It’s not ‘Armour Field,’
but re-done Cell passes architect’s muster

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If you think Philip Bess is permanently embittered because the semi-generic design of the soon-to-be renamed U.S. Cellular Field was chosen instead of his Armour Field layout, disabuse yourself of the notion.

Architect Bess was ahead of his time with his Armour Field ballpark-blended-with-surroundings plan in the late 1980s, before The Cell’s Plain Jane digs with a 35-degree upper-deck slope was unveiled.

The underloved – and if truth be known, underutilized -- South Side ballpark marked its 25th anniversary this year while getting a new naming-rights sponsor in Guaranteed Rate. Bess believes they got it right when early flaws were corrected in a 2002-04 remodeling focused on the upper deck and outfield stands.

Even so, attendance has frequently been problematic. The 95-win 2000 AL West champions, an offensively robust team, failed to draw 2 million. The gate declined for eight straight seasons after the post-World Series 2006 season. This season’s May-June Sox collapse didn’t do the ticket-peddling process any favors.

“They couldn’t change the angle of the upper deck, so I thought it was a good move to chop off the last six rows,” Bess said. “They couldn’t change the basic organizational layout of the plan.

“The plan was the problem. It gives its big footprint and big upper deck. Within the constraints they were working with, the aesthetic changes they made are quite good. It’s a much more pleasant place to watch a game now than when they began. I want to give credit to the White Sox and give credit to HKS (design firm).”
The Cell’s original design on an 11-acre site was conceived as concentric rings. The field was surrounded by the seating bowl, followed by the main concourse with a service tunnel underneath, then concession stands and finally a vertical structure serving as the exterior. In contrast, the last row of Wrigley Field lower-seats are only 10-12 feet away from the exterior edge of the ballpark, in a much smaller eight-acre footprint.

Bess is now a professor at Notre Dame University’s School of Architecture. But as a young-buck designer three decades ago, he conceived of the 42,000-seat Armour Field for the city park of the same name located between 32nd and 33rd streets, formerly abutting the north side of old Comiskey Park. Unlike The Cell, the ballpark would have faced northeast with the Chicago skyline as a backdrop and urban development just beyond the walls.

Bess detailed his plans in a 1989 booklet, updated a decade later, called “City Baseball Magic.” Many of the concepts were later used in the post-1992 stadium development nationwide that overtook The Cell in design and intimacy.

The historical timeline has also overaken some of the precepts of Bess’ plans. But he remains a dreamer.

“In my fantasies, when U.S. Cellular Field becomes too expensive to maintain, they build Armour Field,” he said. “I stand by the urban ideas in ‘City Baseball Magic.’”

Compared to Wrigley Field, The Cell is spacious and convenient for those who have to work there, ranging from ballplayers to ink-stained wretches in the pressbox. Lower-bowl seats provide good, unobstructed views. The food is among the best in the majors.

**Criticism hit The Cell from the outset**

But starting with its steep upper deck that fans often avoid despite discounted tickets, The Cell has endured its fair share of criticism almost since opening in 1991. The ballpark pales in touristy appeal and tradition compared to a renovated Wrigley Field, hosting baseball’s winningest franchise stocked with matinee-idol young stars.

The Sox have a team-friendly lease from the Illinois Sports Facilities Authority that protects them financially even with modest attendance. The authority also footed the bill for a new restaurant on the north side of 35th Street.

Even with the ballpark’s drawbacks in design and location, the Sox aren’t about to move in the manner of the Braves and Rangers junking Turner Field and The Ballpark at Arlington.
Both stadiums were built in the mid-1990s, but are now considered outmoded or in a poor location. High costs prevented the Arlington ballpark from featuring a retractable roof, a seeming necessity with many mid-summer night-game first-pitch temperatures flirting with 100 degrees. Otherwise, there would be little reason to replace the Rangers’ home.

The Cell will far outlive those ballparks. Continuing to play second fiddle to Wrigley Field, the ballpark was simply the product of bad timing on a variety of fronts.

When the White Sox failed to get a stadium project approved in west suburban Addison in 1986 thanks to veiled racism from Illinois Senate cloutmaster “Pate” Philip, they were stuck looking for a city site. Chicago Mayor Harold Washington mandated a South Side location long before Gov. Jim Thompson finagled the stadium financing after hours in Springfield on July 1, 1988, preventing a Sox move to St. Petersburg, Fla.

“The site was picked for its political expediency,” Bess said. “The White Sox were desperate for a site and the city was desperate to keep them.

“There were a large number of people who needed to be re-located (south of The Cell’s site). They were African-American. Only Harold Washington could do that. He was deeply involved in that. The people who were being disenfranchised were politically powerless. Their only patron was the mayor’s office. That was the sacrifice Harold Washington had to make for the sake of keeping the White Sox in Chicago.”

The actual design of the new ballpark also was out of its time with the new wave of stadium construction about to begin. The Sox relied on an old model rather than engaging in visionary thinking.

Without a Camden Yards (opened in 1992) or another new-age ballparks already operating, Reinsdorf’s only frame of reference to diverge from the cookie-cutter, multi-purpose stadiums was a suburban-style ballpark. The model was Kansas City’s Kauffman Stadium, built in 1973.

Such a structure would be built like a self-contained shopping mall, convenient to expressways but divorced from a surrounding cityscape. Fresh from the experience in Addison, where he had purchased land, Reinsdorf could not switch mental gears to an Armour Field-style design.

‘The last suburban ballpark’

“The Cell is the last suburban ballpark,” Bess said. “Reinsdorf wanted his stadium out in suburban Chicago. The (city) deal that was worked out essentially was he would get a suburban-model ballpark surrounded by parking on the expressway. (Stadium architects) HOK Sports was big on pushing the idea that this was a great site for it, that you can see it from the expressway. Reinsdorf was all-in on this suburban model.

“The reason why I did Armour Field was to illustrate what an urban model would look like. I was designing it in the summer of 1987 as a counter to what I knew was going to be proposed as the (new Sox ballpark) site. It got zero interest from the White Sox.”
Believing the location across 35th Street from old Comiskey Park was fine due to proximity to the Dan Ryan Expressway and the Red Line L, Reinsdorf and politicians did not factor a new, attendance-stifling trend going into the 1990s. Horrific expressway traffic congestion developed from the north and west caused by the evening rush-hour inbound “reverse commute.”

“I don’t think anybody was really predicting the reverse-commute phenomenon at the time,” Bess said. “The model of post-war suburbia was the commuting into the city and going out in the evening. What you get now is crushing traffic in both directions.

“That was not something anybody was foreseeing. That was a consequence of demographic shifts that were not really predictable at the time. Even the idea of Armour Field was presented as a proposition, not a prediction.”

Reinsdorf would not have personally noticed the evening reverse commute journeying to the South Side from his longtime Highland Park home since he typically arrived at the ballpark much earlier. But the grueling trip down the Edens Expressway, feeding three lanes into the four-lane Kennedy Expressway late on Friday afternoons, sometimes featured 25-mile-long backups from downtown to the Lake-Cook county line.

The only expressway lacking a reverse commute was the inbound Dan Ryan, linking the Chicago area’s least populous and least demographically desirable areas to The Cell.

Reinsdorf should have picked up on the problem from his Bulls players. Zipping into Chicago Stadium and the United Center from Deerfield and Northbrook, they occasionally were late in reporting to Chicago Stadium and the United Center at the appointed 6 p.m. time for 7:30 p.m. games. Future Bulls announcer Bill Wennington admitted he drove on the expressway shoulder to dodge the jams. Legend has Michael Jordan stashing game tickets in his car to hand over to any constables stopping him from a different kind of traveling in the lane – on that shoulder.

Early this year, the Kennedy-Edens clog was rated the worst traffic in the country. In recent summers, the Illinois Dept. of Transportation has kept the inbound reversible lanes on the Kennedy open until 2 p.m. Fridays to prevent the massive inbound backups from starting at lunchtime. But they cannot add more lanes. The old Crosstown Expressway bypass project to relieve the crush couldn’t even fly under the powerful reign of the late Mayor Richard J. Daley.

Traffic still would have been an issue if the new ballpark had been built, say, around the Roosevelt Road to the 18th Street area. But Bess’ vision of a stadium linking with a neighborhood might have flown better here, given the residential development of the South Loop starting in the 1990s. A closer location to downtown always was perceived as better for any such development.

The 35th Street location and attendance issues could have been a factor in the lack of an established, legacy Chicago company stepping up with naming rights to succeed U.S. Cellular. The latter company had pulled out of the market. The Sox landed the Guaranteed Rate on-line mortgage company, unknown to most fans and media.

“It underscores a problem with the brand and the franchise,” Bess theorized. “I still call
it Comiskey. My son’s comment was he couldn’t have imagined he’d prefer The Cell to something else. It sounds like there was a need to make a decision and this (offer) was available. Circumstances have not conspired to make the (ballpark-area) real estate more valuable. The Sox kind of exacerbate it by putting a big parking lot around the park.”

An unknown naming-rights sponsor is in keeping with the pattern of big Chicago money not flowing into local baseball. The Ricketts family was as unknown to the public as Guaranteed Rate when they emerged as the Cubs owners in 2009. Nowhere to be found in the bidding for the North Siders were the likes of the Pritzkers and Crowns, or any other local billionaires. In the same breath, Sox historian Rich Lindberg worries no Chicago buyers will step up if and when the Reinsdorf family ever decides to sell the team.

**18th Street site was considered**

Private financing was never available for old Comiskey’s replacement. Then-Gov. Jim Thompson had to jockey approval for The Cell/Guaranteed Rate Field at the last second on the floor of the Illinois General Assembly.

Too bad. Bess’ original concepts for a new ballpark were worthy of any 1 percenter’s backing.

Bess claimed his first stab at designing a new ballpark was named Bill Veeck Stadium, envisioned for 18th Street. He recalled the Washington Administration being interested in such plans.

Bess’ ballpark concepts of relatively limited capacity intertwined with the surroundings were frequently adopted by center-of-the-city ballparks opened since the 1990s.

The likes of the much-praised PNC Park, with the pedestrian-only Roberto Clemente Bridge and Pittsburgh skyline in the immediate background, and San Diego’s Petco Park incorporating an old industrial building as part of the left-field wall would seem to fill the bill.

“There is some satisfaction that the ballparks were built in cities as opposed to out on suburban sites,” Bess said. “At the same time, there’s a difference between what I was proposing compared to the model that was adopted.
“The kind of model that I was always interested in was the idea of a neighborhood baseball park, a model built into a walkable mixed-use neighborhood. Cities are places where people live, work, shop, go to baseball games, go to church.

“It’s sort of a half-loaf. Ballparks have been conceived as a kind of an anchor for a section of a city as an entertainment zone. The city was seen as not a place to live, but as an entertainment zone. But even that has changed in the last 10 years or so...to a place where people actually live.”

The catch is the Average Joe is not typically a new city dweller.

“People who live there are a very specific demographic,” Bess said. “It’s expensive to live in these cities. It’s become a kind of upper-class phenomenon. It certainly differs from the kind of model I imagined for Armour Field, which was modeled after the ballparks built in the early part of the 20th century.”

Cubs-residents tiffs throw off Bess’ model

Wrigley Field has long been a living, breathing model of an integration of a community and ballpark. Bess puts his money where his mouth is as a partial season-ticket holder. He likes the old Confines, but exists in a minority in not favoring the 2015-vintage video boards in left and right fields.

The moneyed change in Lake View, now popularly known as Wrigleyville, preceded Bess’ timeline of upper-class migration for the city as a whole. And the cultural dynamics of the Wrigley Field-residents/politician relationship kind of skews his vision of a harmonious ballpark-neighborhood synergy. The metamorphosis of Lake View from a working-class area of the 1960s to one of the more fashionable Chicago neighborhoods has led to clashes between the Cubs and residents.

Knowing how to organize and exercise political clout, the affluent, educated residents blocked the installation of lights for the first six years of Tribune Co. ownership in the...
1980s. City ordinances still restrict the total number of night games are still in effect, requiring Cubs owner Joe Maddon to restrict batting practice late in the season to provide more rest for the players amid the majors’ toughest schedule.

In spite of the initial opposition to lights, the Cubs and the burgeoning neighborhood had a symbiotic relationship. They fed off each other. A few neighborhood-style bars blossomed into a huge collection of higher-end watering holes, restaurants and retailers. Clark Street now features one of the prime entertainment centers of the city with popular bars and clubs. Fans have now shifted their Chicago championship celebrations from Division Street to the two blocks of Clark Street south of Wrigley Field.

Even with most entities making money, tensions have mounted. By the early 2000s, a tug-of-war ensued between rooftop club owners and the team. Eventually a revenue-sharing detente was crafted, lasting until the Ricketts family took over the Cubs. Steadily, the owners are buying up financially distressed rooftops.

More recently, local business owners and some residents – channeling through Alderman Tom Tunney – are not happy over the Cubs’ plan to sell beer and wine until late at night in an open-air plaza bordering the west side of Wrigley Field. Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts wants to directly tap into (literally) the yearn for libation and merriment outside the ballpark that formerly was the lifeblood of the barkeeps.

“It’s a tricky issue about development in the city,” Bess said. “On one hand, I’m not opposed to that kind of development. On the other hand, it’s always better when there’s a multiplicity of owners in that situation.

“The ballpark has been there much longer than anyone who lives in the neighborhood has been there. You come to that neighborhood knowing you’re involved with a baseball park.”

No such troubles beset The Cell. When the Sox are not playing, peace and quiet are predominant on the west side of the ballpark. The only consistent noise is traffic from the Dan Ryan.

Maybe Armour Field would have changed that. We’ll never know since so many wrong choices were made that will reverberate for decades to come.