

# Hockey Arenas: Canada's Secular Shrines

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The importance of the hockey arena to Canadian society is best summed up by a statistical curiosity published recently in *Harper's Magazine*: The ratio of ice rinks to hospitals in Canada — 3:1. Now, this may say more about the state of health care in this country than it does about Canadians' love for the game of hockey, but there is no denying that hockey holds a special place in the hearts and minds of many Canadians. It has been referred to as "our game," "the Canadian specific," "our common passion," "the language that pervades Canada," and "the game of our lives." It is part sport, part spectacle, part religion, and as a religion it has its places of worship.

Hockey arenas in this country come in all shapes and sizes, from the numerous small community facilities with perhaps a hundred seats (Figure 1), to the huge (fifteen-thousand-plus capacity) sports-entertainment complexes of the National Hockey League (NHL) (Figure 2). We tend to hear and know more about NHL arenas and the cities in which they are located because of the top-down world of professional sport. Many cities have built new NHL arenas recently, while other cities have lost their bids for new facilities, and hence their teams. The prime Canadian examples, Winnipeg and Quebec City, have taken their place in the mythology of hockey in this country. While their respective battles to save local NHL hockey — and, as some see it, to save their cities — has been intriguing, it pales in comparison to the story of Radisson, Saskatchewan.<sup>1</sup>

In 1986, Radisson, a small prairie town of 434 people, was trying to raise funds to replace their aging arena. The issue was simple: replace the arena or lose the community. The people of Radisson had reasoned that the first thing to go is the arena, then in succession the gas station, the school, the co-op, and finally the town itself. While melodramatic, it is a scenario that has frequently played out on the Prairies. It is also something that the people of Saskatchewan have been dealing with for some time, as technology and changing cultural and economic patterns have made obsolete many of its 800 communities. The ones that survive are the ones that can provide the amenities to keep the people there.

Why is this story more intriguing than the examples of Winnipeg and Quebec City? It is really a question of scale:

when a fundraising dinner was held to kick-off Radisson's arena campaign, 420 of the community's 434 people attended. This kind of dedication to the cause was repeated time and time again over the course of the campaign. But the most amazing aspect of this story, and the one that perhaps best illustrates the importance of hockey to Canadian culture and community, is the now legendary story of Joe Tutt. Tutt, a twenty-five-year-old driveway contractor who heard about Radisson's situation through a national media campaign sponsored by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, decided to cycle more than 3,000 kilometres from Milton, Ontario, to Radisson to raise funds for the arena. He not only completed the trip, raising \$25,000, he subsequently refused the return air ticket purchased for him by the town because the trip had raised less than he had hoped for. He got back on his bicycle and rode home, raising another \$10,000. To my knowledge, there has never been an effort such as this to raise money for a hospital, which might explain in part the statistical oddity quoted in *Harper's Magazine*.

There are two reasons for this rather protracted introduction to the cultural significance of hockey arenas: first, it is important to understand how widespread and deeply ingrained the game of hockey is on the Canadian psyche; and second, while the discussion that follows deals specifically with NHL arenas, this by no means indicates their superiority over smaller regional facilities. Again, it's a question of scale.

The focus of this paper is primarily on Montreal and Vancouver, both of which recently opened new state-of-the-art arenas. The contrast between the new buildings, as well as the ones they replaced, is quite revealing.<sup>2</sup>

One does not have to look too deeply for evidence of a difference in dialect in "the language that pervades Canada." While Vancouver's newspapers report daily on the Canucks' progress, the Montreal papers wonder if this year's Canadiens team is another dynasty in the making. Canadiens fans believe in their history; Canuck fans are still waiting for theirs. The most illuminating evidence of this difference in dialect can be seen by examining the coverage of the closing and subsequent opening of each city's NHL arena. When the Vancouver Canucks started the 1995-96 season in their new home, GM [General



Figure 1. Tibury Ice, Delta, British Columbia, built in 1995 at a cost of \$2.5 million, seats 100-150 people in the arena and the bar/viewing area. CTA Design, architects. (I. Shubert, 1998)



Figure 2. Maple Leaf Gardens, Toronto, Ontario, built in 1931 at a cost of \$1.6 million, currently seats more than 15,000. Ross & Macdonald, architects. (I. Shubert, 1998)

Motors] Place, little was said about their old home, the Pacific Coliseum (Figure 3), as it quietly passed into oblivion.

By comparison, when the Montreal Canadiens began playing in the new Molson Centre near the end of 1996, the closing of the old Montreal Forum was orchestrated as a nostalgia-ridden, gut-wrenching event. Consider the language of the headline “Vancouver city officials unsure of what to do with the Coliseum,” versus “Forum wake starts with silence,”<sup>3</sup> or “Hockey’s temple passes into history.”<sup>4</sup> As the author of the latter wrote, “when the Forum finally closes down for good this week, its passing will mark the end of an era, the sad demise of a venerable structure that has long been regarded as hockey’s high temple” (Figure 4 and cover).<sup>5</sup> This kind of hyperbole was the norm in the days leading up to the last game to be played at the Montreal Forum. And while the more cynical among us may attribute this groundswell of emotion to shameless advertising on the part of the NHL, it is hard to believe that it was all insincere.

Earlier, when I referred to the language of hockey, I was

really commenting on the inherent connection between language and culture. Since hockey is definitely a major part of Canadian culture — indeed, a culture unto itself — then its language evokes meaning and understanding from those that share in that culture, while leaving others baffled, perhaps understanding the words but not the way in which they are being used. In “Farewell to the Forum,” financial analyst Francis Scarpaleggia shared this connection with his readers:

I had entered a physical and spiritual landmark. The Forum was more than a hockey arena. It had value beyond the purely functional. It figured in anecdotes that became part of family histories, stood as a symbol of the national spirit, and functioned as a microcosm of the larger society outside.... The Forum is more than a storehouse of personal memories. It is a part of the soul [of] the nation, a place where the country’s myths are played out in weekly rituals. Players, rugged, independent yet graceful, move over frozen ground like *coureurs de bois*, overcoming the obstacles in their path with grim determination and roots carved from the wood of the land.... Besides its role as guardian of the country’s sacred myths, the Forum has been a mirror of the society that surrounds it.... The Forum is more than the world shrine of a fast and exciting sport.... It is a crucible in which individuals from around the world are transformed into Canadians.<sup>6</sup>

To some, this way of speaking about a building may seem unnatural, even a little overstated, but to many Canadians — and more importantly to most Montrealers — it is perfectly acceptable, even warranted. What is particularly interesting about this article is that it was written in 1989, when talk of a new arena was just that, talk. One can only wonder what Mr. Scarpaleggia would be saying today.

Neither the Montreal Forum nor the Pacific Coliseum have yet to meet with the wrecking ball. In Vancouver, debate over what to do with the Pacific Coliseum is virtually non-existent; in Montreal, a buzz persists over the possibility of razing the Montreal Forum. According to Derek Drummond, director of the school of architecture at McGill University, the proposed demolition of the Montreal Forum “focuses our attention on how fragile our urban environments have become; ... it reveals how little our collective memories and traditions are valued by not only the corporations who make such proposals but also by those in our community who purport to protect our heritage.”<sup>7</sup> Drummond, who feels that the Montreal Forum is regarded both locally and internationally as the “high altar of hockey,” states that, “As do all these great places, the Forum evokes an emotional response that is based on far more than its mere physical structure. In a society where hockey is more than just a game, the Forum assumes a role far greater than that of just another arena. To destroy it will be tantamount to cutting out a piece of the heart of Montreal.”





Figure 3. The Pacific Coliseum, Vancouver, British Columbia, built in 1966-67 at a cost of \$6 million, was designed to be Vancouver's all purpose exhibition and sports building. It was deemed obsolete before its 30th birthday. W.K. Noppe, architect. ("Pacific Coliseum Souvenir Edition," Pacific National Exhibition, [1968])

What is immediately clear from Drummond's thoughts is that there is much more to the Forum than its merits as a piece of architecture. Here, the importance of brick and mortar is supplanted by collective memories. It is the people that give these buildings life, and it is their shared cultural activities that give these buildings meaning. This is precisely what Drummond means when he states that "for the vast majority of the population the urban places that evoke the most poignant memories are not necessarily those of architectural significance." Sports columnist Jack Todd summed it up best when he stated that it was "the people who made the building, not the building that made the people. The Montreal Forum has never won a Stanley Cup."<sup>5</sup>

Of equal importance to the relationship between the arena and the people is the arena's relationship with the city. As a civic monument, the arena becomes an outward representation of the city, a badge the city may wear with pride. In "The Stadium in the City: A Modern Story," Niels Nielsen wrote that "the city influences the stadium, just as the stadium influences the city; the stadium landscape is both staged by the city and a staging of the city."<sup>6</sup> This duality demonstrates the important role an arena can play in the overall landscape of a city. The conventional wisdom is that "world-class" cities, an oft-used phrase these days, have "world-class" arenas and stadiums, sometimes more than one. The importance of hockey arenas to Canadian cities is highlighted by the recent phenomenon of team owners holding cities for ransom with



Figure 4. The Montreal Forum (built in 1924, John S. Archibald, architect) in 1947, before the expansion of 1949 and the modernist reconstruction of 1968 (Kenneth Sedleigh, engineer; Stone & Webster, architects). (National Archives, PA129603)

the threat of moving the team unless their demands are met. And while larger centres might not lose their communities if they don't get that new arena, they might lose their status as "world-class" cities, which, some city officials believe, will result in grievous social, political, and economic harm.





Figure 5. GM Place, Vancouver, completed in 1995 at a cost of \$160 million, seats 19,056 for hockey. Brisbin Brook Beynon, architects. (I. Shubert, 1998)

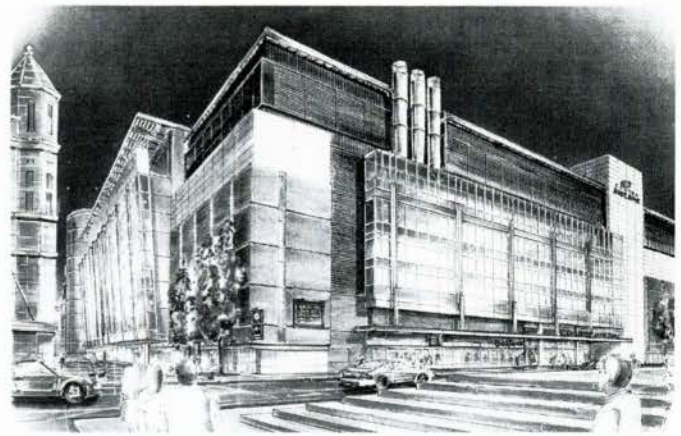


Figure 6. Molson Centre, Montreal, completed in 1996 at a cost of \$230 million, seats 21,273 for hockey. Lemay et associés/LeMoyné Lapointe Magne, architects. (Drawing by Garo Emmayan, Clube de Hockey Canadien, 1994)

One of the more disturbing attributes of the “world-class” city is that their landscapes are characterized by an increasing trend towards *placelessness* or *sameness*.<sup>10</sup> Towering office buildings, fast-food-chain outlets, international airports, and standardized suburban housing designed and built without regard for the particularities of their physical and cultural locations lead “to every such place, regardless of the city, looking the same.” As Nielsen states, “The similarities are so predominant that one may rightfully claim that young people from larger cities of different countries have more in common with each other than they have with fellow country men from rural areas.”<sup>11</sup> The new NHL hockey arenas being built across North America also reflect this sense of placelessness. This is due in part to the “homogenization which necessarily marks a space for sports,” as well as to a need to increase seating capacity and revenues, especially in Canadian cities, as the costs of professional sport continue skyward (Figures 5, 6).

The overall impact of these new monuments to the business of hockey has yet to be fully measured, but the rumblings from hockey fans across the country are loud and clear. For the most part they find these new buildings cold and impersonal. Instead of symbolizing the culture of the sport and its fans, they symbolize corporate control and money. I do not mean to suggest that the old Montreal Forum, for example, was somehow immune to the commercialization of hockey; it wasn't. But that process developed over 72 years, and when suddenly replaced with something that so overtly represents corporate avarice, people are bound to react. The new Molson Centre must not only replace the Montreal Forum as a hockey arena, it must also replace it as a site of collective, cultural worship. For this to occur the memories and patina of the old arena must be transferred to the new one. The question is: Can this be done?

In the case of Vancouver, team officials are not even trying to answer this question. They view their new arena as a

legitimate chance at a fresh start. When GM Place opened, everyone wanted to believe that things would be different in Vancouver, that an indifferent team would fair much better in this new venue because this was now home. You can't blame the team or the fans for wanting to believe, but they simply forgot that it's not the building that makes the team, but the team that makes the building.

An idea of how much things have changed can be gleaned by examining the language used to describe GM Place. When plans for the new arena were unveiled in 1992, an article entitled “Rink of Dreams” appeared in *The Vancouver Sun*:

Yesterday, fathers were telling sons how they played hockey on frozen ponds wearing tube skates and Eaton's catalogues stuffed into their socks to serve as shin pads. Kids never believed those olden-day yarns. Today, an architect is telling us that the new rink in downtown Vancouver, a slap shot away from B.C. Place Stadium, will have 60 luxury suites, fancy restaurants with a view of the ice, an office tower, retail outlets, a fitness club and replays on vast scoreboards. The kids believe. They have been to Disneyland....  
Hockey marries the 21st century in the Chapel of Electronic Dreams.<sup>12</sup>

In Vancouver, at least, childhood memories are being traded for a fresh start. Subsequent coverage by the Vancouver media focused almost entirely on the high-tech aspect of the new arena. Journalist Pete McMartin wrote that GM Place “isn't built so much as wired. It's been built to be plugged in. It's also a Yuppie dream and white collar to the core. General Motors Place is to the future of sports and entertainment as Microsoft is to communications.”<sup>13</sup> GM Place was seen as a “futuristic electronic village” more than an arena. It is interactive, wired for fibre optics, and has “smart seats.”<sup>14</sup> It is the next generation of sports facility.

New arenas and stadiums are being built at an unprecedented rate. According to one source, since 1985 professional

teams have built, or are planning, 92 new buildings.<sup>15</sup> This statistic doesn't take into account the many other facilities going up around the country that have nothing to do with professional sport. This is particularly true of hockey arenas being built in Canada. For every GM Place and Molson Centre there are countless regional and local facilities springing up around the country. The game of hockey is going through a resurgence, despite the popular disillusionment with the business of the professional version. Minor, women's, and old-timer hockey leagues are all demanding more ice time and more arenas. These are the arenas where dreams and aspirations are born and nurtured. These are the arenas where player and fan alike is equal; there are no corporate boxes here, no club seats where you can have your designer hot dog delivered to your seat, no glitzy between-period entertainment. You go to these arenas either to play the game or to watch someone you know play the game — you go to be part of a cultural experience.

Mike Beamish of *The Vancouver Sun* wrote that "We live in an age when cities are compressing much of their creative instinct, culture and community into stadiums and arenas, yet GM Place doesn't offer much [in the way] of spiritual significance beyond its purpose to entertain and make money."<sup>16</sup> The spiritual significance that Beamish alluded to is similar to the concept of *topophilia*, which in one sense is the antithesis to *placelessness*. *Topophilia* "refers to the ties that unite humans and their material surroundings, especially the ties that combine emotion and place."<sup>17</sup> The concept of *topophilia* refers to both the "physical-spatial surroundings and to the more or less mysterious — and possibly quasi-religious — aspects of the experience. The place with which *topophilia* is basically concerned is characterized as authentic, carrying from time to time the stamp of the secular shrine."<sup>18</sup>

Hockey arenas, in this case NHL arenas, provide the physical space needed for a quasi-religious experience to be carried out. The fans worship the players and are rewarded with the knowledge that they have taken part in a ritual that defines their own place within the culture. The arena is also the place "where the city and its inhabitants inherit themselves. Here, the city's sense of history is expressed, not only through museum-like antiquity and the aura of the [arena] buildings, but also through the lived history prolonged by the sustained traditions and myths which are an integral part of [arena] culture."<sup>19</sup>

Arenas like the Montreal Forum or Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens have long provided Canadians a place to carry out these traditions and myths. They are Canada's secular shrines. These venerable buildings represent the outgoing culture of professional hockey, while GM Place — the "Chapel of Electronic Dreams" — and Molson Centre represent the new culture. Professional hockey appears to be moving into less "sacred" buildings. Time will tell if these new buildings can replace the

old ones, if indeed the memories and patina are transferable. In the meantime, perhaps hockey fans will turn to their neighbourhood arena for their spiritual fulfilment, arenas such as the one eloquently described by Kelly Jo Burke:

there is  
fluorescence  
stale popcorn  
wood scared by skate blades healed by falling beer  
it's so ugly and cold and  
familiar

the guys  
horning their lust and rage  
offer smokes to the snow maidens  
cold-eyed at seventeen  
who smile hiding their teeth  
and turn back to the game

the screams cut the lutheran air

when everyone leaves  
even the Zamboni man  
when the unforgiving lights are finally down  
and the ice is again virginal

skate out in the vaulting  
dark

race and turn  
like the great ones

the rafters reverberate with  
your name  
unassisted

the scoreboard shows  
that Home has finally won<sup>20</sup>



- 1 For more on Radisson, Saskatchewan, see Ken Dryden and Roy MacGregor, *Home Game: Hockey and Life in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989). On sports arenas, see John Bale, *Sport, Space and the City* (London: Routledge, 1993), John Bale and Olof Moen, eds., *The Stadium and the City* (Keele, Staffordshire: Keele University Press, 1995), and Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1993).
- 2 Another reason for this choice is of a more personal nature: Montreal is the city where I was born and raised and where I learned to speak "hockey," my "third language"; Vancouver is the city which I now call home, and where, despite my attempts to keep my third language alive, I lose a little more of it each day. Perhaps this has more to do with my advancing age and dwindling abilities as a power forward on my beer-league team than it does with location, but I cannot help feeling that the language of hockey in Montreal is a different dialect from the one spoken in Vancouver.
- 3 Jack Todd, "Old-timers take a last spin; Forum wake starts with silence," *The Gazette* [Montreal], March 11, 1996, A1.
- 4 Barry Came, "Hockey's temple passes into history: Montrealers say goodbye to the fabled Forum," *Maclean's* 109, no.12 (18 March 1996): 56-57.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Francis Scarpaleggia, "Farewell to the Forum," *The Globe and Mail*, 5 October 1989, A7.
- 7 Derek Drummond, "Forum's lesson: Heritage is about more than bricks," *The Gazette*, 8 February 1992, K2.
- 8 Todd.
- 9 Niels Kayser Nielsen, "The Stadium in the City: A Modern Story," in *The Stadium and the City*, 21-44.
- 10 For more on this topic, see Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 90.
- 11 Nielsen, 4.
- 12 Archie McDonald, "Rink of dreams: New venue has the electronic wizardry of a Disneyland," *The Vancouver Sun*, 30 September 1992, D10.
- 13 Pete McMartin, "Action Central: General Motors Place is all revved up and ready to go," *The Vancouver Sun*, 15 September 1995, C1.
- 14 David Smith, "Canuck connection allows fans to shop, sup, sign up from seats," *The Vancouver Sun*, 1 September 1993, D1.
- 15 Mike Beamish, "Stadium stampede: Unprecedented boom in sports arena construction is a worldwide phenomenon," *The Vancouver Sun*, 23 May 1996, D1, quoting the *Charlotte Observer*.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Nielsen, 26. For further details on topophilia as it pertains to sport, see John Bale, "Playing at Home: British Football and a Sense of Place," in *British Football and Social Change: Getting into Europe*, ed. John Williams and Stephen Wagg (Leicester, Eng., and New York: Leicester University Press, 1991), 130ff.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Nielsen, 30.
- 20 Kelly Jo Burke, "At the Arena," in *Thru The Smoky End Boards: Canadian Poetry About Sports & Games*, ed. Kevin Brooks and Sean Brooks (Vancouver: Polestar, 1996), 22.