

Cards Stadium lauded for its architectural touches

BY DON MURET

dmuret@sportsbusinessjournal.com

The Arizona Cardinals' new \$455.7 million stadium got more attention before it opened than most NFL facilities get in a generation of football Sundays. The unconventional exterior design, removable field and radical suite interiors created a buzz like no other pro football venue.

A visit to Cardinals Stadium in Glendale for the first regular-season game Sept. 10 showed the Bidwill family's dream of a signature building largely achieved. But for all the cutting-edge design, all the iconic ideas, the stadium's chief amenity is a simple one. Air conditioning.

It provides an oasis long overdue after the team's sweaty tenure at Sun Devil Stadium in Tempe, where the team played for 18 seasons outdoors, sometimes in 100-degree heat, while fewer and fewer fans baked in the stands. The conditions kept many families away, according to team research.

Now, as some in the sellout crowd of 63,407 stream off elevators onto the upper deck, only the smart-alecky wall graphics refer to the Cardinals' days in the desert sun: "Welcome to our frying pan," one says.

Michael Bidwill, Cardinals vice president and son of team owner Bill Bidwill, said, "If we were to have the same game, Week 1 at 1:15 over at Sun Devil Stadium, it wouldn't be sold out even with (new marquee players) Edgerrin James and Matt Leinart. Air conditioning makes all the difference." Make no mistake, the Bidwills are proud of their half-billion-dollar baby.

"We went out to different stadium architects and what we saw is that we were going to have the 2006 version of a domed stadium," Bidwill said. "We didn't want something that looked like it already existed in another city."

suites took 15 feet off the height of the stadium, helping put fans closer to the field. "It makes the upper deck not so tall, and that is a definite benefit," Spear said.

The \$75 price tag on all the lower-bowl sideline seats is one of the best NFL ticket bargains, and 4,000 seats were priced as low as \$10 for a season ticket in the upper deck in both end zones. Sullivan especially likes the view from the \$100 corner club seats.

"The fact of the matter is the Cards did it the right way," Sullivan said. "They knew what the product was and decided to price it a little less. Volume is more important."

And volume they'll have. The stadium is sold out for the season.

Only one ramp leads to the top of the building, a prime example of the progression of stadium development. Fans heading upstairs also can use the stadium's 10 public elevators and 18 escalators.

Traffic flow has improved since the first preseason game, Sullivan said. Color-coded walls inside the elevators and along the escalators tie into the layers of Arizona earth and sky. There are public plazas in both end zones that serve as bridges between the east and west sides.

Bud's Red Zone in the south end zone contains banquet space on the event floor and bleacher seating for 500. The area can fit 5,000 temporary seats, which will help increase capacity to 73,000 for the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl and the Super Bowl.

Above the field, the asymmetrical roof weighs 18.5 million pounds, supported by two 700-foot-long trusses. Birdair, an Amherst, N.Y.-based firm produced the translucent roof cover. When the cover is closed, sunlight streams through the fabric and provides a brighter atmosphere than traditional indoor stadiums. The stadium's 21 vertical glass slots, part of its unique exterior, also

help to enhance the light mix.

"The amount of natural light is stunning," said Ted Ferris, chief executive for the Arizona Sports and Tourism Authority.

Network TV standards require stadium lighting to be used for indoor NFL games, but there are other daytime events Cardinals Stadium schedules that could operate on sunlight alone, Ferris said.

The Cardinals marketed their 88 suites as "lofts" to reflect the urban industrial theme extending throughout the two 39,000-square-foot club lounges. Pentagram, a New York interior design firm and another firm that does not ordinarily do sports facility work, developed the cork floors, carpeted walls, chalkboards, swivel chairs and garage-style doors that roll up in front of the suite to provide a view to the inner bowl. The Cardinals told Pentagram, "Don't go looking at other stadiums or arenas; start from the beginning and rebuild the model," Bidwill said.

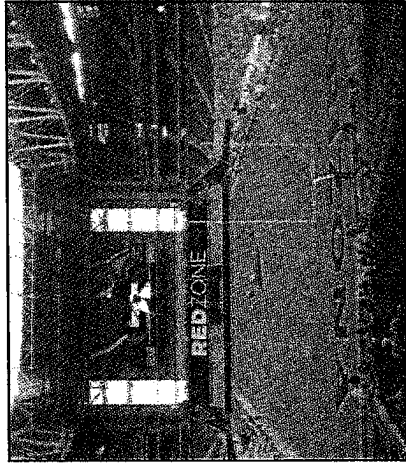
The Cardinals did borrow a few suite concepts from other NFL buildings.

The four flatscreen TVs in each loft, three inside the hospitality space and one hanging unit in the bowl showing the in-house game feed, is a suite feature the Cardinals took from Raymond James Stadium in Tampa and Reliant Stadium in Houston.

The franchise routinely kicks off as the East Coast games finish, and the team pitched premium seat prospects on the opportunity to watch "your team" play the early games, the younger Bidwill said.

It reflects the reality that many fans have migrated from other NFL markets and root for their old home teams. The Cardinals hope a trip to an impressive new stadium will bring some of those fans into the fold.

Don Muret is a reporter for *The Sports Business Journal*, a sister publication.



JIM POULIN/THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

The cutting-edge design of Cardinals Stadium makes it an NFL standout.

The Cardinals reached outside the universe of sports designers to noted architect Peter Eisenman, but also hired HOK Sport and Hunt Construction, the industry's foremost NFL stadium planner and builder.

Together, the three parties developed a venue that stands out in design but is also functional and loud.

"It's unique in the league," said Jeff Spear, HOK's lead project designer and an architect that worked on FedEx Field, M&T Bank Stadium and Gillette Stadium.

Cardinals Stadium could very well contain the NFL's most intimate seating bowl outside of Lambeau Field in Green Bay. The sight lines rank among the league's best views, said Peter Sullivan, Global Spectrum's stadium manager in Glendale.

"The bowl really has more of a feeling of being a room than any other stadium I've ever been in," Spear said.

Putting 33 of the 88 suites on the club level instead of building two floors exclusively for