the climb. That’s yet another challenge for designers.

Interestingly, a small elevator, hardly bigger than a dumb waiter, leading from the upper-deck concourse one floor up to the pressbox level was installed as part of the 1988-89 construction project. But it was never used, not even to ease access for senior-citizen Harry Caray or a Ron Santo walking on a pair of artificial legs.

Both genders at disadvantage getting to Wrigley bathrooms

The upper deck also is center of yet another issue – more and better bathrooms.

Women have traditionally complained of lack of enough restroom facilities at old and sometimes not-so-old stadiums. In one incident at vintage 1966 Busch Stadium II, predecessor to the present namesake stadium in St. Louis, women tired of waiting in line at the bathroom broke ranks, hollered a warning to the occupants inside, and stormed the men’s room to use the commodes.

But in Wrigley Field’s upper deck, the men have had equality in lack of relief compared to the women. There are only two sets of bathrooms upstairs – in right and left fields. The renovation must boost this count. Once fans are upstairs, they’re almost stuck in place due to the narrow concourse dividing the box and terrace reserved seats – the only way to move horizontally in the area. Even an increased number of elevators would not help the situation. Adding restrooms at each end of the upper deck would go a long way to increasing fans’ comfort in an already congested situation.

Everyone has a good (albeit nervous) chuckle over the troughs in the men’s rooms. This military barracks-style communal-relief design is supposed to be part of the quaint charm of Wrigley Field. But it is really part of a discredited past in the same way early 20th Century-constructed Chicago public-school boys’ bathrooms did not have doors on the commode booths. In many modern men’s rooms, newer urinals have dividers on each side for a degree of privacy. After the Ricketts family took over in 2009,

a modest number of urinals were installed in the main-concourse. Such installation has to be standard, upstairs and downstairs, as part of the renovation project.

The Cubs' plans are the most costly and ambitious of any of the construction efforts that have kept Wrigley Field going since 1914, when a much smaller version opened for the Federal League Whales. The Cubs moved in two years later.

The upper deck was completed by 1928, then re-constructed 40 years later. The permanent bleachers, scoreboard and ivy were installed in 1937. New, expanded bleachers opened in 2006. Grandstand seats down the left- and right-field lines were turned toward home plate as the 1960s ended. Around the same time, the old box-seat railing dividers were taken out as new, self-rising seats were put in. The OK for lights permitted the suites installation. A year after MacPhail was forced out in 2006, White Sox "sodfather" Roger Bossard supervised the installation of an entirely new field with man-made drainage, eliminating the downward slope in foul territory around the infield.

The key going forward will be basics before luxuries and gimmicks. Fans have so many entertainment options compared to the mid-20th Century, when attending a Sunday doubleheader in a crowded ballpark on a hot day was still better than sitting home in a stifling apartment or house.

Wrigley Field may have a special, historical cache. But fans paying premium prices for tickets simply want to be semi-comfortable start to finish.