
Howard Shubert
Canadian Centre for Architecture

Hockey Night in America: The Role of Architecture in the Expansion of Professional Hockey to the United States

The economic stability and long-term viability of the National Hockey League (NHL) was ensured between 1924 and 1931 with league expansion into the United States. Surprisingly, this pivotal period in the history of professional hockey has received little attention by historians. We know the names of the major players – Charles Adams, Frank Calder, Thomas Duggan, “Tex” Rickard – and the broad outlines of the story, but the precise details of how this expansion was affected still elude us. Significantly, it was also between 1920 and 1931 that eight new NHL arenas were constructed, for nine of the ten teams that made up the league by the end of this period.

This paper has three main goals. First, it will make a case for the critical role that architecture played as a precondition for expansion of the NHL into the United States, and to the subsequent North American-wide development and success of the league. The argument here is primarily economic; greater capacity, increased amenities and fan comfort, and artificial ice required a significant financial commitment on the part of owners, but together with longer seasons they produced huge profits for those teams that survived. Second, the paper will focus on individuals, events, and circumstances leading to NHL expansion to Boston and New York, and to the construction of Boston Garden and Madison Square Garden, in order to expand our understanding of this key moment in NHL history. The crucial activities of Thomas Duggan in facilitating NHL expansion to these cities will be highlighted, through reference to previously unpublished correspondence.

Finally, by comparing the different economic and functional origins of hockey arenas in the United States and Canada, as well as the motivations behind the construction of these buildings, some observations will be offered regarding how these essential differences reflect the relative importance of the sport to each nation. The findings presented here come out of a larger, ongoing study devoted to the architectural history of buildings for skating and hockey in North America, from 1860 – 2000.
