



Canada's Sporting Heritage: Keeping Old Places Fit

By James Careless

Visit any small town or big city in Canada and you will likely find a rink or arena at the heart of the community. There is no doubt that sports venues help build our communities and bind this country together. Since the late 19th Canadians have been quick to embrace athletic pleasures and to build the sporting venues that support them.

But old facilities are often viewed as obsolete when compared to modern structures, relegating many to the side lines. Although much has been demolished, some real gems remain—and most are playing as active a role in community life today as they did when they first opened.

Granite Curling Club

Winnipeg's Granite Curling Club (GCC) was founded in 1880 at a time when most curlers played outdoors on natural ice protected only by tents.

“The name reflects a debate at the time over the best kind of stones to use, iron or granite,” says GCC general manager Laurie Martens. “The GCC members preferred granite, hence the name.”

The GCC has inhabited its Tudor-style three-storey clubhouse and rink since it was built in 1912-1913. The “Mother Club,” as it is affectionately nicknamed, features nine ice sheets inside an arched metal and wooden

shell with a clear open space of 42 metres. The metal-sheathed walls were not insulated at first—an advantage back when the club's rinks were made of natural ice.

Today the structure is insulated and an artificial ice-making plant was installed in 1953. The bar has been refurbished and overall maintenance carried out. Aside from that, little has changed.

“The members' rooms have stayed the same, and the ‘barn’ [the rink] still has its original trusses and everything. The feeling here is very much as it was in the early 20th century,” Martens says.

The survival of this historic facility owes much to its members, not only because their dues pay for maintenance but also because



they keep the bar and restaurant busy.

“Our members meet here for lunch and dinner, and hold business meetings at the club,” explains Martens. “This is what keeps this facility vital. It remains an integral, living part of the community.”

The club has survived hard times. It was built by Thomas Kelly, who also built the Manitoba Legislative Building. As a result of a corruption scandal involving the legislature project, Kelly’s assets—including the club—were seized. The club was a tenant of the provincial government until it bought the property in 1946. The GCC’s independence lasted until 1975, when money problems forced the club to sell to the City of Winnipeg. It remains a tenant of the City.

Despite these troubles, Winnipeg’s historic Granite Curling Club remains a vibrant part of the city’s sports scene.

The Vancouver Rowing Club

Nestled in Coal Harbour, the Vancouver Rowing Club (VRC) is one of Stanley Park’s historic gems. Built in 1911 after the arch-rival Vancouver Boating Club and Burrard Inlet Rowing Club merged, the VRC sits atop wooden piers driven into the harbour mud. Visitors reach this charming, pitch-roofed Tudor clubhouse by walking over a ramp from the shoreline.

Almost 100 years later, thanks to the respect and dedication of its members, the Vancouver Rowing Club retains its original character and charm. In 1990, the City of Vancouver designated it a heritage property.

“We have kept up with repairs and done some things to improve the building’s durability,” says general manager Keith P. Jolly. “For instance, we replaced the original wooden railings with metal treated to look like wood. We reinforced the structure with a steel beam and new piers in the 1980s because the wooden piers had decayed and the clubhouse was starting to sink. Overall, we have tried very hard to keep the VRC looking as it did in 1911, despite modernizing the facilities inside.”

The VRC’s survival has much to do with its organizational structure. Rather than trying to be all things to all people, the club allows specialized interests, including non-nautical ones like rugby and field hockey, to form their own autonomous sections under its banner. (Rugby dates back to the early days when off-season rowers were looking to stay fit). VRC members pay a basic fee to belong to the club and use its facilities, but they also pay a second (usually larger) fee to their particular section.

Sections may come and go. The one for cricket, for example, has disappeared. But the club’s fee structure helps protect it from serious losses when sections fail.

The club also makes money hosting weddings, meetings and other events. This helps to keep the club plugged into community life.

According to Jolly, both the club’s financial and heritage health have never been better.

“The history and character of the VRC are extremely important to its members. That is why we have weathered nearly a century in Coal Harbour despite all the changes that have happened over the years.”



Maple Leaf Gardens

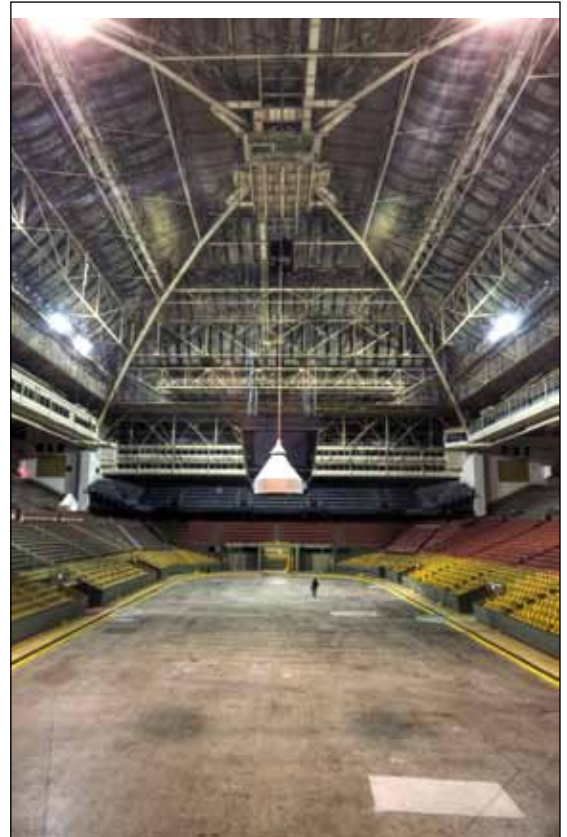
Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens, with its cathedral-high domed ceiling, has been a shrine to hockey since it opened in 1931. Although other National Hockey League (NHL) arenas hold more people, none feel as large and awe-inspiring as the "house that Conn Smythe built."

The Gardens has been facing an uncertain future since its NHL team moved to the new Air Canada Centre in 1999. Loblaws bought the property in 2004 to develop a flagship store inside the Gardens' Art Deco shell, but those plans stalled for years.

But now Ryerson University has partnered with Loblaws and the federal government to transform the arena into the Ryerson Sports and Recreation Centre. In this plan, a 6,500-square-metre Loblaws will be built on the ground floor of the Gardens while a two-storey, state-of-the-art 14,000-square-metre sports facility will be built above. The top floor will feature a 500-seat NHL-sized rink under the famed Maple Leaf Gardens dome.

"Today's artificial ice rinks use lightweight air cooling systems, which makes it possible to build them on a non-concrete raised floor," says former Toronto mayor John Sewell, spokesperson for Friends of Maple Leaf Gardens. "This means that the site can be reused while retaining the essence of its hockey heritage."

"This is more than a great day. It is a decisive moment in Ryerson's history, a true game-changer for our students and the return of Maple Leaf Gardens to Toronto," said Ryerson's president Sheldon Levy, when the news was announced on December 1, 2009.



Red Mountain Resort

Rossland, B.C. has been ski country since the 1890s when Scandinavian miners working the area's gold and copper fields began skiing on nearby Red Mountain, which hosted Canada's first recorded downhill ski competition in 1896. In 1934, local skiers built a cabin, ski jump and gasoline-engine-powered ski rope tow on the mountain. In 1947, they formed the Red Mountain Ski Club and built what is today known as the main lodge of Red Mountain Resort.

Although there are more modern buildings in the resort, the three-storey main lodge retains its original wooden charm.

"Our Rafters bar hasn't changed since the day it opened," says Mika Hakkola, Red Mountain Resort's marketing manager. "The place has a homey, old-time

skiing feeling that reminds you of the early days of this Canadian sport. Step into the lodge and you feel as if you've gone back to a calmer, slower time."

Other heritage ski buildings on the site invoke a sense of nostalgia, like the A-frame cabins of the 1960s. Why has the main lodge survived the test of time?

"I think the owners and skiers really value the heritage of the lodge," Hakkola replies. "After all, Red

Mountain is the oldest ski resort in Western Canada. I think they like the unchanging nature of the place. It's a familiar, nostalgic feeling.”

Galt Arena Gardens

With its impressive Edwardian brick and stone façade and Art Deco accents, the Galt Arena Gardens in Cambridge, Ontario looks like a 20th-century temple to hockey. When the 4,000-seat arena was built in 1921, it was a fitting home for the Galt Terriers Hockey Club, perennial winners of the Ontario Hockey Association intermediate championship.

Almost unchanged over the years, the arena was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act in 1995. Both the exterior façade and spacious steel-arched ceiling have been maintained. The Galt Arena Gardens looks as polished and prestigious today as it did when it opened in January 1922.

The arena also prides itself on being the oldest continuously operating arena in the world and boasts an impressive hockey heritage—Gordie Howe and Bobby Hull both skated there.

For all its glory, the arena struggled in its early days. The owners installed artificial ice in 1929, not in response to the needs of skaters, but in an effort to make the facility more saleable after a number of business failures. In 1940, the club installed a roller rink for the summer to improve the facility's finances. Still, the sheer grandeur of the arena has always been a financial burden for the small community it serves.

Despite these challenges, Galt Arena Gardens is a focal point for Cambridge, according to Mayor Doug Craig.

“It's a heritage masterpiece and a functional arena, a place where people skate and play hockey year-round. But the Galt Arena Gardens is more than that. It is a local landmark that people associate with Cambridge. It is part of who we are.”

James Careless is a freelance writer and broadcaster whose credits include the Globe and Mail, National Post, Montreal Gazette, Ottawa Citizen, Toronto Star, Chatelaine, MacLean's and CBC Radio/TV. He also contributed articles to the book Chronicle of Canada, and wrote the Heritage Moments radio series for the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

