



THE RACE COURSE OF THE FUTURE

Can a new viewer experience make racing the sport of tomorrow?

Horse racing is one of the grandest spectator sports in the world. Still – the way the sport is watched has changed very little over the last 200 years. It is still mostly a grandstand close to the finish line and horses that, for at least 60% of the time, are so far away that you need binoculars or a TV to see them. But it doesn't have to be that way, as the sports architecture specialists at Populous show with this fascinating new concept .

BY MATS GENBERG IMAGES POPULOUS



The idea is to make a new horse-racing development that is a collection of mixed use districts around a racing track and park. All connected to the infield/community park via green spaces.

“Horse racing is a great sport, but it is a bit stuck in it’s own idea of how things must be,



The track is surrounded by a 360° fan boardwalk hosting a variety of hospitality spaces. From cafe-type experiences to rooftop bars and temporary grandstands.



On non-race days the “fan boulevard” becomes a public pedestrian thoroughfare, lined with shops, restaurants and cafes.

says Todd Gralla, who is in charge of equestrian venues at Populous. The company is one of the world’s greatest sports architecture firms and has worked on venues from Ascot to Churchill Downs and multiple Olympic Games, having designed more than 2,500 sports venues worth US\$40 Billion.

“The general consensus is that everybody wants to be at the finish line, so you build a really big grandstand that can accommodate these people. And then you might open the infield on major days, where people basically use a flat lawn and very few see anything at all.”

“By doing this you not only fail to think about how the sport is best consumed from a spectators point of view. You also create venues that only have one purpose.”

“Our idea was to challenge all this and to really think outside the box. How can a race course become a venue that is more than just a race course? And how do we create the ultimate visitor experience?”

When the Georgia Horse Racing Coalition announced their plans to bring back racing to the state of Georgia in the USA, Populous was given the opportunity to make a project plan where nothing was carved in stone.

“A race course has to motivate its own existence. The idea of a large grandstand looking out over 100s of acres of land that no one has access to is dead.”

The concept here was to create a community development with a collection of mixed-use districts with the race track as the center piece. The districts include single and multi-family residential, hospitality, green spaces, restaurants and entertainment, and of course an equine zone con-

sisting of the race stables and opportunities for people to engage with horses. With a park-like infield, the track itself would become a massive central green space that adds a sense of beauty, nature and space to the community.

“Some of the most successful developments in the world are near marinas or harbors”, Todd says. “People love to live there and just go there to hang out regardless of whether there are any events going on. The open views and boats that go in and out make something happen and create an atmosphere. In this plan we show how a race course can achieve exactly the same objective where there are no big waters nearby. You just go there and sit down for a bite and there are horses doing workouts and green spaces for all kinds of activities. You might walk over to the market or stroll past the stable area watching horses being groomed. There is a sense of everyday life and purpose that is very important to people.”

360° EXPERIENCE

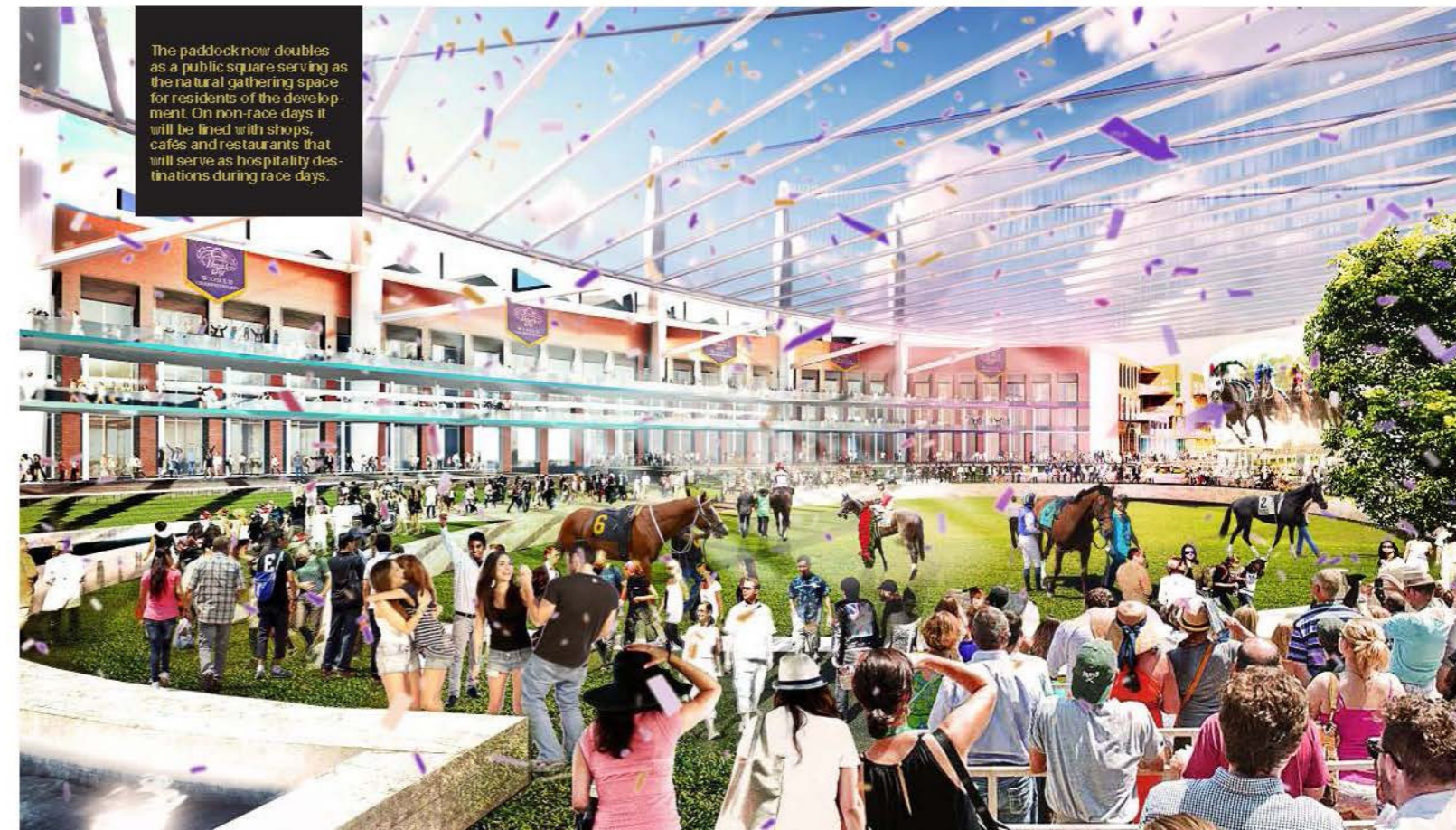
The development of community is an important part of what would make it possible to realize a project such as this. But what makes it really interesting for lovers of horse racing is how Populous has taken on a brand new set of glasses when they started to look at how to design the track viewing experience.

Race tracks have looked the same for ages. Most people are put in a grandstand where you can see the last 300 meters of the race – if you are lucky. The other 85% of the circumference is typically inaccessible and can only be viewed on a TV or through binoculars. At most race courses this means that in the majority of the races it is not possible to be close to the start – which to many is the most exciting part of the race, and a place where you really get a feeling of the horses. And usually no one can watch the last turn

“We have done a lot of research related to auto racing and particularly road courses lately. One thing that really came across is that people really want to be close to the action and they love to experience the races from multiple vantage points.”

AUTO RACING AND HORSE RACING share some characteristics that are unique in the sports world and also challenging to design around; the events last most of the day, the fields of play are extremely large and engagement among the fans and athletes is very challenging. Populous is designing glass-floored viewing areas above the pit stops and garage areas at auto race tracks to help connect the fans with drivers and crews. This is but one of multiple fan activation zones being designed around auto tracks to provide multiple fan experiences through a day of racing.

“We decided to translate these ideas to horse racing and designed a 360° boardwalk that we call “The Fan Boulevard”. This makes it possible to walk around the track and maybe see one race from one spot, and the next from



The paddock now doubles as a public square serving as the natural gathering space for residents of the development. On non-race days it will be lined with shops, cafes and restaurants that will serve as hospitality destinations during race days.



The media square is a gathering point in the infield that offers a hi-tech experience of the races – both from this track and others. And on non-race nights it can host a variety of other functions.

“A race course has to motivate its own existence. The idea of a large grandstand looking out over 100s of acres of land that no one has access to, is dead.”



The roof-top deck offers an elevated 360° view of the race. A luxurious space with opportunity for premium food and beverage service.



The media square.

somewhere else. Around the boardwalk there will be a variety of different hospitality spaces operated by different entrepreneurs. You will have outdoor café type experiences, as well as roof-top bars and temporary smaller grandstands in the most popular spots.”

With this idea the Fan Boulevard becomes the equivalent of a river-side boardwalk. The pressure on the grandstand is reduced on major race days and people get a choice of different ways to experience a race day. Or a non-race day for that matter. This eliminates the need to build a huge grandstand and also helps to eliminate the problem of scarcely populated grandstands on racing days when live attendance is typically lowest.

RECREATION PARK

“The traditional model for horse racing is based on only one viewing position, only one experience, only one function. Our new model is designed to provide many viewing positions and many experiences. Media elements throughout and a perimeter of privately operated hospitality ensure a powerful and unique fan experience at every location.”

There are several more ideas that are in stark contrast to how things are normally done in racing. One is the parade ring or paddock that is placed on the “finish side” of the track and doubles as a public square and the natural gathering space for the people who live in the community.

“Well-designed paddocks can serve a multitude of public gathering and entertainment functions and can become community focal points. These spaces do not have to be just about racing, the more we can engage the public as part of their daily routine, the more likely we will be able to engage them in the sport of racing.”

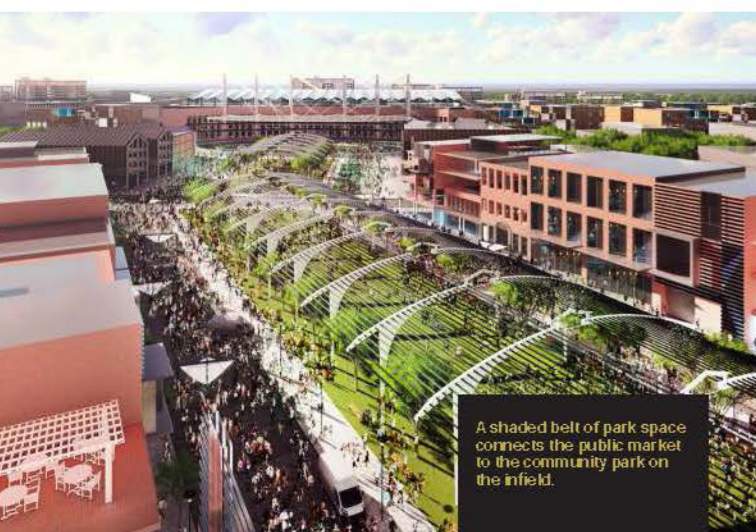
The infield is designed like a park with recreation facilities and has several entries under the track, in order to make it truly accessible. It is designed with elevated walkways that are part of the 360° experience and you can also watch the race on screens from almost anywhere in the park. Here you also find the “Media Square” amphitheater that is a bit like a giant hi-tech drive-in cinema without cars. The screens are set on a structure that provides a unique elevated roof top experience from which you can watch every single stage of the race going on all around you. A great spot for premium food and beverage. The screens double on the inside of the cube, where non-racing activities could include e-sports, which is growing rapidly around the world.

“I see the media square as a fantastic venue in which to watch global horse racing. Imagine watching the Dubai World Cup or Royal Ascot completely surrounded by LED media mesh towering up around you. It’s a bigger than real-life experience that also translates to music concerts, e-sports and other professional sports.”

If and when the great plans for the Georgia Horse Racing Coalition will come to life remains to be seen. But the ideas presented here are so exciting that some people somewhere must put them to use. This is too cool to be left in a drawer filed under “opportunity lost”. The ideas are in place. Now we just need people with the courage to execute. **RM**



The infield will now be the place to be for a new type of spectator experience where it will be possible to see the races from a variety of positions.



A shaded belt of park space connects the public market to the community park on the infield.



New technology and less crowded spaces will make it possible to offer new methods of betting.