

Dodger Stadium: Alhambra's Connection to Dodger Stadium

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NBC sports caster Bob Costas has called Dodger Stadium “the Taj Mahal” of baseball stadiums. With its spacious layout, outstanding views of the field, abundant parking, and magnificent vista of the Elysian Park Hills and San Gabriel Mountains, the ballpark ranks as one of the top sports venues in America.

A deeper look at Dodger Stadium shows that its evolution mirrors the visionary perspective and financial savvy of the team’s owner, Walter O’Malley.

As Mr. O’Malley refined the previous Dodger President Branch Rickey’s technique of developing baseball talent through a farm system and by assuming risk with a less conventional approach, the Dodger owner would employ the same mindset in selecting contractors, architects, and building techniques for his stadium that was completed in 1962.

The Dodger way of utilizing an unconventional approach, which included the Rickey legacy of breaking the “color line” in major league baseball with Jackie Robinson, proposing the first major league domed stadium in Brooklyn, and ultimately moving the team from the East to West Coast, created a blueprint that O’Malley followed in constructing his ballpark after he moved the team to Los Angeles.

Dodger Stadium’s architect had never designed a major league baseball park, the construction firm that built the stadium had never built a major league sports venue, and the construction material, a lightweight concrete, varied from the baseball tradition of heavily depending on steel.

Mr. O’Malley, who had gambled on moving his team west from Brooklyn, would also gamble on the team to build his ballpark.

Walter O’Malley was trained as an engineer. He later became a successful lawyer and progressed from part owner to majority owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

O’Malley understood the significance of a building material that was gaining immense popularity during the 1940’s and 50’s through America’s emerging cities and highway infrastructure, concrete. Concrete displayed superior structural integrity and cost effectiveness.

“The first pre-requisite (in building the stadium) was concrete,” said Mark Langill, the Dodger’s Historian in the team’s front office. “Dodger Stadium used a special type of light weight concrete.”

Dodger Stadium relied on concrete with metal reinforcement. Most major league ballparks utilized much more structural steel in their construction.

To build this concrete innovation, O’Malley needed a team that understood concrete. O’Malley selected the distinguished architect, Emil Praeger. However, Praeger had never designed a major league ballpark.

But Praeger brought a great asset with him. He understood concrete.

Praeger had designed the floating concrete breakwater known as “Phoenix” at the invasion of Normandy during World War II and received the Distinguished Service Cross for this. Praeger served as a consulting engineer on the renovation of the White House in 1949. O’Malley had known Praeger as the Chief Architect for the City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation and employed him in the early 1950’s to design the Dodgertown spring training stadium, Holman Stadium, in Florida.

When Dodger Stadium was completed in 1962 it displayed a mid-century modern architecture with clean simple lines and streamlined symmetry. Concrete umbrellas at the top of the stadium that looked like something out of the Jetsons provided shade for spectators while wavy corrugated metal roofs highlighted each outfield pavilion.

To construct his ballpark in Los Angeles, O’Malley then again went outside the box. He selected a company located in the adjacent city of Alhambra which was known more for its work building highways and bridges, the Vinnell Corporation. Vinnell certainly had experience building large civil engineering projects, but not major league baseball parks. This team member brought an expert understanding of the light weight concrete O’Malley wanted to use in the stadium.

“Their (Vinnell’s) only early involvement was to bid on grading and the parking lot,” said Dodger Historian Mark Langill. Vinnell’s bid for the grading and parking lot was accepted and to their surprise O’Malley asked them if they would not consider building the entire stadium. One condition was that Vice President, Jack Yount, would have to be present on the construction site each day.

Vinnell accepted the challenge and set up a casting yard of concrete forms in what now is the parking lot of Dodger Stadium. As Mr. Langill noted, the large concrete forms could not be transported on the local highways.

The Vinnell Corporation was founded by A. S. Vinnell in 1931 to pave roads in Los Angeles and headquartered in Alhambra. The company became a major contractor for U. S. military bases internationally in such locations as Anderson Air Force Base in Guam and Okinawa during the 1950’s. And on Feb. 24, 1975 the *New York Times* ran an article on the Vinnell Corporation closing its

headquarters in Alhambra. The company's headquarters are now in Fairfax, Virginia.

Dodger Stadium was unique in another respect. It would be set onto the side of a hill in Chavez Ravine. This building technique utilized the side of the hill for support and reduced the amount of building material required to build the stadium.

The key to analysis of real estate projects is not the cost of the construction. Most real estate professionals can calculate construction costs. The critical element of analysis that is so often miscalculated is the price of acquiring the land. Overpay for the land, and the project starts at a great disadvantage.

Walter O'Malley demonstrated his financial acumen in acquisition of the land of Dodger Stadium. This was one of the key elements of negotiation that brought the Dodgers west from Brooklyn. The City of Los Angeles controlled the land of Chavez Ravine which had to be used for a "public use". Voters approved a referendum that allowed the Dodgers to acquire the 352 acres at no cost.

Dodger Stadium was constructed for 23 million dollars (1962 value) and the stadium itself became the first to be funded with private funds since Yankee Stadium in 1923. Initially the stadium seated 53,000 fans and later would be expanded to 56,000.

During the stadium's first three seasons, from 1962-65, the expansion Los Angeles Angels, also played home games here and then moved to Anaheim.

True beauty does not suffer with time. And from its simplicity of design to magnificent view of the game, mountains, and downtown, Dodger Stadium looks as beautiful now as it first did in the 1962.

