

Veterans Memorial Coliseum

By Brian Libby

Veterans Memorial Coliseum is a 12,000-seat arena on the east bank of the Willamette River in Portland. Originally known simply as Memorial Coliseum, it was renamed Veterans Memorial Coliseum in 2011 to re-emphasize the building's role as a tribute to veterans of World War II and the Korean War. 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.

Veterans Memorial Coliseum is 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.

Veterans Memorial Coliseum was the city's largest indoor arena until the Rose Garden (now Moda Center) was constructed next door in 1995. The building hosted countless concerts and events, including a concert by The Beatles in 1965, and the NCAA basketball Final Four championship in 1965. The Portland Trail Blazers basketball team played their first season at the Veterans Memorial Coliseum in 1970 and won the NBA championship at the Coliseum in 1977. Additionally, 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 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 2016, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Veterans Memorial Coliseum a National Treasure.

Sources

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