



CLARENCE PICARD PHOTO, 2008

By Clarence C. Picard

Last Look BUFFALO MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM

It was inevitable. This is Buffalo, so of course controversy was involved, but ever since the sparkling HSBC Arena opened in 1996, Buffalo Memorial Auditorium was doomed to appear in our Last Look feature. That time has finally come after it was announced in late-May that crews would begin dismantling the Aud in October.

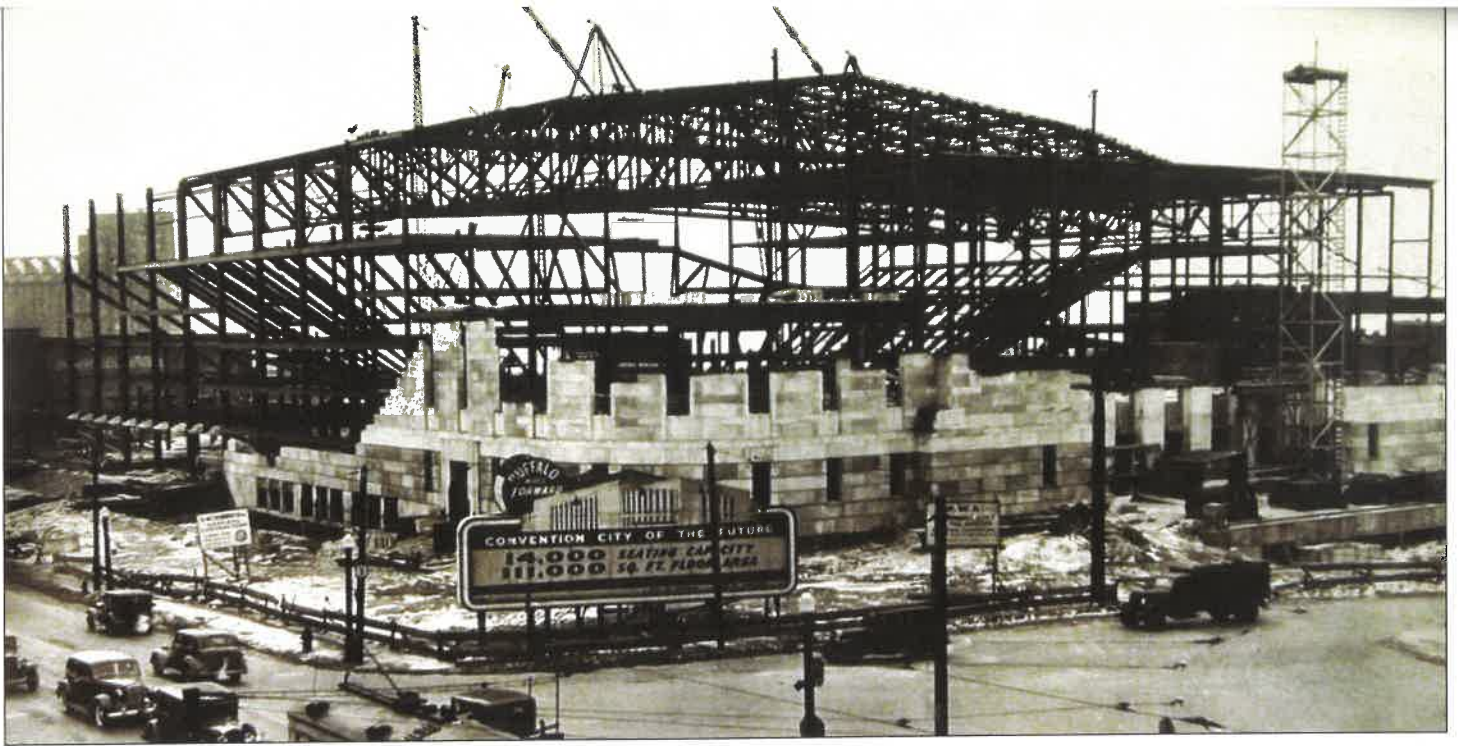
Construction on Memorial Auditorium began in November 1939 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and finished the next fall. The arena's Art Deco style fit perfectly with City Hall and the Central Terminal, quickly becoming an aesthetically pleasing and functional focal point of Buffalo life. With an original capacity of 12,280 for hockey and additional floor seating for basketball, concerts, wrestling and other events, the Aud attracted over one

million people in its first seven months. The AHL's Buffalo Bisons ("Hockey Before Helmets," Winter 2008) were the biggest attraction but the Aud hosted everything from dog shows to political rallies.

For 30 years the building powerfully looked over Buffalo with a classic beauty rarely seen today – more Roman Coliseum than modern-day sporting venue. When the NHL and NBA granted Buffalo hockey and basketball franchises, respectively, the roof was raised, adding seats but detracting from the building's design. Nevertheless, the Aud still remains an impressive site for newcomers cruising north on Interstate 190 for the first time. Many considered the Aud a dinosaur when the Sabres moved out – it was the last NHL rink not regulation-size – but it would always hold a place in Buffalo hockey fans' hearts. Several

features of the Aud were moved to HSBC Arena and artifacts such as seats will be auctioned. Crews will also salvage various decorative-stone and metal pieces.

Memorial Auditorium stands on land once occupied by Spaulding's Exchange (Centerspread, "Buffalo's Banker," Spring 2002). The Liberty Pole at the corner of Main and Commercial streets (Spring 2007) was removed for the arena's construction but the pole's aim of remembering the nation's lost soldiers carried on in Memorial Auditorium's name. A war memorial has stood at that intersection since 1838. A new monument – or even a fifth liberty pole – does not look likely. Instead the land will return to its roots as a commercial site with a Bass Pro Shop planned. Many hope it will be enough to bring consumers downtown again. Many others aren't convinced.



Memorial Auditorium under construction, c. 1939.

STEVE MANGIONE COLLECTION

Construction on Bass Pro will not begin until the Aud and the Donovan State Office Building are taken down. Syracuse-based C&S Engineers will face speed bumps such as asbestos removal; the 12-foot-wide Hamburg Drain running underneath the building and

maneuvering cranes around nearby highways and railroad.

Perhaps the new Bass Pro will be the solution that everyone is looking for to the *Downtown Problem*. And perhaps it

won't. But one thing is for sure – it'll never draw crowds or provide memories like *The Aud*. 🏠



This Art Deco eagle on the building's north-east corner should be preserved for future use.
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