



Will the downtown diamond sparkle?

by **Marianne Combs**, Minnesota Public Radio
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If the deal goes through to buy land for a new Minneapolis baseball stadium near the Target Center, Twins fans will still have a lot of questions about the park's size and shape. Will there be room for enough seats? The estimates seem to keep going down. How far will the seats be from the action? And will they enjoy travelling to that part of town?

Minneapolis — To fully appreciate the proposed design, lead architect Bruce Miller says you need to get in the right mindset. So please, stop calling it a stadium. It's a ballpark.

"It's not about creating a stadium from the 1970s," says Miller. "We're trying to create a neighborhood ballpark. And this ballpark would fit inside of many other ballparks we've done across the country. It's very intimate; it's very close to the action."

With a footprint of just eight acres, the proposed Twins site would be the most compact ballpark in the majors.

That puts it in a league with two of the most revered ballparks in the country: Fenway Park in Boston and Wrigley Field in Chicago. Both of them are pretty cozy compared to most major fields, and both inspire a great sense of loyalty and community pride.

University of Notre Dame architecture professor Philip Bess is considered a leading expert on traditional stadium design, and has consulted on the Twins plan. He says a small park in a metro setting is what you want because it demands creativity.

"One of the great things about traditional urban baseball parks is that they are each unique, owing to the circumstances of their creation and owing in particular to their urban context," says Bess.

In the case of the Twins stadium, that context includes Interstate 394 on one side, railway lines and a garbage incinerator on another, the backside of Target Center on a third. As a result, the design for the ballpark oozes into all the free space above and below ground.

It's kind of like what happens when you've cinched your belt too tight. The stadium angles up and outward over the railway, the Cedar Lake Bike Trail and other neighboring obstructions. Storage space for John Deere tractors and hookups for media trucks are underground.

In the stadium bleachers, front-row ticketholders will be just 45 feet from the field. In most stadiums, those seats are more like 60 feet away. While the Metrodome currently seats 42,000 fans at a baseball game, the proposed ballpark would seat closer to 40,000.

Some fans worry that having fewer seats will mean more expensive tickets. County Commissioner Mike Opat disagrees.

"For those who want to see 42,000 seats, well, the last thousand seats are a long way away."

They might be affordable, but you'd probably be better off watching it on TV," says Opat. "So I think it's about the right size. We'll keep pressure on the Twins to keep those last seats affordable and I think that's going to make for a quaint, interesting ballpark."

The designers don't talk about a particular look they're after. They talk about intimacy, sightlines and the way the park fits into the neighborhood.

Architect Bill Blanski stands in a parking lot where someday home plate will be, envisioning the future. He says it will be nothing like the Metrodome.

"The Metrodome is backwards," says Blanski. "It puts the wrong face to the city. This is going to be the reverse of that."

Blanski says when there's a game underway at the Metrodome, there's really no sense of it on the street. The proposed stadium will be far more transparent from the outside, and the energy of the game will spill out into the neighborhood.

And that's exactly what worries neighborhood resident David Frank.

"I am not a sports fan," says Frank. "So what happens inside the walls of a stadium is really somebody else's business."

Frank wants to know what's going to happen to his neighborhood when a game ends, and suddenly 40,000 people take to the sidewalks at 10 o'clock on a school night. Or, even more important, what about the 284 days when there are no games scheduled?

"We've seen some preliminary designs where concession stands and bathrooms and necessary ballpark functions are against outside walls," says Frank. "That makes it very difficult to have the traditional good pedestrian experience of walking by and seeing storefront windows and activity happening at ground level."

Frank does think the ballpark, if done right, will have the potential to revitalize the entire neighborhood and bring in lots of new business.

Because what good is a great stadium if people don't feel comfortable walking the neighboring streets? Who wants to leave a game only to be surrounded by highway ramps and concrete walls, instead of restaurants and shops?

Lead architect Bruce Miller agrees that the success of the ballpark depends not just on the design of the stadium, but also the neighborhood. Ideally, he says it should develop into a "Ballpark District."

"So you start getting the sense that you're arriving in the ballpark district maybe two blocks away, maybe four blocks away," says Miller, "so that there's an experience that starts remote from the ballpark as you enter the area."

Of course, Miller is in charge of designing just the ballpark, not the neighborhood. Hennepin County has expressed interest in developing the surrounding area to make it more pedestrian-friendly, but it doesn't know yet how much money it can spend. That depends on how much is left over after buying the land.