A Civic Approach to Ballpark Design

Introduction

Going to a baseball game can be an exciting and memorable experience. I have attended countless ballgames, but my most influential memory occurred in my early childhood. It was September of 1993, I was 7 years old, and the White Sox were one game away from clinching the American League West title. In the late innings of a close game, Bo Jackson crushed a towering home run to left field, giving the Sox the lead. The crowd in the stadium went ballistic. At that moment, the collective passion that a city shared for one of its baseball teams was perfectly illustrated, but this experience occurred within the confines of the ballpark itself. Outside the stadium existed an expanse of parking lots void of human activity, and as a result the collective experience of civic pride was only available to the 40,000 who were able to afford the expensive price of a ticket.

Reflecting on this experience and the hundreds of others I have had at baseball games raises several questions regarding the role of the urban ballpark. Surely, a primary role of the ballpark is to provide a satisfactory playing surface for the teams, and adequate seating for the fans. This is an internal role; yet ballparks exists within the urban fabric. Due to its large physical size and the public funding used to finance the ballpark, its design should address issues of community, economics, and year-round functionality. Additional factors affecting the role of a ballpark within a community include radio, television, and internet based media. An urban ballpark has the potential to be a civic monument, an anchor to economically rejuvenate an area, and an energy generator to reinforce a sense of community and civic pride. Civic spaces should be considered an extension of the neighborhood. A civic space is one that promotes interaction between residents, bringing together various cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. As a result, these spaces can promote a sense of community that connects people, enhances their daily life, contributes to the character of a place, and ultimately promotes civic pride. Can a civic approach to ballpark design promote urban, commercial and community growth, and help transform a ballpark into a viable, year round civic resource? In order to explore this inquiry, I will utilize a diverse method consisting of first person experiences, historical case studies, comparisons of existing ballparks, and a discussion of formal design strategies.

Ballpark Economics

To define the role of the urban ballpark, economic issues must be placed at the forefront, due to the allocation of large amounts of public money. Last year in New York City, both the Yankees and Mets opened new ballparks costing a combined $2 billion, with the teams receiving nearly $500 million of public money from the city.[1] If a ballpark demands public funding in order to be realized, the role of the ballpark must be considered accordingly. Funding ballparks with public money has been debated seemingly every time a city is planning a new ballpark; critics challenge the issue of public funding for professional sports stadiums as a responsible way to allocate public money. In response,

team owners and public officials note the potential of millions of dollars brought in by a sports franchise and the hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs it can create.[2] It has been well documented by many economists, however, that the public investment into a stadium is at best offset by the potential benefits, and in many cases no economic benefit is ever realized. According to Robert Baade, an economist at Lake Forest College, "recent history indicates that the tangible economic benefits to cities that undertake to build such facilities do not outweigh their tangible economic costs".[3]

However, there is another realm to consider when weighing the issues regarding professional sports stadiums: the intangible benefits that sports provide. For one, stadiums often become one of the city's landmarks, and folks take pride in the fact that their city is a "major league" city.[4] Additionally, the presence of a professional sports franchise can have a dramatic affect on the psyche of the general population. Collective support for a team is one of the few times when a city's population comes together in support of a solitary goal. If the argument to justify the spending of public money for a sports stadium revolves around said intangibles, then the approach towards a ballpark should become civic in nature. In this sense, the ballpark and its surroundings should focus not just on economic development of the area, but also upon the civic benefits a stadium development provides. Many team owners and public officials market the ballpark as a civic monument, however, these marketing ploys are only half true. While the ballpark is often a monument, rarely is it *civic* in nature. This is a fundamental aspect of many recent ballparks in that they exist only as a visual monument, no different than any sculpture, building, or statue that may be present within a city. However, a ballpark must become more than just a visual monument. As a publicly funded structure that stands for civic pride, it should incorporate the qualities of a civic monument that exist in the best interest of the community.

Defining the Urban Fabric

To effectively study urban ballparks, it is important to establish what characterizes a "city" or "urban fabric". Typically, all cities possess a certain density of buildings that house a variety of functions such as businesses, dwelling units, public recreation, parks, and civic structures. According to Phillip Bess, "This formal arrangement is typically characterized by an architectural hierarchy wherein the grandeur and prominence of buildings, as well as their relative positioning on the streets and squares, represent to a greater or lesser degree the purpose and communal significance of the institutions they shelter".[5] Essentially, the urban fabric is an arrangement of housing, workplace, recreation and business all existing within close proximity to one another, in contrast to the separation of these fundamentals that exists in a suburban context.

This paper's specific focus on baseball stadiums within the urban setting results from the unique characteristics a ballpark can possess. According to sports commentator Frank Deford,

> In a subversive way, ballparks even sort of divert attention from the game itself … baseball fans are more engaged by the whole experience. It's rather like how some people go to restaurants primarily for the food, others just as much for the ambience.[6]

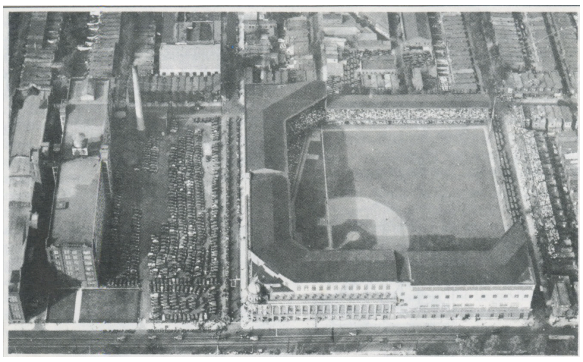
Baseball stadiums are typically open-air structures that are exposed to their surroundings, thereby establishing a visual and physical connection. Historically, site-specific constraints are what helped establish a ballpark's identity, a physical connection to its site. As a result of these unique conditions, it is the responsibility of architects to consider the special connection a ballpark can have with its urban surroundings, and to design the stadium so as to address its impact upon the neighborhood.

Current ballpark design addresses the urban condition in a closed, integrated manner, where the exterior materials of the ballpark mimic the surrounding buildings. However, in these stadiums there is a clear hierarchy created by the closed walls, essentially excluding those outside the ballpark from any sightlines into the space. The ballpark becomes private and disconnected from the community. A civic approach to the design of the ballpark can break this hierarchy and exclusiveness, while remaining sensitive to the value of a ticket and revenue for the team. An integrated, civic-based response to ballpark design can enhance the character of a place, ultimately becoming an extension of the neighborhood itself.

Evolution of the Urban Ballpark

In the 1860's, baseball began growing in popularity mainly as a result of increased exposure in the press, and in turn, fans began to develop more passion for the game due to the newspaper articles published on a regular basis.[7] It was commonplace for fans that attended games to observe the action from a carriage parked next to the playing field. These rather informal gatherings eventually gave way to a more structured event, and as a result, the clubs began to benefit financially from the contests. "Paying for admission not only attracted spectators who liked to watch skillful play, but also those who took partisan delight in their local team's ability to defeat teams representing rival communities".[8] Even in baseball's early stages, communities began to exhibit civic pride in their teams, something that is still evident in today's game.

Baseball experienced a large boom in popularity in the 1920's, due in part to the economic prosperity of the times that existed until the Great Depression. The first radio broadcast of a ballgame also occurred during this period, although it wasn't until the 1930's when all major league cities obtained this form of media coverage.[9] This was a time when the fans of a given team were still closely associated with the immediate neighborhood of the ballpark, and the ballpark in turn was physically connected to the specific landscape of the neighborhood. One major architectural feature that historical urban ballparks share is a tangible relationship to the street system of the urban fabric. The ballpark was typically built to fit within an existing urban grid, This often resulted in the distinctive outfield dimensions that in turn contributed to the uniqueness and intimate character of traditional urban parks. Another aspect of the historic park's relationship to the street grid was the increase in foot traffic, and the tight fit within the surroundings required the presence of public transportation due to minimal availability of vehicular parking.[10] These qualities are evident at Wrigley Field, and at demolished stadiums such as the Polo Grounds in New York, Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., and Shibe Park in Philadelphia.



Shibe Park nestled into the urban grid.
[Image from Bess, *City Baseball Magic*, p. 22.]

The growing popularity of television in the 1950's provided the next major step in the evolution of baseball. This new source of revenue not only allowed teams to pay higher salaries to players, it also allowed fans to follow the teams from increasingly remote locations.[11] Social and political conditions of the 1950's led to a transformation of the neighborhoods of many urban ballparks. White flight began immediately after WWII. Due to a racially-motivated movement of whites to the suburbs, in conjunction with redlining and

other policies that kept minority groups out of suburbs, tax revenue in cities decreased, resulting in the decline of urban areas.[12] Ultimately, these factors contributed to the relocation of the Dodgers and Giants from New York to California for example. Not only did schools and businesses leave these areas as a result of white flight, so did the baseball teams themselves. This was an opportunity for ballparks to become more civic in nature, to exist in the best interest of the community. Instead, the result of these deteriorating urban conditions led to the shift in suburban ballpark location, and a step backwards in terms of design and relationship of the ballpark to its environment.

Unfortunately for baseball, the 1960's and 1970's marked an era of multi-use, suburban type stadiums that put a premium on vehicular parking and luxury boxes. Many of these stadiums featured identical dimensions, artificial turf, but most disheartening, a lack of consideration for its surroundings. While some of these stadiums existed outside the dense areas of the city, others like Busch Stadium in St. Louis were of the suburban type, surrounded by parking, but located on a downtown site.[13]

In the late 1980's, many baseball fans and owners agreed that the current multi-purpose doughnut shaped stadiums were not ideal for baseball, mostly due to their sameness and lack of intimacy. The result of these complaints culminated in the design of Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore. The main idea behind Camden Yards was to break free of the sterile, multi-purpose stadiums, and introduce a baseball only, smaller scale facility more integrated within the urban fabric.[14] The ballpark features a material palette of brick, iron, and exposed steel, referencing the industrial roots of the area, as well as the structural features of the downtown skyscrapers. The scale of the stadium is smaller, bringing fans as close to the action as possible. The outfield dimensions of the park begin to reflect the urban conditions of the site, setting the ballpark up with a unique playing field and appearance.[15] The success of Camden Yards does not lie strictly in its coziness or retro appearance, but also in its creation of a sense of place. Its integration into the city provides opportunity for a complete experience when going to the ballgame, with integrated dining, shopping, and urban atmosphere as much a part of the experience as the game itself.[16] These reasons illustrate why many consider Camden Yards the current pinnacle of ballpark design, and explain why almost every ballpark built since has used it as a model, almost reproducing its main design features and mimicking its retro styling.

For the last two decades, the trend in ballpark design has reverted to a retro industrial style, with essentially all 18 major league fields built since 1992 modeling its architecture after the original retro park, Camden Yards.[17] In 1994, Jacobs Field was built as part of the Cleveland Gateway, a planned sports development in downtown Cleveland, with the idea that the ballpark, along with a basketball arena would activate the downtown area.[18] In order to ensure that the Gateway became part of the downtown, the design called for a system of sidewalks and open spaces that reverenced the existing urban conditions. To avoid the condition of previous suburban stadiums surrounded by fields of parking, the vehicular traffic was distributed to various existing locations urging fans to park cars off site and experience the urban fabric by walking a block or two towards the ballpark.[19] This planned increase in pedestrian traffic success promotes spending at nearby bars and retail establishments. Ultimately, the Gateway project serves as an example of a planned development anchored by a ballpark that contributes to revitalizing an urban setting.

The proposed Ballpark Village in St. Louis is an undertaking of planned urban development at an enormous scale unseen in ballpark design. The idea is to build up a large area adjacent to the new ballpark with a variety of shops, stores and restaurants intermixed with terraces, office spaces, condominiums, and parking garages.[20] Several site conditions contribute to the planning of the development; most

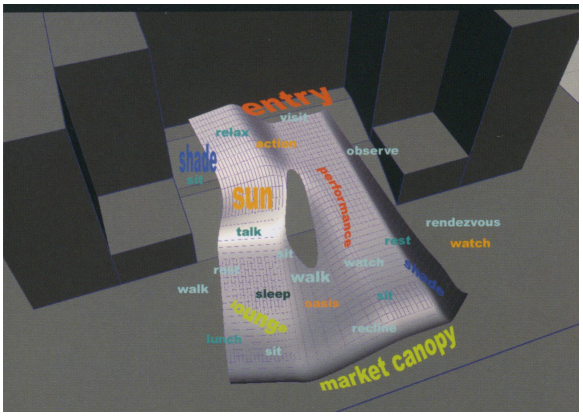
importantly the playing field of the adjacent stadium is below grade, providing a view into the park.[21] These examples, as well as other ballparks base their approach entirely on economic considerations. However a responsible approach to urban ballpark design must embrace techniques that are focused on civic solutions.

Discussion

The examination of a successful civic space provides some insight into civic strategies for ballpark design. One such project, *Between the Museum and the City* designed by Garofalo Architects, is a transitional space outside the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Regardless of its temporary nature, several themes within the project occur on a small scale that could be executed on the grander scale of an urban ballpark.

Civic space outside Museum of Contemporary Art.
[Image from Garofalo Architects, *Between the Museum and the City*, p. 66.]

The space links the museum to its surroundings, serving as an interactive zone for museum patrons as well as local residents. It tells a story about the museum in a physical way; a ballpark should do the same, ultimately extending its visibility within the neighborhood. The design of the plaza serves multiple functions, a flexible space that could accommodate activities not limited to performances, meetings, and areas of rest[22]. This space educates new audiences, but most importantly, illustrates the character of the museum in a democratic manner. It is the variety of democratic urban amenities that allows the space to remain vibrant, and capture activity.



Multiple functions of civic plaza outside Museum of Contemporary Art.
[Diagram from Garofalo Architects, *Between the Museum and the City*, p. 28.]

Recent urban ballparks share in their ability to experience initial excitement and energy around the ballpark. But these aspects seem to fade over time, suggesting that substantial excitement lies in the newness of the facility. Cleveland, for example, in 2010 ranked towards the bottom of the league in attendance, averaging only 22,492 fans per game.[23] Cleveland was at the top of the league in attendance from 1994-2001; this declining trend supports the theory of excitement due to newness of the facility. One strategy to consider sustaining energy around the ballpark is to look toward outside entertainment, dining and retail towards community aspects or public spaces associated with the ballpark. In essence, the idea is to shift the focus of a ballpark from strictly a revenue generator to more of an energy generator. A civic-based approach to ballpark design allows the development to serve as a civic monument that becomes a catalyst for both commercial and community growth.

To most effectively integrate a ballpark into the urban fabric, one aspect to consider should be the ballparks relationship to the urban grid. In almost all retro ballpark designs, some kind of fabricated urban grid results, either completely surrounding the park, or lining one major side in order to create the illusion that the park is creatively situated within the urban grid.[24] This sort of arrangement was first conceived at Baltimore's Camden Yards, but is especially evident in Cleveland's Jacobs Field, where Ontario and Eutaw Streets line the ballpark, with Ontario serving as a main entrance to the stadium in left field.[25] "Instead of redesigning Jacobs Field to account for an existing grid, architects actually chose to create spatial conflict".[26] While certainly an intriguing effort to integrate the ballpark within an urban setting, this fabricated street system within the actual urban grid creates a problem. The streets become a viable pedestrian walkway on the street level scale, providing an interesting experience for approaching the ballpark. However, by interrupting the existing city grid, and breaking its traffic patterns, these fabricated city streets can become desolate and unengaged on non-game days, since their place within the actual functioning grid becomes unnecessary. It also disrupts traffic flow within the city essentially creating a transportation inconvenience to the residents and daily users of the area. If the grid is modified or shifted, careful consideration must ensure that existing traffic patterns are not altered in a negative fashion, and any new street created serves a viable purpose during the off-season.

Next, consider the transportation issues involved with an urban ballpark. On 81 days a year, up to 45,000 people may descend upon the site, causing potential traffic and parking problems. Obviously, team owners are concerned with providing ample parking spaces, and large parking lots adjacent to the stadium provide fans with a place to leave their vehicle and access the ballpark. Several problems exist with parking lots around the stadium. First, it encourages folks to drive to the ballpark instead of utilizing public transportation. Secondly, what becomes of the parking lot on non-game days or in the off-season? Large parking lots simply exist as a wasteland within the urban context, and provide no economical or social benefit to the area.

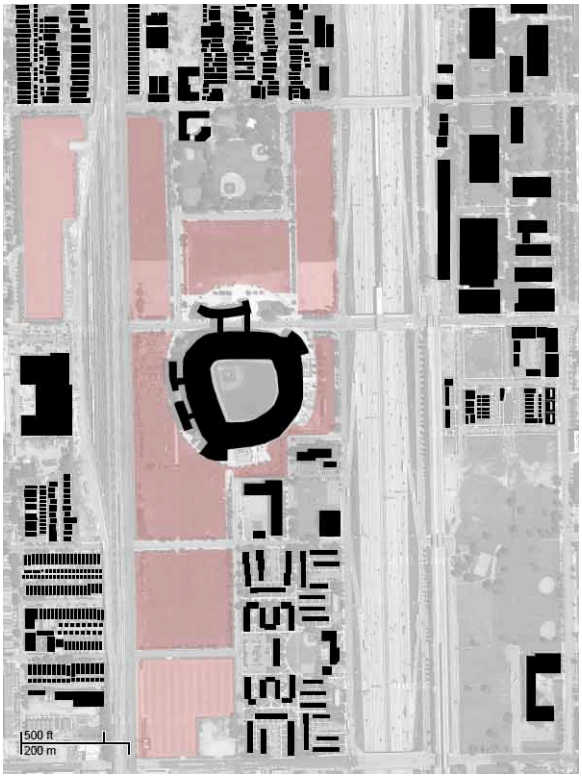


Figure ground diagram, U.S. Cellular Field. Red areas indicate parking lots.
[Diagram by author.]

A comparison of two conditions in Chicago, Wrigley Field and U.S. Cellular Field, illustrate the idea of vehicular access vs. public transportation and the consequences of each condition. Both stadiums are adjacent to the CTA Red Line, so public transportation exists as a viable option to access each ballpark. However, Wrigley Field's location tucked into a residential neighborhood, mixed with bars and retail establishments, puts vehicular parking at a premium. On the other hand, U.S. Cellular Field is surrounded by massive parking lots on all sides. As a result, fans attending a game at

Wrigley primarily utilize public transportation, whereas on the other side of town, the vehicle is the preferred choice for stadium goers. Since both ballparks have the same public transportation opportunities available, this example illustrates that fans will utilize public transportation when it exists as the best option.

Another civic strategy is the implementation of public recreational space in close proximity to the ballpark. Providing a space for the public to experience the area of a game should be a priority in planning development around a ballpark. For example, providing sightlines into the stadium from a park setting would give residents of the city an opportunity to experience the game, but also a place for recreation. The idea is not to devalue the ticket of a paying fan, but rather to open up a visual connection to the neighborhood, and to extend the idea of sport and recreation into the urban context.

A public park can exist year round as a node for the area, independent of the activity at the ballpark, but also supplement the experience of a game during the season. For example, Millennium Park in downtown Chicago provides a multitude of activities for the public that are free. Translating some of these ideas to an area adjacent to the stadium is relatively simple. One possibility is to create public plazas where non-ticket holders either get a glimpse of the game, or can be close to the stadium where the sounds of the game can be heard. Perhaps the action is displayed on a large video board, conceivably on the façade of the stadium. This could be an exciting place to experience a ballgame if one could not afford the price of the ticket, as it would provide an opportunity for citizens to gather and not only see the game in some way, but also to feed on the potential energy created by the event.

Fans watch game results on a temporary scoreboard in 1929 in Philadelphia. A similar condition could exist as a civic space adjacent to the ballpark. [Image from Stein*, A History of the Baseball Fan,* p. 156.]

An additional opportunity regarding public parks would be to create public recreational facilities that are integrated into the ballpark development. Beyond providing enjoyment for the general public, these facilities could serve a role in hosting programs such as R.B.I.,[27] as well as other youth sporting events. The presence of the ballpark could provide energy and uniqueness for these parks, and in turn, the parks themselves would exist as a vibrant location and reason to frequent the area during the off-season. Public parks and recreational facilities may serve an important role as energy generator and second anchor for the area.

Another strategy to consider is the integration of housing and office space within the ballpark itself or incorporated in close proximity to the ballgame. Providing residential and office space with a view of the game establishes a visual connection to the stadium for residents. If these spaces were to be incorporated into the ballpark itself in some way, it would begin to justify some activity for this large parcel of land that remains desolate during the off-season. Additionally, the integration of non-stadium structures within the stadium can

provide an interesting interior/exterior connection to the neighborhood, reinforcing to fans the idea that the ballparks exists as part of the urban fabric, and vice versa.

Conclusion

As illustrated, the last twenty years of ballpark design have revolved around the idea of economic gain. However, as proved by economists, no substantial financial increase is experienced due to the existence of a ballpark versus some other form of entertainment. One argument that seems to have the most influence in justifying the need for urban ballparks addresses intangibles such as civic pride and the stadium as a monument for the city. As a result, it is necessary to take a civic approach towards the design of the ballpark and its surroundings. Providing a public space so that all citizens of the city can choose to be included in an event seems fair. In fact it seems necessary, bearing in mind that the ballparks are so heavily funded with public dollars, money that could ultimately be relocated to other civic needs. Considering the ballpark as a civic function of the city and addressing its design as such can provide a unique energy generator. For an urban ballpark to become a civic monument, it should promote a sense of community in a way that connects people, enhances their daily life, contributes to the character of a place, and ultimately promotes civic pride. The strategies presented here can help create ballparks that are more civic in nature, while also providing the opportunity for economic gain due to a level of sustained energy generated by the development of the ballpark environment.

Notes

[1] Pesca, Mike. "High Dollar Stadiums in a Low Rent Economy." April 12, 2009. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103013135

[2] Bess, Philip, and Society for American Baseball Research, Ballparks Committee. *City baseball magic : Plain talk and uncommon sense about cities and baseball parks* (Minneapolis, MN: Minneapolis Review of Baseball, 1989) p. 16

[3] Ibid, p. 17

[4] Ibid, p. 17

[5] Ibid, p. 18

[6] Deford, Frank. "Ballparks Should Be Built For Fans, Not Architects." April 8, 2009. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102837901 (accessed April 2, 2010).

[7] Stein, Fred. *A history of the baseball fan* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2005) p. 17

[8] Ibid, p. 19

[9] Ibid, p. 101

[10] Bess, Philip, and Society for American Baseball Research,Ballparks Committee. *City baseball magic : Plain talk and uncommon sense about cities and baseball parks* (Minneapolis, MN: Minneapolis Review of Baseball, 1989) p. 22

[11] Stein, Fred. *A history of the baseball fan* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2005) p. 60

[12] Frey, William H. "White Flight: Racial and Non Racial Causes" (*American Sociological Review*, Vol 44, No 3, Jun. 1979) p. 425-448.

[13] Bess, Philip, and Society for American Baseball Research,Ballparks Committee. *City baseball magic : Plain talk and uncommon sense about cities and baseball parks* (Minneapolis, MN: Minneapolis Review of Baseball, 1989) p. 7

[14] Rosensweig, Daniel. *Retro ball parks: instant history, baseball, and the new American city* (Sport and popular culture. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005) p. 4

[15] Ibid, 3

[16] Ibid, 5

[17] Deford, Frank. "Ballparks Should Be Built For Fans, Not Architects." April 8, 2009. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102837901 (accessed April 2, 2010).

[18] Hirzel, David M.. "Cleveland Gateway Revisited." (*Urban Land*, April, 1996) p. 42

[19] Ibid, p. 42

[20] Prost, Charlene. "If We Build It, Will They Come?" May, 2007. http://www.stlmag.com/St-Louis-Magazine/May-2007/If-We-Build-It-Will-They-Come/

[21] Ibid, http://www.stlmag.com/St-Louis-Magazine/May-2007/If-We-Build-It-Will-They-Come/

[22] Garofalo Architects, Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, Ill.), and University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. 2003. *Between the museum and the city*. [Chicago]: MCA and CAA/UIC.

[23] espn.go.com/mlbatendance/_/year/2009 (Major

League baseball attendance statistics)

[24] Rosensweig, Daniel. *Retro ball parks: instant history, baseball, and the new American city* (Sport and popular culture. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005) 40

[25] Ibid, p. 41

[26] Ibid, p. 40

[27] mlb.mlb.com/mlb/official_info/community/rbi.jsp (RBI Program information)

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