

Q&A: Orioles' Janet Marie Smith on the architecture at Ed Smith Stadium | Real Estate Today

Janet Marie Smith, vice president of planning and development for the Baltimore Orioles, discusses the team's proposed designs for a new facade at Ed Smith Stadium, a new clubhouse at "the Ed," and a new training facility at Twin Lakes Park with Herald-Tribune real estate editor and architecture writer Harold Bubil.

Harold Bubil: At Ed Smith, the architecture of the new structures is what many Sarasotans would call Mediterranean revival. Do you agree?



The proposed design for Ed Smith Stadium is rooted in the Sarasota's 1920s Mediterranean revival architecture. Rendering by DMSAS Inc.

Janet Marie Smith: I don't know what (architect) David Schwarz would call it, but certainly their inspiration was from the many wonderful buildings that are in Sarasota, and a feeling that we ought to try to transform Ed Smith to not only be a friendlier place to be, with more shade, more places to hang out and watch the game at the leisurely pace that is spring training, but also it should be a building that has a presence when it is home to 9,000 spectators and when it is sitting as a backdrop to the hundred or so players who are working out year-round at Ed Smith.

So there was a very deliberate goal on the part of the architects to make certain that it had an image that was worthy of the kind of sophisticated, cultural architecture that is representative of Sarasota's civic buildings.

The architect of record is Hoyt Architects. The design architect and the inspiration for the renderings is David Schwarz. From the Orioles' perspective, we would say they have been a fabulous team and it has been a real collaboration. We have the best of all worlds, we think: someone who has major league baseball experience and a keen aesthetic sense, as well as a conviction about creating spaces for people to celebrate and enjoy life, combined with the Hoyt firm, which shares similar sensibilities, but has the added blessing of being based in Sarasota and knowing the community. Knowing the processes for getting city and county approvals, and knowing the engineering community. It is a lot more than process that they are handling. They have really brought something very special to the table from a design perspective, as well.

Q: Do you sit down with them and say, "I want you to design a traditional building," or a modern building?

A: Mr. Peter Angelos – the Angelos family owns the Orioles – has been convinced, I think appropriately, from the very beginning that Sarasota is a fabulous place to be, and one of the things that makes it so fabulous is its sense of community and its strong sense of style. So it was his directive to the design team that we make certain, in our transformation of the Ed Smith and Twin Lakes facilities, that we not only bring them up to today's standards from a functional and amenities perspective, but that we assign a style to them that really transforms them into something that feels timeless and very much a part of the civic buildings that do define Sarasota.

Q: You know, people in the architectural community here will say, "But ... Sarasota has a strong modernist tradition."



The design for the Orioles' Buck O'Neil Complex at Twin Lakes Park references the 1950s Sarasota school of architecture. Rendering by DMSAS Inc.

A: It does. I would like to say we haven't ignored that, either. Twin Lakes in particular has lent itself well to the kind of – I don't want to call it 'Sarasota Modern,' because I am looking deliberately not to put a label on it – much simpler, cleaner style with the kinds of lines that would be indicative of a modern, International movement, than the kind of traditional "Florida Picturesque" that has guided our transformation of Ed Smith.

One of the things David Schwarz would say, if you were speaking with him, is that there is still the old Ed Smith that is there. One of the challenges they faced, is how do you develop a style that doesn't clash with that? I think their feeling was that this very traditional stadium approach ... the rhythm of the arches, the notion of a second story to the concourse ... to provide the shade and a space for concessions and retail outlets that fans have come to expect to find in a venue of this size. It has a nice rhythm with the old, and finding an architectural style that meshes well with a 1988 building is a challenge in and of itself.

The good news is it's a very solid building and it has held up well. It has provided the basis for what we are putting together now in a way that has allowed us to do much more programmatically, with a very tight budget, than we ever could have done if we were starting from scratch. One of our goals has been to reuse as much as we can of that, not only for good environmental reasons, but just to make certain from a budget perspective that we are getting as much value as we can out of what is there.

Q: The community salutes you for that, because some have asked how is it that a building that has been perfectly suitable for 20 years all of a sudden, to some other teams that might have moved here, is not worth keeping?



Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore was a trendsetter, with its urban setting punctuated by a brick warehouse at right. Herald-Tribune archives.

A: We feel the same way. As a society, we've come to treat our buildings as disposable in a way that is very inappropriate. In Baltimore, we had the luxury of having these beautiful old historic buildings to save. And certainly the warehouse at Camden Yards gives personality and definition to the ballpark in a way that nothing else ever could, but equally compelling to us is the challenge in Sarasota of using something that maybe stylistically isn't as compelling as the warehouse is, but from a functional perspective is every bit as worthy of saving.

Q: Yes, we have warehouses near Ed Smith, but they tend to be made of metal and not brick.

A: (Laughing) We were lucky enough to have a nice, 100-year-old brick one.

Q: It was serendipitous to have that setting, whereas the setting around Ed Smith is somewhat nondescript.

A: We are hopeful that, over time, the work that we are doing, not only architecturally, but literally the work that our players will be doing at Ed Smith in years to come ... will be an uplift to the neighborhood.

Q: Were you with the Atlanta Braves when their spring training park at Disney's Wide World of Sports was built?

A: In a limited way. They were well on the way, and the credit for that goes, once again, to David Schwarz, who worked on that for Disney. That building must be 15 years old, and it has held up extraordinarily well. I used the word "timeless" a moment ago, but I think it's a nice goal for architecture to subscribe to because you don't always to be of a period. Fashion works well that way, but not so architecture.

Q: But I have heard other architects say buildings should be of their time. I have quoted them on that. There is plenty of room for disagreement.



The proposed clubhouse at Ed Smith Stadium. Rendering by DMSAS Inc.

A: There is plenty of room for interpretation. I'm not sure there is ever any right way or wrong way. There are different attitudes. One of the reasons why "timeless" may be a goal for us is we have a 30-year lease (at Ed Smith); we want to make sure we are as enamored of this in Year 29 as we are in Year One.

Q: You have lamented the use of the phrase "retro ballpark." And after a time in which Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium and Three Rivers Stadium and other "cookie-cutter" stadiums of the 1970s were replaced by Oriole Park at Camden Yards and others that are more traditional in their styling, if not "retro," where is the state of the art going in major-league ballparks?

A: I'm not sure I know the answer to that. My crystal ball has never been very clear. But I will comment on "retro," though, because I have been saying this for years. I appreciate that it is a nice, easy sound bite, and confess to having used it myself in casual settings, but it is frustrating to me on a more intellectual level because what we were seeking at Camden Yards was not retro. We were looking to be of the time. The word we would use over and over again is that we were looking to design a traditional ballpark with modern amenities. That is not as short a clip for our impatient society as saying "retro." But we certainly were not looking to do a throwback.



Janet Marie Smith. Photo courtesy of the Baltimore Orioles.

We studied the older ballparks that had a character and a charm and a uniqueness in that they were baseball only; they were not trying to be multipurpose. In that came a litany of things, from the use of a steel truss structure; the use of masonry, which seemed just right for the site, where we had this brick warehouse; an asymmetrical playing field whose dimensions were dictated by the site it was on; maintaining buildings on the site; maintaining the street on the site; designing the seating bowl so that it almost completely surrounded the playing field, but had very little foul territory, unlike the multipurpose stadiums.

So our attitude about Camden Yards was driven by our desire to respect the urban environment that we were in, and if you think about it, Camden Yards was the first ballpark that had been built in an urban setting in some 70 years. It was trying to be respectful of its urban setting, as opposed to literally wiping it out, as if it were an urban redevelopment project.

So the respect for the context, and the hope that we would be part of the litany of things downtown, from the Inner Harbor to the historic buildings on Howard Street to the aquarium. ... The collection of attractions that were being added to Baltimore at the time was really what drove the design. It is only 20 years later, in hindsight, that you can say it really began a new era of thinking in ballparks. It certainly wasn't our goal, expectation, nor would we have been presumptuous enough to say, "We're going to change the trend." We just said, "We want to do the right thing for Baltimore."

As it turned out, many things about it were mimicked, and maybe the thing we are most flattered by is that so many other teams chose urban settings for their ballparks. Forget about the style: In many ways, I think it's the attitude about the revitalization of city centers that makes this trend so important to America. Whether it's a modernist interpretation or a traditional interpretation is a stylistic gesture. It's the fact that so many are in cities that is the real statement.

Q: In Europe, it seems that nothing is built that is not contemporary or modern. They don't do revivalist architecture. They religiously are very modern. An example is the Stade de France, which many American tourists have seen on the road from Charles de Gaulle airport to downtown Paris. Why do you think that is, whereas revivalism is a strong trend in America?

A: I can't speak to Europe as a whole, but especially in Paris, there is so much rich architectural history and it is so outstanding, that it's better to have a contrast than something that is like-kind. In many American cities, the context, it isn't nearly as strong, either as individual buildings or as a total urban fabric. In many ways we are still building the context in many American cities.