

Patricia Vertinsky  
University of British Columbia

## **Contesting Space and Knowledge in the Gym**

New analyses of space and place have encouraged scholars of sport and physical education to look more closely at how forms of popular culture such as sport have been worked out in particular places through the production and maintenance of social relations and the distribution of power. Sporting forms, of course, have always, to some extent, been determined by place and space, and we can readily see how sport itself has produced specific forms of place and space.

One way to analyze the production and processes of space as a practiced (sporting) place (to use De Certeau's terminology) is to look at power struggles as they appeared in the planning, design, and use of particular sites and events for sport, athletics, exercise training and the pedagogy of physical education. "Contesting Space and Knowledge in the Gym" examines particular issues of place and space within and around a unique local building for sport and physical education, the War Memorial Gymnasium of the University of British Columbia in Canada (UBC), built just after the Second World War to memorialize Canadian soldiers who gave their lives for their country. Examining the design and production of space in this place where physical education and knowledge was constructed and purveyed, citizenship values embodied, sporting identities formed, and relationships developed, can be a more evocative and revealing approach to the social history and comparative study of physical education and sport than any written records. The use of spatial concepts can help us to illustrate how this memorial gymnasium became a partner in a dialogue with the bodies of students and the bodies of memory. They can infuse our everyday understandings of what fits where, how the academic landscape is articulated for teaching and learning, whose knowledge is seen to be legitimate and how the boundaries of disciplines are formed and defended.

From this space emerged important and undocumented stories of intense struggles around disciplinary paradigms as UBC reached to accommodate Franklin Henry's vision of the academic discipline of physical education and then fractured around splintering sub-disciplines and the different priorities of

professional development, performance and scientific laboratory work. Organizational units were created and destroyed in response to internal conflict, the changing scene of higher education and athletics, leadership styles, shifts in faculty and student supply and demand and the emergence of new technologies.

I have discussed, in other venues, the architectural design of the War Memorial gym and the stimulus of modernist architecture as a particular setting for movement and interaction showing how architecture is never autonomous but is necessarily constitutive as well as constituted by social processes. This study explores the relationship of the changing spaces of the War Memorial Gymnasium to the emerging academic discipline of physical education and the response of faculty, staff and students to its demands. I will attempt to illustrate critical spatial mechanisms through which the memorial gym evolved into an arena of contested spaces and functions around gendered, racial and sexualized bodies, as well as bodies of knowledge and the shape/s of disciplines. I will try to show how the changing face of knowledge and popular culture over the past half century of the gym's existence demanded accommodations, shifting spatial arrangements and acquiescence or resistance to views on how the "Canadian" body should be remembered and educated.

---