

Architects and librarians

A baseball experiment with American fiction and stadium design

by William E. Brown Jr. and Rolando Llanes

Architects and librarians both build, although generally architects focus on buildings and structures while librarians concentrate on collections and information.

At the University of Miami (UM) members of these two disciplines collaborated to teach an experimental course that combined baseball literature and history with baseball stadium design.

The 1996 course, "Architecture 510: A Ballfield for Big Inning, Iowa," taught by Assistant Professor Rolando Llanes, School of Architecture, with contributions from Associate Professor William E. Brown Jr., of the UM Library, represents

an initiative by both faculty members to engage in collaborative projects that stretch traditional librarian-faculty boundaries.

Librarian and teaching faculty partnership

The two faculty members joined forces to craft a unique, interdisciplinary course. Llanes and

Brown first met through a "team" project that created a museum exhibition of baseball history in Miami. Brown's ongoing outreach efforts as a rare book and special collections librarian to engage faculty and students in diverse areas of scholarly research, and Llanes's

two earlier classes on baseball stadium design, set the stage for this unusual course. In 1997, they also collaborated on another course. This summer class focused on horse racing, and led students through the creation of a horse barn and related structures. Llanes and Brown are also at work on a documentary film project that traces



"Big Inning," rendering of the fictional town of Big Inning, Iowa.

the architectural and social history of Miami Stadium, a historical baseball stadium built in Miami in 1947. Both faculty members are also founding members of the Center for Research on Sport in Society (CRSS), a newly formed interdisciplinary program at the UM.

About the authors

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Course content and assignments

The course syllabus included readings and assignments to foster an understanding of baseball and baseball architecture in our modern world. The featured book for this course, *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* by W. P. Kinsella, is a baseball novel of mythical proportion. Kinsella, also the author of *Shoeless Joe*, a novel that served as the basis for the film *Field of Dreams*, described *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* as “the most visual [work] I’ve done. . . . Everything I write is visual, and it’s meant to be read aloud—it’s very visual.”¹

The Iowa Baseball Confederacy tells the mythical tale of a lost and forgotten baseball league in the heartland of America. The main character, Gideon Clarke, searches through time to prove the existence of an amateur baseball federation. Clarke travels through “cracks in time,” to the year 1908 and the city of Big Inning, Iowa. Clarke and his friend Stan Rogalski participate in an exhibition game between the Chicago Cubs and an all-star team of Confederacy players. The incredible game, which lasts 40 days and 2,641 innings, serves as the backdrop for an incredible tale that weaves historical figures and elements of pure fantasy against a tapestry of baseball and the Iowa landscape.

The Iowa Baseball Confederacy proved an excellent choice for the architectural studio. By combining elements of fact and fiction, of contemporary time with a bygone era, this volume set the stage for an architectural odyssey that concluded at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Library in Cooperstown, New York.



“The Circle,” rendering of the proposed stadium—student project.

On June 12, 1996, at the Eighth Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture, Llanes and Brown, joined by three students from the class, presented a selection of architectural drawings, renderings, and models. Symposium participants also enjoyed a presentation on the history of the course and the effort to integrate baseball history, literature, and architecture in the academic curriculum. The Symposium also hosted Kinsella, who took the opportunity to participate in this discussion and commented upon the students’ work and role of baseball in our society.

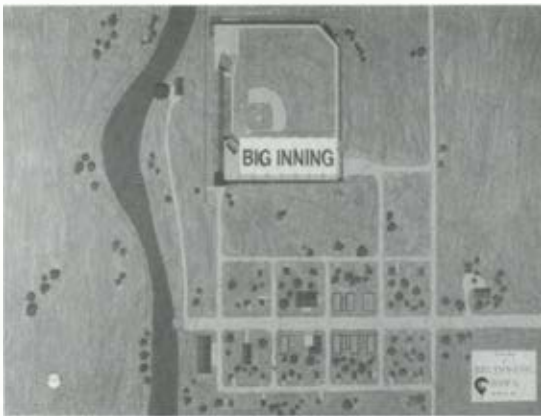
Student assignments included a variety of architectural design projects. The first assignment required the preparation of architectural drawings and the construction of a scale model ticket booth for the ballfield described in Big Inning, Iowa. The second project required the “reconstruction” of the town of Big Inning. Careful analysis of the novel in order to build a physical version of Big Inning led students and faculty through discussions on literary techniques and imagery. Students produced a two-dimensional map of Big Inning and a three-dimensional scale model. The design team of nine architecture students made all decisions, and the work was evenly distributed among the class.

The third student project, entitled “The Beginning,” asked students to create a working program for a stadium in Big Inning. The program required students to include conceptual drawings, models, and documents for a “real” ballpark. Faculty members allowed students wide latitude in shaping the individual characteristics of each project. However, a legitimate connection to the spirit of *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* remained a requirement. The students prepared drafts of drawings and presented these products to the instructors to receive necessary commentary prior to the creation of final plans.

The students’ final project required the construction of the town of Big Inning, Iowa, including the design of a ballpark/train station. Students found initial efforts to translate their personal visions into two-dimensional drawings and ultimately into a three-dimensional model, replete with frustration. Architects usually work for living, breathing clients. These individuals, in addition to paying for architectural services, are at

hand to provide necessary feedback for modifications in plans. For purposes of the class project, the instructors served as the final arbiter of interpretive disputes.

Each student project offered a unique contribution to the design studio and the learning experience of all the students. Two design projects are presented here as a representative of the overall work. The two projects are titled “The Circle” and “The County Fair.” Each work drew upon three key elements: the mythical world created by Kinsella: the more tangible world Kinsella also described; and the imagination of the individual student.



“The County Fair,” rendering of the proposed stadium—student project

“The Circle”

This ballpark design draws upon the imagery of *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* through the predominance of circles. Fans who come upon the stadium by foot, arrive directly through the surrounding Iowa cornfields and discover a strange yet familiar scene. This design concept will ring familiar to those of you who recall the creation of an Iowa ballfield in another of Kinsella’s works, *Shoeless Joe*.

This particular design was influenced by the novel’s many references to circles, as stated by the Indian Chief, *Drifting Away*:

“Think of circles instead of the lines . . . the ball, the circumference of the bat, the outfield running to circle of the horizon, the batter running around the bases. Baseball is as close to the circle of perfection as white men are allowed to approach.”²

“There is land enough for us all. See how small my own circle is, my charmed circle. The land births us, feeds us, reclaims us.”³

With the exception of the train station, the buildings and structures are placed within the circle, and offer a traditional Iowa design pattern—the red barn motif. Barn doors serve as entrance gates to major buildings and wood-lattice construction details aid in air ventilation efforts.

“The County Fair”

This ballpark offers an enticing, celebratory atmosphere highlighted by the colorful canvas tent facade bearing the proud name of “Big Inning.” This clever canopy serves multiple purposes: an effective covering for fans watching

baseball games; a distinctive landmark for the town, the stadium, and the team; and a flexible structure that can adapt to facilitate non-baseball events on the site, such as a county fair.

The square-frame design for the stadium complex melds with traditional Iowa design features, and when coupled with the canvas tent on the opposite side of the ballpark, residents of Big Inning have an attractive, functional facility at their disposal.

Evaluation

Student responses to a questionnaire serve as a barometer for evaluating this course. Students enjoyed the novel, although some found the portion of the work dealing with the lengthy game a distraction from their primary mission: to gather applicable information necessary to design a stadium suitable for the environment.

In all cases, the students confronted challenges that face a practicing architect. Certain challenges were purposely exacerbated, as students had no physical site to examine. This required a greater reliance on their ability to create an image from descriptive text.

The ultimate question “What did you learn from this course?” produced the type of answers that make teaching worthwhile. One student wrote, I learned “How to imagine, I mean truly imagine. The experience was truly rewarding. The exercise of converting written words and fiction into what could be considered a tangible reality was a new approach for me.”

Another student found the course to be an inspiration that taught him “how to use psy-



Front row: selected students. Standing: faculty and visiting panelists. Bill Brown, far left, and Rolando Llanes, third from left.

chological influences to form a context,” for he noted that his design was “driven as much by the mental images and emotional reactions to Kinsella’s novel . . . as by the [physical] landscape.”

Lessons were also learned, “There is a commonality between the literature and the architecture. The story creates architecture and the architecture can create a story.” From an emotional standpoint students learned to understand stadiums from a variety of perspectives. “A stadium doesn’t just hold people, it holds their memories. An effective design will capture and release the memories of thousands.”⁷⁴

Students were also asked to express their feelings toward the game of baseball, and one student found himself rekindling an interest in the game, “I even went out and bought a bat and ball just to hit it around.” A student less familiar with the game and its terminology described baseball as “a passionate game, because it is not just about garnering points or running the field to catch and throw . . .”⁷⁵

Students were unanimous in their praise for the course, and urged that the class be offered again. “It is a unique opportunity to design something, which most professionals will never get the chance to do.”⁷⁶ The students, once hesitant about the concept of designing a facility from a fictional source, came to appreciate the challenge inherent in the art of interpretation, a crucial component to any architectural or literary enterprise.

The final phase of the course, prior to our discovery that this topic would be of interest

to groups such as the National Symposium on Baseball Culture and Literature, involved a daylong series of presentations by students to a “jury” or “panel” of experts. A combination of teaching and practicing architects, baseball historians, and baseball literary experts participated in the review. Each student presented an oral summary of his work, including the display, introduction, and review of drawings, models, and supporting documentation. The jury listened, evaluated, and questioned the work and the presentation, as a client would react to a final presentation by a professional architect.

Among the jurists was Philip Bess, a noted architect and author on baseball stadiums. One of the reasons Bess finds ballparks and stadiums such an important and fascinating subject “is because of the range of practical, urban (and as this studio demonstrates) mythic issues that can be associated with baseball and the places where it is played.”⁷⁷ This studio illustrated one of the major dilemmas facing architects and modern architecture today.

“One of the frustrating aspects of the contemporary culture and practice of architecture is that increasingly architectural concerns for placemaking are conceived or executed apart from the concerns for or knowledge of membership in the communities for which they design—if indeed they are even designing for communities.”⁷⁸

Herein lies the ultimate challenge for the baseball architect, and the students in the course. In Kinsella’s story, as in the game of baseball, there are “some things solid and definite.” The “framework and parameters” must be considered. Baseball, however, and particularly baseball in the mythical world of Kinsella, offers a celebration of the power of creative invention or “fabulation,” whereby the author’s “magic realism” allows for a world where nothing is impossible.

However, the architect and the writer both have the freedom to explore and to create. Most often, they do so in their separate worlds. The writer creates a structure that is part fact and part fantasy with words that help us see the images in our minds. The architect creates a structure of fact and fantasy with pencil and paper (and, ultimately, building materials), to give

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don in 1694.” Maybe it was my imagination, but I swear I heard a sharp intake of breath around the room. Now to the point of this, I thought.

Research then and now

“How do you think the world was different for university students when this book was printed?” I asked. I began writing things down on the board as they were offered. No Internet. No computers. No photocopiers. No electricity. And the list went on.

I had raised this because I wanted to convey to the students the importance of having patience when doing research. “Not everything is on the Net,” I said, “and oftentimes the full-text sources you can get that way aren’t the best ones for your topic.”

This provided a good lead-in for talking about the importance of critical skills and the need to judge the relative merits of one source against that of another, especially when they contradict each another.

“Next time you’re tempted just to take the path of least resistance and produce a mediocre paper with a mediocre bibliography, I want you to think of those students 300 years ago. Copying everything out by hand. Working by candlelight. Traveling sometimes to foreign countries just so they could see the books that they needed for their research.

“Then compare those students to yourselves. Going to the fifth floor of the library to get a book, when it means in the end writing a better paper, really isn’t so bad. This place is a storehouse of knowledge. And sometimes it takes patience and hard work to draw out the best sources.”

In the end, our learning had been collaborative and it had been fun. Instead of laughing or dismissing me as naive, the students appreciated my enthusiasm and the trouble I had taken to introduce them to the library, the university, and the scholarly record. I think they came out of that class with a much better sense of what doing research is all about.

The professor, for her part, thanked me for “putting it all in perspective.” And I still had almost half-an-hour to talk about good approaches to title and keyword searching. At least this time those skills weren’t presented out of context. ■

(“Architects . . . continued from page 386)

physical definition to our dreams. Fact and fantasy are as open to literary interpretation as tradition and scale are to architectural design.

A success story?

To summarize, “A Ballpark for Big Inning, Iowa” was an experiment that celebrated the unique status of baseball in our literary and architectural culture. Was it successful? From the participants’ viewpoint, the answer is yes. Does it have a significance and application beyond the classroom experience?

The participants would again answer in the affirmative, for the exploration and investigation of the imagination cannot be anything but a worthwhile experience, whatever the academic discipline or intellectual orientation.

This architectural studio sought to recognize, stimulate, and encourage the spirit of imagination so essential to an appreciation of *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy*. In this case we did so not by adding innings or characters to the story, or by analyzing their every word and deed, rather we looked inward and created several “Big Innings.” No doubt, each reader has an individual vision and interpretation of how Big Inning and its baseball field should appear. The effort to improve upon the perfection of the baseball field may be a challenging and perhaps foolhardy endeavor, for we are likely experimenting with something beyond our earthly realm.

“Name me a more perfect game! . . . Take the layout. No mere mortal could have dreamed up the dimensions of a baseball field. No man could be that perfect.”⁹

Notes

1. “Interview with W. P. Kinsella,” *Short Story*, Columbia S.C.: Wentworth Print Corp. Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 1993, p. 83.

2. Kinsella, W. P. *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy*, Ballantine Books: New York, 1986, p. 167.

3. *Iowa*, p. 104.

4. “Architecture 507: A Ballfield for Big Inning, Iowa,” Student Course Evaluations, in possession of the authors.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Letter from Philip A. Bess to William E. Brown, Jr., March 5, 1996.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Iowa*, p. 44. ■