

It's a shame Shea won't be missed

■ Too many people seem ready to bury the memories and move on, but that park earned respect

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Within all the recent chatter over Citi Field, the corporate name for the baseball stadium being built next to the Mets' current ballpark, there was next to nothing about the imminent destruction of Shea Stadium itself.

Confession: I have no appreciation for baseball. In fact, I'd rather stick a corkscrew in my ear than sit through a game. Unlike my contemporaries, I have no fond childhood memories of going to baseball games with my dad, or even watching them with him on TV. Fact is, my parents, three siblings and I were late 1960s immigrants from South America, and my father didn't know from baseball.

Still, growing up in Jackson Heights, it seemed the mammoth purple arena was always in my face — a passing fancy. Even if we tried, there was no avoiding Shea, as we'd frequently eyeball it while driving along the Grand Central Parkway or as we rode the elevated No. 7 train along Roosevelt Avenue.

So Shea became a visual fixture of my youth, as was the

giant steel Unisphere in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park left over from the 1964-65 World's Fair. As was the spherical, futuristic structure that used to be Macy's in Rego Park. And the colossal, red-and-white-striped gas tanks (both then on Queens Boulevard in Elmhurst). Queens is not exactly glamorous or remotely appealing architecturally, and in every way imaginable paling in comparison with Manhattan, which has the Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center, the Chrysler Building. But, hey, these were the few familiar landmarks of my borough — and I reflect on them somewhat when passing through Queens from Long Island.

Weirdly, I am particularly wistful about Shea, and I've been trying to figure out why, since no one else I've spoken to seems to be. The general consensus is that it's an outdated, uninspired ballpark, with virtually no historical significance, especially when compared with Yankee Stadium. I suppose this is accurate, but as a kid struggling with a foreign language and perplexing cultural customs (not the least of which was Thanksgiving), to me Shea Sta-



AP FILE PHOTO, 1966

It was a hard day's night in Queens when the Beatles rocked and the fans rolled at Shea Stadium.

dium represented something unattainable but thoroughly American: leisure. My parents worked factory jobs, and we had little disposable income. But what Americans! They spent money on baseball tickets and hot dogs. That was wondrous.

Of course, there's no room for silly musings when it comes to money. Pretty soon Shea Stadium will be demolished. Millions upon millions of public and private funds will be spent on a better facility. The park's new name will not reflect a person, but the institution that helped finance it. (I suppose a bank is a tad

more dignified than, say, an orange juice company.)

It matters not one iota that Shea is where the Beatles played in 1965 and 1966 for tens of thousands of crazed fans. Or that in 1969 the Mets won their first world championship against the Orioles there, or that the Yankees played in that stadium (as did the Jets and the Giants) during the 1974-75 season, when their park was undergoing renovations, or that the Mets won their second World Series there, in '86.

The fans I've spoken to, many of whom do have childhood recollections of Shea and even drag their own fami-

lies to games as adults, don't seem to give the stadium's demise a second thought. They're eager for the new and improved ballpark, which will have more luxury suites, more restaurants and more bathrooms. I have no doubt it will also have more advertising billboards and that it'll cost more for tickets.

Although I'm sure I won't be among the throngs on opening day of Citi Field or any time thereafter, I do have an important message for those involved in this project: A rousing, raucous, sloppy Archie Bunker-like raspberry to one and all.

Now, play ball.



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