

‘Placemaker’ Jerde to design Braves’ mixed-use project

By Douglas Sams

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The Atlanta Braves have tapped world-renowned architect Jon Jerde to help design the mixed-use development surrounding the team’s new Cobb County stadium.

Jerde, who founded his Venice, Calif., firm The Jerde Partnership Inc. in the late 1970s, gained international fame as an architect for his work on projects such as the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles; the Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas; and Canal City in Fukuoka, Japan.

Closer to home, Jerde Partnership designed the master plan for The Coca-Cola Park downtown, including the World of Coca-Cola attraction.

Jerde Partnership wanted the project to be a showcase for Coke’s memorabilia and the company’s commitment to sustainability.

Jon Jerde is known as one of the pioneers of “placemaking,” a movement that started in the 1960s as a backlash to projects designed solely around the use of the automobile. Instead, placemaking stressed connectivity, a better quality of life and the chance to spur economic development.

The Braves were likely drawn to Jerde because its planned mixed-use project is as ambitious as it is complex. It would include offices, hotels, retail and an entertainment district that has to thrive year-round, not just for 81 Braves home games. The project will also have to address traffic flow in an area that doesn’t offer a connection to transit.

As architect and master planner of the Braves’ project, Jerde and his teams could pull from their experiences across the world, offering a fresh perspective on the challenges, said people familiar with the mixed-use development.

“The Braves are trying to do something that has rarely been done successfully,” said Stephen Swicegood, managing director of Gensler Atlanta, one of the city’s leading architects.

Atlanta Braves’ officials did not respond to inquiries from Atlanta Business Chronicle.

Last fall, the Braves surprised the city and much of Major League Baseball when the team went against the grain and decided to relocate its stadium out of an urban area to the suburbs.

The Braves have been playing at Turner Field since 1997.

Several issues played a role in the Braves' decision to move to Cobb, including the team's desire to have more control in Turner Field operations and to partner in the redevelopment of the parking lots surrounding the ballfield.

Earlier this year, the Braves paid about \$34 million for a 57-acre site at interstates 285 and 75 in the Cumberland Galleria district, where they will build the new ballpark and mixed-use project.

The Braves could see the project as a money-maker that compensates for a bad long-term television deal.

"I think most people would agree it's not so great," said J.C. Bradbury, chair of Kennesaw State University's Exercise Science and Sport Management department. "Whether they can offset the TV contract with revenues from the new development is really tough to say."

That's because teams that have tried similar projects haven't always had success. The St. Louis Cardinals planned a \$650 million mixed-use project next to Busch Stadium.

But, the project struggled amid the steep U.S. recession.

"Often, these developments are planned with a build-it-and-they-will-come approach," Bradbury said. "What the Braves are doing is interesting though because they aren't building this in the middle of nowhere. It's already known as a popular commercial and residential area."

The Braves need to wrap up a critical decision, ideally in the next 30 days, about who will develop the \$400 million to \$600 million mixed-use project and entertainment district.

In the past two weeks, Braves officials have been touring the existing projects of both finalists: Atlanta developers Fuqua Development LLC and Pope & Land Enterprises Inc., and the competing group of Los Angeles-based American Entertainment Group (AEG), Houston-based Hines Interests and Cincinnati-based North American Properties.

“The Braves are putting a lot of money into this,” Bradbury said, “so they obviously feel good about the chance for it to succeed.”

Jerde Partnership

Founded: 1977

Headquarters: Venice, Calif.

Projects:

- 1984 Olympics
- Universal City Walk, Los Angeles
- Canal City Hakata, Japan
- Riverwalk Kitakyushu, Japan
- World of Coca-Cola