

Memorial Coliseum

Memorial Coliseum, a 12,000-seat arena on the east bank of the Willamette River in Portland, was named as a tribute to veterans of World War I and World War II. Financed by an \$8 million bond passed in 1954, the arena was completed in 1960 from a design by the Portland office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Memorial Coliseum was steel-framed, despite the prominence of Oregon's timber industry, and the building's spare, even stark, International-style design initially met with controversy. There was also disagreement over the location of the arena on the east side of the Willamette River, rather than a more popular downtown location.

The design of Memorial Coliseum consists of a circular, freestanding, concrete seating bowl within a cube-shaped, glass-walled exterior. Despite being equivalent in size to four Portland city blocks, the building stands on just four columns, thanks to an intricate rooftop structural system. This allows the lobby to act as a winter garden-like space, with views through the glass exterior to the downtown skyline and river. One of the names originally considered for the building was "The Glass Palace."

Memorial Coliseum was the city's largest indoor arena until the Rose Garden was constructed next door in 1995. It has hosted countless concerts and events, including the Beatles and the NCAA basketball Final Four championship in 1965. The Portland Trail Blazers basketball team began playing at Memorial Coliseum in 1970, the team's first season, and it is the home of the Portland Winterhawks, the city's minor-league hockey franchise. In 2007, Memorial Coliseum hosted the Davis Cup tennis championship. Other events include concerts by such well-known musicians as Luciano Pavarotti and Led Zeppelin and addresses by leaders such as the Dalai Lama of Tibet and then-Senator Barack Obama.

In early 2009, the building was threatened with demolition when a minor league baseball stadium was proposed for the Coliseum site. After locals rallied for the building's preservation, the stadium plan for the site was abandoned. In September, the building won listing on the National Register of Historic Places, which calls for protection of not only the glass exterior but also the concrete seating bowl inside. In the fall Mayor Sam Adams commissioned a Stakeholder Advisory Committee to identify possible new uses for the building as part of an overall makeover for the Rose Quarter development. A final decision on the future of the building is expected by late 2010.

Written by [Brian Libby](#)

Further Reading:

Abbott, Carl. *Greater Portland: Urban Life and Landscape in the Pacific Northwest*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

King, Bart. *An Architectural Guidebook to Portland* (2nd ed.). Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2007.

Mirk, Sarah. "Input of Hundreds 'Appreciated' at Rose Quarter Open House." *Portland Mercury*, April 14, 2009.

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