



These Walls

Gallagher-Iba Arena

BY KIRBY LEE DAVIS
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TULSA - Frustration drove architect Gary Sparks to create the opportunity of a lifetime.

The Oklahoma State University alum was driving around Stillwater 13 years ago when he uncharacteristically found himself listening to a sports radio discussion about replacing Gallagher-Iba Arena.

To casual fans enraptured by their 1995 Final Four trip on the shoulders of Bryant "Big Country" Reeves and Randy Rutherford, building a larger, modern facility made all kinds of sense.

Not so with Sparks. The very idea angered the die-hard Cowboy.

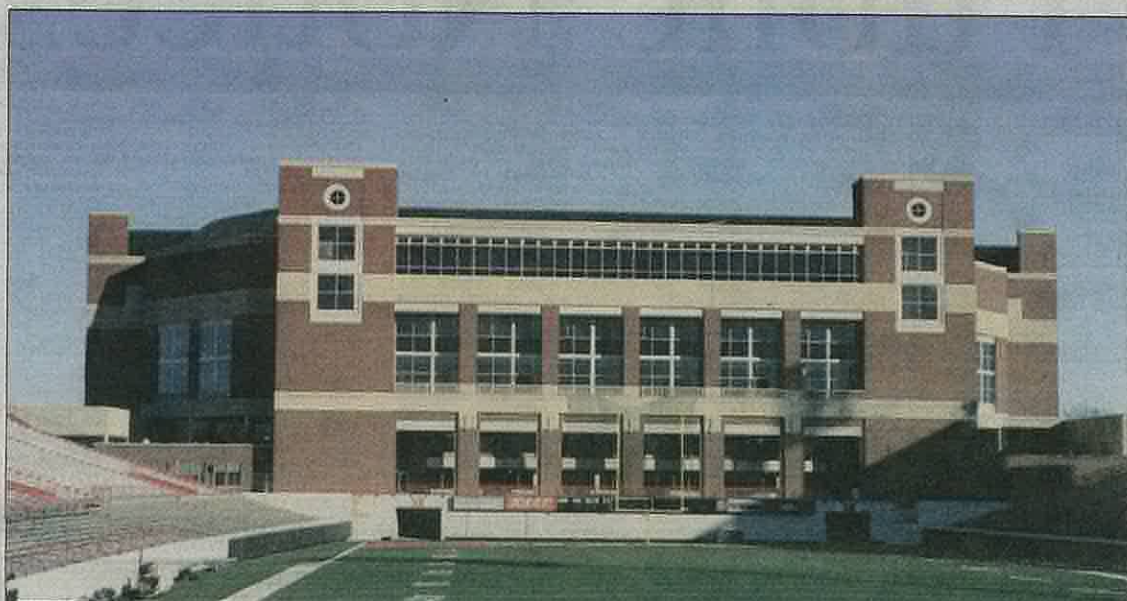
Replace the Madison Square Garden of the Plains, a classic design by revered architect John Duncan Forsythe? The snake pit named for two coaching legends, where OSU wrestling teams recorded winning streaks of 37, 61 and 50 home duels, and the basketball squad once boasted an 80-game home court non-conference winning streak? The claustrophobic structure so frightening to opponents ... where, as a student, Sparks often wooed his future bride?

"Teams in that building won more national championships than any other building in the U.S.," said the founder of Sparks Architecture, reflecting on OSU's 34 wrestling titles, two basketball championships and 10 golf trophies. "I think anybody would have a hard time challenging that statement."

The very idea of replacing Gallagher-Iba - at 6,300 seats, the nation's largest basketball arena when opened in 1938 - seemed so wrong to Sparks that, on his own initiative, he started contemplating how to preserve the classic structure while installing state-of-the-art amenities and doubling its size.

Site constraints and ongoing usage needs soon drove Sparks, Senior Architect F. Ivan Griffith and others in their team to draft an audacious plan - build a building over the building. This would require installing two huge box trusses 20 feet above Gallagher-Iba, each one 267 feet long and 40 feet tall. With those million-pound steel bridges suspended above the arena, Sparks figured construction could proceed even as Gallagher-Iba remained in use.

The challenge then transferred to seamlessly lining up the extended arena seating with the existing bowl so that, when contractor Manhattan Construction finally got around to slicing off the old roof, future patrons climbing



COURTESY PHOTOS

The very idea of replacing Gallagher-Iba Arena seemed so wrong to architect Gary Sparks that, on his own initiative, he started contemplating how to preserve the classic structure while installing state-of-the-art amenities and doubling its size. Started in October 1998, contractor Manhattan Construction finished the \$45 million, 460,000-square-foot project in January 2001, immediately drawing a boatload of national accolades. Their success helped Sparks Architecture win the coveted contract to revitalize OSU's football stadium. "It was so complicated, and nobody had really done it before," reflected Sparks, gazing at several Gallagher-Iba construction photos. "When you sit here and talk about this, it really was an amazing project. I'm amazed that we pulled it off."



the steps would not recognize where the old structure met the new one.

"Typically buildings aren't square and aren't plum," said Griffith, describing how they had to survey the site down to the inch. "And the new structure couldn't impose any loads on the old structure, or it wouldn't work."

They also faced the problem of sealing their new ceiling before removing

Forsythe's massive roof, all without damaging the original white maple basketball court, where so many beloved memories still linger.

After independently consulting with engineers and contractors to verify their plans and assure him the needed 650-ton crane, other equipment and materials could be employed on the site, all without seriously disrupting campus activi-

ties, Sparks presented his ideas to incoming OSU athletic director Terry Don Phillips, the man hired to modernize all OSU athletics. Immediately drawn to Sparks' romantic concept, Phillips hired the Sparks team (now part of Crafton Tull Sparks) and stood by their plans even after other consultants claimed they wouldn't work.

Started in October 1998, Manhattan finished the \$45 million, 460,000-square-foot project in January 2001, immediately drawing a boatload of national accolades. The project also gave OSU a string of luxury boxes overlooking both Gallagher-Iba Arena and Lewis Field, priming efforts for upgrading that facility.

Their success helped Sparks Architecture win the coveted contract to revitalize OSU's football stadium. But while that gave Sparks the chance to design what should become a historic building, he more cherishes the gamble and personal investment made to preserve one that's already earned its legacy.

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