

HOME & AWAY

Upping Its Game

Renovations and neighborhood developments enhance Chicago's Wrigley Field as a visitor attraction.

By Katherine Rodeghier

America's second-oldest ballpark has sat on the North Side of Chicago for more than a century. Flanked by brownstones, brick and frame houses, some with rooftop views of the field, it's a treasured jewel set in a vibrant neighborhood that has come to be called Wrigleyville.

Both are getting a new look as \$1 billion in investments add modern amenities while preserving historical features fans have long loved. With one foot in the past and another in



Memorabilia is displayed in the new office and retail building next to Wrigley Field.
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the future, Wrigley Field continues to dance near the top of Illinois' visitor attractions. One reason: The home team Cubs' national following, thanks to many years of WGN broadcasts with Harry Caray calling the names of baseball greats.

New Next to the Ballpark

"It's an amazing tourist destination even when it's not a game day," said Eric Nordness, senior vice president of Hickory Street Capital, the

Ricketts' real estate development company building projects adjacent to the home field. Chief among them: The 173-room Hotel Zachary scheduled to open this spring under the Marriott Tribute portfolio. Named for Wrigley Field architect Zachary Taylor Davis, a lifelong Chicagoan known as the Frank Lloyd Wright of baseball, its seven stories rise right across the street from the historic ballpark.

The hotel positions itself as a gathering spot in the neighborhood by offering a Lakeview outlet of popular chef-driven Chicago restaurants, such as West Town Bakery, Big Star overseen by a James Beard Award semifinalist, Smoke Daddy barbecue and Mordecai, a restaurant and cocktail bar by Chef Matthias Merges, who earned his chops working alongside the late Chef Charlie Trotter. One exception to the hyper-local focus: McDonald's, which once sat on the hotel site.



Two other developments backed by Cubs' owners next to the ballpark strengthen its position as the hub of Lakeview. The Park at Wrigley and the Cubs' mixed-use office building both opened last year.

A plaza next to Gate H, the Park at Wrigley serves as the ballpark's backyard. Restricted to ticket holders on game days, it has food and beverage concessions, benches, flower boxes, fountains, and a lawn where kids can play if they get antsy before or during the

game. A huge video screen on the new Cubs' office building next door displays the action on the field. When the Cubs aren't playing, the park is used for events and community functions, such as a farmers' market, ice-skating rink, movie nights, music and fitness programs.

The first two floors of the office building remain open all year and house a Cubs Store with memorabilia displays, a Jostens jewelry store where fans can gawk at World Series-themed jewelry, an upscale Starbucks, Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams and the two-story Budweiser Brickhouse Tavern with four bars and two outdoor seating areas. Lucky Dorr Patio and Tap is a craft-beer pub named for Wrigley Field's former groundskeeper whose cottage lies around the corner.

A development not owned by the Cubs plans to open this year along the street on the south side of

Wrigley Field. Along with 148 apartments and more than 400 indoor parking spaces, it will have a movie theater, Lucky Strike bowling alley with dining and entertainment, Shake Shack burger joint, and a Harley-Davidson dealership and store.

Yet another developer plans to open a 21-room boutique hotel, The Wheelhouse, just south of Wrigley early this year.

New Inside the Ballpark

The multiphase renovation of Wrigley Field began in 2014 and more than a third of the cost has gone to non-revenue assets such as structural upgrades. Some of the park's steel and concrete date to 1914, when it was built in six weeks at a cost of \$250,000. Now the oldest National League ballpark—Boston's Fenway is two years older—it had 14,000 seats compared to nearly 42,000 today.

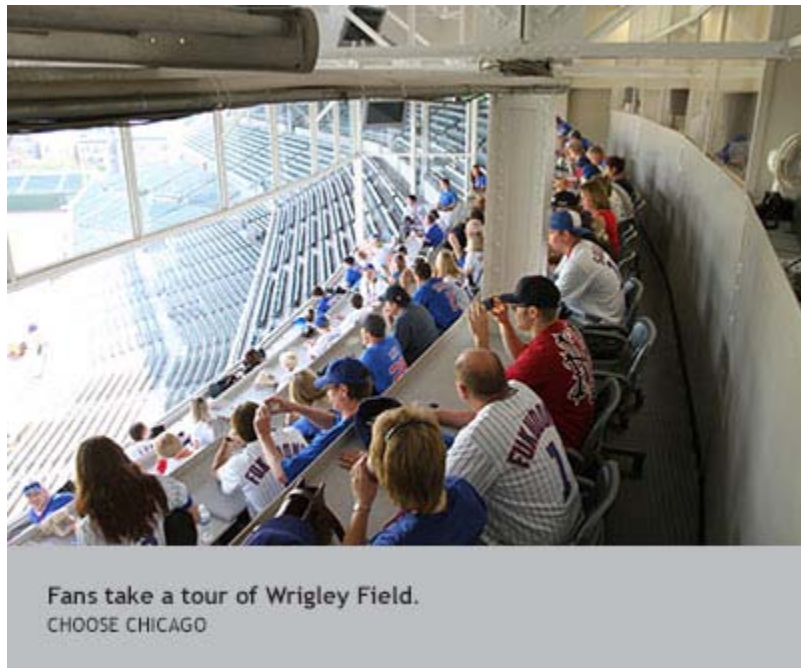
Such nuggets of history are gathered on ballpark tours taken by more than 60,000 visitors year-round, most from out of town. They sit in the Cubs' dugout and the visiting teams' clubhouse where Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Jackie Robinson dressed. In recent years Lady Gaga, Paul McCartney and Bruce Springsteen hung out there before concerts on the field. Visitors also sit in the bleachers, once the cheap seats occupied by the sometimes rowdy Bleacher Bums, so named because they weren't at work in the daytime. Not until 1988 did Wrigley install lights for night games, the last major-league ballpark to do so.

Renovations so far added 300 bleacher seats and two video boards and expanded and improved the ballpark's restrooms, concourses and concession areas that now sell a wider variety of food and drink.

Sticking With Tradition

Before making improvements the Cubs sought input from fans who told them not to touch Wrigley's beloved features: the ivy that grows 18 inches deep on the outfield walls in summer, the red

marquee where fans gather for selfies in every season and the hand-turned scoreboard where the



W flag flies after a Cubs win.

“We wanted to make sure we hit the mark” before committing a billion dollars of non-taxpayer money in renovations and new development said Julian Green, Cubs’ vice president of communications and community affairs. It probably would have been cheaper and quicker to build a new stadium, but with more than a hundred years of history, “Wrigley Field is not just another ballpark.”

Last year, the bullpens were moved below the bleachers, and when the Cubs face the Pittsburgh Pirates on opening day, April 9, the dugouts will have been moved farther down right and left field with more netting stretched between them. Some of these changes will accommodate new private clubs. The American Airlines 1914 Club opens this year behind home plate. Three more clubs will launch in 2019, and the ballpark’s suites are getting facelifts. Future plans call for replacing the annex at the southeast corner of the ballpark with a two-story structure with a rooftop terrace and concession area linked to the right field upper concourse. Possible uses include dining, retail, entertainment and a ticket office.

The challenge of adding modern, family-friendly amenities while sticking to tradition continues in what Ernie Banks called The Friendly Confines. A statue of Mr. Cub stands outside the ballpark on a pedestal inscribed with his other famous phrase: “Let’s play two.”

Planning Your Trip

For more information, visit chicago.cubs.mlb.com/chc/restore-wrigley and hickorystreetcapital.com. Plan your trip with a local AAA agent or AAA.com/travel.

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