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PITTSBURGH, Pa.--The national pastime is blessed with many beautiful new baseball stadiums, but none fit into the pastiche of community as well as PNC Park at North Shore in downtown Pittsburgh.

The ballpark is muscled between a regentrified warehouse district and the Allegheny River, an appropriate location for a working-class town where five o'clock shadows are 24/7.

It's like having a shot glass next to a beer.

The Roberto Clemente Bridge rainbows the river. The former Sixth Street bridge was renamed in honor of one of the Pittsburgh Pirates' most beloved players. Clemente perished in a Dec. 31, 1972, plane crash while leading the Puerto Rican relief effort for earthquake-torn Nicaragua. He was 38.

Sometimes Clemente would complain about his aches and pains. I can still see him twitching his neck while going to work in a bitter September wind. But he always got the job done with passion and pride.

That's Pittsburgh.

The Clemente bridge is closed to vehicles during game days, allowing pedestrians to approach the park with anticipation in each step--just as Clemente used to come to the plate against the Cubs. The right-field wall at PNC is known as "The Clemente Wall." It is exactly 21 feet high in honor of the right fielder's uniform number.

One of the best places to watch the game is from the cheapest seat, a \$9 ticket in the 300 section of the right field upper deck grandstands. This presents a glorious view of bridges, the north downtown skyline and the ballpark's "toothbrush" light standards. The long and lean black light standards are replicated from the standards that stood in Pittsburgh's Forbes Field, where the Pirates played between 1910 and 1970. From a distance, you can see how the infield dirt matches the color of the ballyard's limestone foundation.

Although the Pirates have had a lousy year, PNC (which refers to PNC bank corporation) is a Labor Day success story. It has provided a boost for a city that for the past 20 years had one of the largest population losses of any area in the country.

As the steel industry went south and international immigrants failed to come to Pittsburgh, the city dwindled from 520,117 in 1970, according to the mayor's office, to its current population of 334,000 people. Wichita, Kan., has more people than

Pittsburgh. To put it another way, Pittsburgh now has twice the population of Naperville.

"If a city doesn't have a major league team, it's not a big deal," says Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy Jr. "For a city to lose a major league team is a real blow.

"This was important because Pittsburgh had gone through almost 25 years of bad news. Mills closing. People losing jobs. Through the '70s and '80s we got 'The City of Champions' name with the Pirates and football Steelers winning. In my mind, they become a symbol of whether we as a community have the will to change or let it all continue to slide away."

The North Shore warehouse district near the ballpark is bouncing back. The Andy Warhol Museum is a block north of the ballpark at 117 Sandusky St. .

And to top it off, Pirate great Bill "Maz" Mazerowski went into the Baseball Hall of Fame last month. A native of nearby Wheeling, W. Va., Maz played his entire 17-year career in Pittsburgh. Maz turns 65 on Wednesday. He cried at his induction ceremony.

That's Pittsburgh.

While at PNC, I tracked down Pirates broadcaster Steve Blass for an analysis of the new park. Blass, 59, is unique in that he pitched at Forbes Field (1964-70) and at Three Rivers Stadium (1970-74); in 1971 he won two World Series games, and now he works at PNC.

"This park is a delight," Blass says, looking out at center field. "We've talked to people who have seen all the new ones and we hear superlatives that this might be the best. But I also have reverence for Wrigley Field. It's an absolute shrine. I loved pitching there, even when the wind was blowing out. Partially because we'd score seven runs a game."

Ouch.

HOK Sport Inc. of Kansas City, Mo., designed PNC Park. Th that is the same architectural firm that designed Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore (1992), Jacobs Field in Cleveland (1994), Coors Field in Denver (1995), Comerica Park in Detroit (2000) and Pac Bell in San Francisco (2000). I have seen all those parks. They are all hits. HOK also designed Comiskey Park (1991). That's an error. Comiskey is the anti-PNC, constructed as if there is a moat separating the ballpark from the community.

Blass says, "You hope the people who build these things learn, improve and polish the edges as they go along. Apparently they have here, by utilizing a natural asset like the Allegheny River in the background and down to the detail that's open to the

city by not putting a light standard that would obstruct it."

Blass has been a Pittsburgh homeowner since 1972. He is a beloved figure around town. Blass and his family hold court at the Carlton, a steak and fish house which opened in 1984 at One Mellon Bank Center, 500 Grant St., about a 10-minute walk from PNC. The house specialty is the prime rib.

Blass says, "This ballpark has given the city a shot in the arm, and this city needs a shot in the arm. It continues to need a shot in the arm. There's diminishing population and a different direction in where the city hangs its hat in terms of corporate image and the steel image that no longer exists. It was a steel town when I came here as rookie in 1964. It still has that kind of reputation, feel and pride."

Mayor Murphy's father, Tom Sr., worked in the Jones & Laughlin steel mill for 51 years. While in college the younger Murphy toiled in the same mill during the hot summers in the valley. Although the mills have closed, Pittsburgh continues to be a graying community. "We Allegheny County) are the second-oldest county agewise in the country other than Dade County in Florida," says Murphy, 57. "We have lost a lot of young families. Making decisions in an atmosphere with a high percentage of elderly people is difficult. Doing all this stuff makes the city competitive for young people, but people who vote don't see that as clearly."

A 10-county referendum was proposed in 1998 to raise the sales tax half a percent for seven years to finance a new convention center, PNC Park and Heinz Field, the home of the Pittsburgh Steelers football team that opens Sept. 16.

The referendum was defeated by 70 percent of the vote.

"Two months later two county commissioners, myself and representatives of the Pirates and Steelers said we were going to do this anyhow," says Murphy, a former seminarian. "Everybody wanted to go to heaven, but they didn't want to pay the price. Every day people would say to me, 'Don't let these teams go, but don't spend my money to build a new facility.' We were going to figure out a way to finance the project without raising taxes; by using a mix of existing revenues such as hotel and sales tax."

Those taxes financed a bond issue. Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge agreed to provide one-third of state financing for the two stadiums and half for the convention center if the city of Pittsburgh came up with the remaining financing. Murphy says, "That in itself was controversial." But it worked.

PNC Park was a \$262 million project. The football stadium is a \$275 million project. They are separated by 26 acres of land designated for mixed-used development. The area will evolve into a new neighborhood.

"This city has gone through wrenching change," Murphy says. "Less than 10

percent of the people here now work in heavy manufacturing. Old industrial sites that were once viewed as liabilities, we've converted into billions of dollars of new development, several thousand housing units and millions of dollars of new offices. Things are on the upswing."

At one time, part of Pittsburgh's population loss was even blamed on a lack of beaches. Blass says, "To me, Pittsburgh is a small town that can give you all the big town positives. That may sound melodramatic, but it's the case. You can get around here in a minute and be out in the country in 20 minutes. We get all the big-time plays and entertainment."

The hardcore baseball fan can pay homage to a portion of the Forbes Field left-center field wall, which still stands covered in rich ivy on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh. Be patient. It is difficult to find. The wall is off Schenley Drive, near Schenley Park.

In a bit of heartfelt Pittsburgh folklore, fans gather every Oct. 13 at the wall to commemorate Mazerowski's World Series winning home run on Oct. 13, 1960, which gave the Pirates their first World Championship in 35 years. Last year Mazerowski even showed up to sign autographs. For free.

That's Pittsburgh.

A few interesting trivia nuggets on Forbes: There never was a no-hitter thrown in the 61-year history (1909-1970) of the ballpark. The original "Angels in the Outfield" was filmed at Forbes in 1951. And the CHI'GO section of the Forbes scoreboard is currently in storage in Chicago. It formerly hung in Ray's Bleachers, now Murphy's Bleachers, across from Wrigley Field. WSCR radio personality Mike Murphy (no relation to Murphy's Bleachers) and his fellow Bleacher Bums brought the booty back from Pittsburgh after the Pirates swept the Cubs in a June 28, 1970, double-header, the final two games played at Forbes.

With a smile Blass says, "When they built the university library, home plate at Forbes would have been in the ladies room. The new park reminds me of Forbes in that it has nooks and crannies. This isn't a sterile, cookie-cutter design. It has personality. And I haven't even been into some of the exclusive clubs. Someday I hope to be qualified to get into the Home Plate Club."

Be sure to arrive early to allow ample time to rub shoulders with the locals. You will feel a Pittsburgh pride. "The people in this city have made me and my family welcome from day one," says Blass, a native of Canaan, Conn. "I've learned that if you reach out 10 feet to the people in Pittsburgh, they reach back 90."