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for Browns fans





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By Mark Watt | Photos by Ryan Gobuty

**S**hortly after Jimmy Haslam was introduced as the new majority owner of the Cleveland Browns in October 2012, he announced his two primary goals. The first: doing everything possible to help players and coaches to win games. The second: creating the best fan experience in the NFL.

Three years later, the Cleveland Browns organization has worked to deliver on those goals with the completion of an ambitious, \$125 million phased upgrade at FirstEnergy Stadium. The project has reinvigorated the 15-year-old stadium with improved seating and hospitality spaces, upgraded audio/video systems and lighting, dedicated sponsor areas, new wayfinding elements and enhanced food service offerings. Inside and out, the stadium is designed to spotlight the city of Cleveland and the history of the franchise with new branding and graphics – from custom murals of local landmarks inside to massive 25-foot-high scrim along the exterior that feature images of players.

“When fans come into the stadium, they know they’re in Cleveland,” says Rob McBurnett, communications manager with the Browns. “They can feel the history of the team and the vibe of Cleveland. A primary goal of the project was to showcase our city to fans and visitors alike, and convey a sense of Cleveland through graphics and food offerings from local chefs.”

A joint venture partnership of Cleveland-based Turner Construction and Ozanne Construction managed the renovation. Designed by Los Angeles-based architectural firm Gensler, the project focused on revitalizing the overall look, feel and functionality of the sports arena, while also accommodating new revenue streams through

new sponsorship zones and special event capabilities.

“There’s literally no section within the stadium that wasn’t touched during the renovation,” says Cleveland Browns Finance Director Greg Rush.

### Devising a game plan

The project kicked off in late 2012 when the Cleveland Browns’ new owner and front office began conceptualizing ideas for a comprehensive modernization of FirstEnergy Stadium, which first opened in 1999.

“In the world of professional sports stadium architecture, even a 10- or 15-year-old building can begin to feel tired,” says Jonathan Emmett, project designer and Gensler Sports Practice

Photo courtesy of Cleveland Browns



Photo courtesy of Cleveland Browns



**ELECTRIFIED ATMOSPHERE** The first phase included major reconfiguration of end zone seating. In the existing east end zone (left), upper level seats were removed and replaced by a new structure (right) with new seating, sponsorship zones and a 6,900-square-foot video screen.

leader. “I think it was very important to ownership and the front office to reinvigorate the fan experience.”

Working in tandem with the Cleveland Browns, Gensler led a thorough planning and programming phase to set the overall direction and scope for the project, followed by an initial design process where all renovation items were conceived and then divided into two planned construction phases.

The project would be self-financed by Browns’ ownership, with \$30 million paid by the City of Cleveland in the form of a 15-year loan, Rush says.

Construction took place during the offseason, with Phase One launching immediately after the last game of the 2013 season and finishing in August 2014.

Utilizing a design team familiar with the facility was critical to meeting the challenging schedule, says Senior Structural Engineer Jack Krebs, of Osborn Engineering, the Phase One engineer of record. As the stadium’s original structural engineer of record, Osborn employed several of the original engineers on the renovation to minimize the learning curve inherently needed on complex structures such as FirstEnergy Stadium.

“Using our in-house drawing archives of the stadium and the engineer’s own original design calculations allowed the

design team to quickly provide vital information to Turner,” Krebs says.

Similarly, Phase Two began just after the 2014 season and concluded by the start of the 2015 regular season this September.

“These are very short windows for construction when you’re trying to do all of the work during the offseason,” Emmett says. “Being able to take care of issues in the field quickly was important, and that required close communication between the construction, engineering

and design team, as well as the Browns’ front office and their sales and marketing team.”

### Phase One: structural enhancements & amped up A/V

Phase One addressed several practical issues to improve ticketing, security and circulation, allowing fans to enter and move around the stadium more efficiently and safely. This included installation of two sets of wider, faster-moving escalators

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**FORWARD PROGRESS** The \$125 million, two-phase project focused on revitalizing the overall look, feel and functionality of FirstEnergy Stadium, while also accommodating new revenue streams through new sponsorship zones and special event capabilities.

to more quickly transport fans from street level to the upper concourse.

“Those maybe aren’t the most glamorous aspects of the overall project, but they really help to set the tone for a better fan experience and more efficient gameday experience,” Emmett says.

The first phase also incorporated significant reconfiguration of seating areas at both end zones, including removal of upper level seats, addition of seats to the lower bowl and installation of 40-foot by 192-foot HD video screens at both the east and west ends of the stadium.

“We had a lot of upper bowl end zone seats, which in the NFL are probably the least desirable locations, and we actually reduced the overall number of seats in the building by about 3,000 seats,” Emmett explains. “We effectively moved many of those upper bowl seats down and increased lower bowl seating dramatically by over a 1,000 seats. We also added ADA-accessible decks in the lower bowl.

“That’s a great improvement as it brings fans closer to the field. It also creates a new revenue stream since the dollar value of those seats is significantly higher than the upper bowl seats that we took away. And then removing those upper

bowl seats also allowed the opportunity to create a variety of platforms, decks and sponsor zones that enhance revenue for the stadium.”

Bringing a visual presence for corporate sponsors within the seating bowl are five new branded areas, including the Ford Zone, currently showcasing the newest F-150, and the Bud Light Balcony with a bar, mounted TVs and a standing-room area overlooking the field. Interestingly, the reconfiguration also introduced an intimate 600 level seating area – the only one in the stadium – placing 150 fans directly above the new Ford Zone.

Construction at the end zones was a challenging and intricate process, notes John Dewine, vice president at Turner Construction. Work entailed severing the top of the end zone seating structures to remove the upper 20 rows, and then installing all new structure bolted to the original steel framework.

“It was a very meticulous process to disassemble the structure and then put it back together,” Dewine says. “We cut the structure off, jackhammered down to the concrete frame and then set new columns.”

Construction was aided by a considerable amount of offsite fabricating, Dewine says. For instance, both \$6 million video boards arrived as a series of pre-wired modules that were assembled on the ground and then hoisted into place by crane.

“We started on July 16, 2014 with the first video module and by 6 p.m. on August 8, Mr. and Mrs. Haslam were standing on the field, watching fully produced content on the new screens,” Dewine says. “It was tremendous how quickly that piece of the project was commissioned and activated.”

At 6,900 square feet each, the two video screens are not only triple the size of the stadium’s original video displays, but are also placed 32 feet lower and 56 feet closer to the field. Installation of ribbon-board displays around the facility plus an entirely new concert-quality audio system has enhanced the Browns’ ability to energize the crowd with bright, clear sound and video.

“By bringing fans closer in the lower bowl and with the new state-of-the-art audio system, it’s much louder on the field,” Rush says. “Not only does that enhance the fan experience, but it also



helps to improve the home field advantage for the team. The players talk about how much louder it has been.”

### Phase Two: updated look & feel

“While the first phase was largely structural in nature and focused on the fan experience within the seating bowl area, the second phase was much more about improving the look and feel of the stadium as a whole, plus upgrades to all premium ticket areas,” McBurnett says.

Completed last month after nine months of construction, Phase Two included a general revitalization of concourse spaces with fresh paint and finishes, newly polished flooring, improved wayfinding signage, upgraded sound systems and updated lighting. Where possible, three-foot bays were bumped out to effectively widen the concourse and ease fan congestion.

“It’s amazing what a difference has been made in the concourses,” Dewine says. “These areas used to be very dark, bland and gray. There was no color. It was really just concrete. Everything is much more colorful now, and the new LED lights are 150% brighter than what was here before. You’d never know you were in the same facility.”

Here and throughout the stadium, a completely new branding and graphic package has been introduced, driven by the team’s recently refreshed team colors, logos and uniforms. In various areas, large wall graphics depict key moments in team history and banners highlight current and former players, while feature lighting is utilized to create a lively atmosphere. Team colors are splashed as accents throughout the stadium, and nearly all wood used in furniture, cabinetry, frames and accent pieces is quarter-sewn walnut, adding a consistent, earthy and warm ambience.

In addition to team-related graphics are photographic murals that showcase architecture from around Cleveland, highlighting the Flats, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum and other landmarks.



**LOCAL FLAVOR** Concourse spaces have been updated with new finishes, polished flooring, upgraded signage, sound systems and lighting. Additionally, all 35 permanent food stands – each with Cleveland-focused menu concepts – have been fully remodeled.

Also adding local flavor, literally, are improved general-admission concessions with Cleveland-focused menu concepts and redesigned food stands and restaurant fronts. All 35 permanent stands have been remodeled, Emmett notes. This includes quick ser-

*“It was incredibly important to the Browns organization that these spaces and these experiences would feel very authentic to Cleveland and to the Cleveland Browns organization.”*

**Jonathan Emmett**  
Gensler

vice gourmet offerings from well-known Cleveland chefs, including Michael Symon’s B Spot, Rocco Whalen’s Great Lakes Cheesesteaks, Jonathon Sawyer’s Sausage & Peppers and Chris Hodgson’s Downtown Dogs, all of which have been newly incorporated at the 100 level.

“At stadiums across the county, often what you see in one city is the same as what you’ll see in another,” Emmett says. “It was incredibly important to the Browns organization that these

spaces and these experiences would feel very authentic to Cleveland and to the Cleveland Browns organization, really celebrating the history of the club and the city as well. The entire project focused on that as a central concept.”

### One-of-a-kind premium spaces

Hometown and home team pride are also evident in the design of renovated suites and club spaces. This includes a trio of new hospitality lounges introduced this fall: Club 46, the Cleveland Club and the Draft Room. All three include all-inclusive food and drinks and are tied to premium 100-level seats.

“There is a trend right now at NFL stadiums of searching for whole new offerings for ticket holders beyond the typical options of general admission, club seats or suites,” Emmett says. “There’s an interest in creating broader experiences with different amenities for a wider range of target audiences. For instance, there’s an increasing demand to allow fans to get closer to the players, closer to the action.”

#### Club 46

Answering that call, Club 46 is a newly created premium space beneath the lower bowl on the stadium’s north-



**DRAFT PICKS** The Draft Room features a bar wrapped in reclaimed wood with a feature wall built of more than 300 beer kegs. Wall graphics in the space highlight the names of Browns players throughout the team's history, along with the year in which they were drafted.

west corner, formerly utilized as a storage room for grounds-keeping equipment. Named in honor of the very first Browns team from 1946, the 3,650-square-foot, upscale lounge is now one of the most desired areas for pre-game or halftime drinks and dining, incorporating an attached patio space that puts fans directly adjacent to the Browns' locker room and home team tunnel.

"It's a very close-up, personal experience that gives premium ticket holders an opportunity to watch players come out of the locker room and take the field," Emmett says. "The club is limited to just 115 people, so it's intentionally an exclusive space."

#### *Cleveland Club*

Located at street level on the south side of the building is the 8,460-square-foot Cleveland Club, a premium area for 240 members paired with lower bowl, 50-yard-line seats. To create the space, a previous lounge area and several neighboring offices were gutted and rebuilt as a chic lounge with two bars at each end, a fireplace and soft seating.

With a private patio entrance into the stadium and drive-up access along

Alfred Lerner Way, the Cleveland Club is a luxury on gamedays. It's also well suited for non-gameday special events, like weddings, bar mitzvahs and corporate retreats, Emmett notes.

"One of the issues with stadiums is that they are dormant most of the year," Emmett says. "Creating a number of these flexible hospitality spaces for non-gameday, revenue-generating events was a very important aspect of the project."

#### *Draft Room*

The Draft Room, positioned at plaza level on the building's north side, is a 12,485-square-foot premium area with walls of windows overlooking Lake Erie and offering direct access from outside. The spacious, contemporary lounge features a two-story ceiling, fireplace and a variety of seating choices. Wall graphics highlight the names of Browns players throughout the team's history, along with the year in which they were drafted.

"The Draft Room really brings to light this whole concept of celebrating the team's history by highlighting their draft picks and different players," Emmett says.

"At the same time, we're also creating this industrial aesthetic that feels very much at home in Cleveland."

There are two bars in the club, one of which features reclaimed wood sourced from a barn in Fairport Harbor. Nodding to the design aesthetic of the nearby Ohio City and Tremont neighborhoods are steel chairs and rustic wood tabletops, plus a wall feature constructed of more than 300 beer kegs, which were cleaned, polished and stacked nine rows high.

#### *Lake Club and City Club*

The project also included remodeling the stadium's north and south clubs, now known as Lake Club (37,300 square feet) and City Club (35,000 square feet). Here, as in all refreshed premium areas, Turner's Special Projects Division self-performed selective demolition, millwork and carpentry. Bars have been relocated from the center of these areas and now reside along outer walls.

"Moving the bars has turned the clubs into more versatile spaces," Rush says.

Both clubs feature new carpeting, lighting, wall coverings, finishes and furniture. At the primary entrance to the City Club is a particularly eye-catching design



**FRESH LOOKS** The renamed Lake Club and City Club (top, middle) have been refreshed with all new finishes, while Club 46 (bottom) is an entirely new premium space next to the Browns' locker room, giving fans unprecedented access to players as they take the field.

feature: a curving wall of backlit panels that emits a warm orange glow.

The Lake Club includes a dedicated “fantasy football lounge” with stat tickers and 42 TVs, as well as its own bar and lounge seating area.

#### Refreshed suites

Lastly, 140 suites at FirstEnergy Stadium have been remodeled with new furniture, appliances, phones, cabinetry and artwork.

“Each suite comes with its own furniture,” Rush notes. “There’s a high table option with communal seating and another option with lower seating and a coffee table. There are also a few art packages available that include photos of historic moments in Browns history.”

#### Driving downfield

With the 2015 football season now underway, Browns fans are getting a firsthand look at the completed stadium upgrade – and early feedback indicates that they like what they’re seeing, McBurnett says.

“Fans are telling us it feels like a completely new stadium,” he says.

Continuing to seek opportunities for improvement, the team ownership is now installing an upgraded wireless Internet system throughout the stadium. “We will have a fully functional and optimized Wi-Fi system by the end of this season,” McBurnett says.

As the project concludes, McBurnett notes that the Browns organization is excited with the results. “We were very fortunate to work with great people in Turner, Gensler and the other project partners who saw what we wanted to do on our wish list and helped us to check off each of those boxes in an efficient way,” McBurnett says. “It was a great partnership.” **P**

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Photo by Mark Watt