

Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens To Become A Grocery Store

Pressure from The Friends of Maple Leaf Gardens did get Mayor David Miller to ask Council to once more consider including a skating surface in the redevelopment project. However, that's a slim chance.

"It's a very, very remote

possibility," said Robert Hunter of Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment.

Councillor Kyle Rae has tried since 1999, when the Toronto Maple Leafs moved to the Air Canada Centre, to keep an ice rink at the Gardens. Ottawa Senators hockey team owner Eugene Melnyk had shown interest in the Gardens for junior hockey, but that plan never materialized. The Councillor recalled that proposals for the former hockey shrine have included an entertainment centre, a venue for Cirque du Soleil, condo towers rising through the roof, a Home Depot and, finally, a supermarket.

"I would love to have an ice rink on that site," Councillor Rae said. "It has always been on the agenda ... but it is far too expensive. I've been told four or five times that it's not possible." However, the grocery giant has agreed to keep the existing façades of the arena exterior, as well as the existing roof line (including the marquee and rooftop Maple Leaf logos), and to continue calling the building Maple Leaf Gardens. Most of the development will take place within the building's interior. The new development will include not only a three-level supermarket and two levels of parking, but also a fitness centre, liquor store and post office.



View of Maple Leaf Gardens taken shortly after its construction in 1931, showing the giant domed truss roof that spans the entire interior.

ERA Architects Inc., who have been involved in a number of successful heritage rehabilitation projects in the city—including the acclaimed adaptive reuse of the Gooderham and Worts Distillery District—have been hired to work on the heritage conservation aspects of the conversion project. According to Michael McClelland, Principal at ERA Architects, the adaptive reuse of Maple Leaf Gardens is being undertaken with an understanding of "the principle of reversibility." "The overall space is being retained in a way that I think will be quite successful," he added.

Loblaws is expected to begin work this September and open the supermarket 20 to 24 months later. Mr. Hunter said that the project will bring jobs, services and people back into the neighbourhood, and expressed relief that the five-year quest to find a new life for the building has been endorsed by City Council in a 25-1 vote.

The lone opponent was Councillor Joe Mihevc, who described the planned makeover as inadequate for a building of such historic significance. "I don't think the Loblaws proposal is the worst thing that could happen," Mr. Mihevc allowed. "However, I think we could have done more."

In 1990, the Gardens was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act for its architectural and historical significance. Since its construction in 1931, it has been the home of the Toronto Maple Leafs, where radio coverage of "Hockey Night in Canada" began and was broadcast by Foster Hewitt for almost fifty years. As well, it has been the arena for a variety of events, including the protest rallies of the Depression, skating carnivals, the circus, opera and concerts. Historian Michael Bliss of the University of Toronto has called the Gardens "the cathedral of Canadian Hockey in its golden age," when the National Hockey League was emerging to become North America's dominant expression of the game. Dr. Bliss contends that "if any building in the world is identified with hockey, it is Maple Leaf Gardens. ...It played such a central role in the history of a sport deemed integral to the national culture."

According to Tim Morawetz, co-founder of the Art Deco Society of Toronto, Maple Leaf Gardens is significant for several reasons beyond hockey and an incomparable roster of special events. He marvelled that the building's structural engineering was very innovative for its time, employing a reinforced concrete structure and a giant domed truss roof to span the entire interior without any sight-obstructing columns. In addition, the entire building floats on giant concrete pads, as it was built atop Tattle Creek. The Gardens was constructed in a record five-and-a-half months by 700 workers toiling

night and day—remarkable even by today's standards!

Architecturally, the Gardens is a huge, reinforced-concrete box sheathed in buff brick with stone trim. Its architects, the Montréal firm of Ross & Macdonald with associates Jack Ryrie and Mackenzie Waters, drew upon two contemporary architectural styles—Art Deco and Streamlined Moderne—to successfully disguise the building's size and give it a strong, but graceful, exterior presence.

Mr. Morawetz noted that the symmetrical façades, with subtle changes in wall plane and height to emphasize the middle section, are characteristic of the Art Deco style. He described the windows as “vertical strips, adding a sense of height and rhythm when viewed from a distance,” and pointed out that “even though it was the Depression, the Gardens incorporates subtle decorative elements, such as angled brickwork and the flat stone panels with zigzag patterns in the shape of an ‘M’.”

The sleek, horizontally oriented Streamlined Moderne style, Mr. Morawetz continued, “symbolized progress and the promise of a better future.” The Gardens has continuous horizontal bands of stone at the top and bottom, as well as stacked rows of slightly protruding bricks at the corners of each block. Like many buildings of this period, there are flagpoles at the roof line to finish off the façade.

In short, he called Maple Leaf Gardens an irreplaceable and sophisticated example of large-scale, Canadian 1930s architecture.

Friends of Maple Leaf Gardens (<http://www.friendsofmapleleafgardens.ca/history.cfm>); *Art Deco Society of Toronto* (<http://www.artdecotoronto.com>); and *Toronto Star*, Ont., 06/24/04.