

SPORT AND THE MILITARY

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Ontario's Memorial Arenas: Origins, Growth and Decay

Memory is generally thought of as an individual faculty, left to the treatment of psychologists, psychoanalysts, and neurologists. In the last two decades, however, social memory has become a significant field of historical enquiry, examining the value and meaning of memory to life and, indeed, history, itself. Yet, until recently, little of the burgeoning social memory scholarship has included sports. The provision of sporting facilities as war memorials offers fertile ground for such exploration.

In this sense, it is particularly interesting that in the years following World War II, small towns all over Canada built "memorial" arenas and hockey became synonymous with small-town Canadian life. For example, the Ontario cities of Guelph, St. Thomas, and Peterborough opened memorial arenas in 1948, 1954, and 1956, respectively. These memorials, that often seem lost in the clutter and movement of towns, originally had a resonance that is not readily apparent to us now. Although un-monumental, the residents that built these living memorials gave them a distinct meaning through their dedication to the dead and injured. Such buildings were not expected to create an impact by their appearance but, rather, their value rested in the life-enhancing services that they provided.

Similar to the Cenotaphs and monuments that became a ubiquitous feature of most Canadian communities following World War I, memorial arenas also relied on local initiative, organization, and action. For the individuals and groups who came together during and after the wars, the process of remembrance was about creating a space in which their story could be told and retold in its local, particular, parochial, and familiar forms. However, reaching the requisite degree of agreement on the often-related matters of form, location, and financing was not always straightforward or easily obtained in Canada's heterogeneous communities.

As many of today's memorial arenas approach or surpass fifty years of age, they are becoming old, outdated, and uninsurable. Moreover, many memorial arenas have been condemned or torn down, while others, such as Guelph Memorial Gardens, have been abandoned. As the distance widens between the memories of the bulk of the population and the events that directly prompted the building of memorials, questions about their purpose and future become more critical.
