



265 NOTRE DAME AVENUE

**FORMER CANADIAN GENERAL ELECTRIC
BUILDING**

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

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The latter decades of the nineteenth century saw the rapid growth of Winnipeg as an economic, political and population centre. This growth, due mainly to the success of attracting immigrants to the Canadian prairies, gave rise to the well-documented warehouse district of the city to supply these immigrants with all their needs. As this warehouse district, along Princess and King Streets flourished, an associated entity, the fringe district also grew. Here one could get a meal, a bath, a shave, a hat cleaned, or a place to lay one's head. As Winnipeg's economy diversified from the earlier role of distribution centre into a wider based economy, so too did the warehouse fringe district also see its share of new buildings.

Another result of Winnipeg's growth was the utilization of new technologies, specifically electricity. Winnipeg's first electric streetlights, four along Main Street, were turned on October 16, 1882¹ and the growth of electric power in Winnipeg and the West was enormous. Electricity was used for more streetlights and more importantly, an expanding number of commercial and residential uses. One of the major Canadian firms to take advantage of this huge growth sector was the Toronto-based Canadian General Electric Co. (CGE). Needless to say, the enormous growth in western Canada's population centres in the early 1900s allowed CGE to successfully market all its goods to westerners hungry to keep up with all the innovations in the more established cities of the east.

Thus CGE found itself increasingly swamped with orders for all its electrical equipment and increasingly cramped for space at its Winnipeg address. In 1930, to alleviate this problem, a new home for the firm was constructed at 265 Notre Dame Avenue for \$225,000.²

¹ A History of Hydro-electric Power in Manitoba. (Winnipeg 1986), p. 4.

² City of Winnipeg Building Permits. (BP) 3436/1930.

STYLE

Northwood and Chivers have designed a structure firmly set in the art-deco style that became popular in North America in the late 1920s. It was part of a movement that was a rejection of the simple recreation of historic styles so popular in architecture to this time. Emphasis turned to a futuristic look for buildings and many of the usual practices were abandoned. Concrete, metal and smooth stone were invariably utilized to give a less textured appearance and low-relief geometrical designs became the accepted ornamentation of the buildings. Also prevalent in art-deco structures were hard linear lines and often building elements such as windows, spandrels and materials were all arranged to add vertical emphasis to the structures. Ornamentation was often stylized and these patterns came to adorn everything from appliances and furniture to large office buildings. Windows and openings were usually simple and square.³

CONSTRUCTION

The former CGE Building is found on the northeast corner of Notre Dame Avenue and King Street and rises five storeys above the basement. It measures 60' x 100' x 80'⁴ and is comprised of reinforced concrete beam-joist supports. Floors are capable of withstanding 250 pounds per square foot in order to hold heavy equipment.⁵ The use of reinforced concrete had only taken place in limited numbers of Winnipeg buildings since 1906 when the Bemis Bag plant on Princess Street first used the system. This technique, perfected in the U.S. nearly a decade previous was utilized to create an extremely rigid frame and thus affording much better load bearing capacity.⁶ Given CGE's move into mining and other heavy electrical equipment, a need for such structural considerations was vital. The building at 265 Notre Dame Avenue uses the

³ See J. J-G Blumenson, Identifying American Architecture. (Nashville 1981), p. 77 and J.C. Poppeliers et al, What Style Is It? (Washington, D.C. 1983), pp. 88-9.

⁴ City of Winnipeg Assessment Records 600290, Ward 2, PC 40.

⁵ Western Canada Contractor and Builder XXVIII, Feb. 1931, p. 16 (below as WCCB).

⁶ L.K. Eaton, "The Bemis Bag Plant in Winnipeg, Canada." in Concrete International, February 1979, pp. 63-5.

Tee Pee Mocha brick laid with cut joints (save for the eastern wall, which is of common brick) and tyndall limestone completes the structure on all elevations except at the rear.⁷

Wall thicknesses vary from 17” in the basement, to 15” on the first and second floors, to 13” on the three upper floors.⁸

DESIGN

The architect’s design fits well into the art-deco categorization. The new concept of futuristic rather than historic motifs takes on many forms in their building. Gone is the rusticated stone base so prevalent in Winnipeg construction, replaced by polished blue granite and smooth Tyndall limestone to the base of the second storey windows. At this level a saw-toothed design runs along the north, south and west elevations.

Vertical emphasis is created through the movement of limestone at the corner bays up the entire height of the building and the vertically ornamented spandrels within these limestone risers add to the effect. Windows are plain and square with stone slip sills on the second to fifth floors and Northwood and Chivers use low relief carved ornamental bronze window surrounds at grade. An unusual feature is the use of pierced bronze around the oak door main entrance that exposes the limestone behind the bronze.⁹

Another dimension of the art-deco scheme is the lack of projecting cornice to finish the structure. Instead, the CGE Building displays a limestone parapet with carved and incised ornamental stone designs.

⁷ WCCB, p. 26.

⁸ Assessment Records, op. cit.

⁹ WCCB, pp. 16, 18.

INTERIOR

As mentioned previously, the building was designed with heavy load-bearing capabilities throughout. Other design features related to this function include a 4,000 lb. Capacity freight elevator and a basement mono-rail system.¹⁰

The ground floor was originally designed for show room purposes with a shipping and receiving department at rear (including a built-in scale, fourth floor spiral chute and shipping platform). Interestingly, entrance to the offices which occupied the entire second floor was gained by a side door on King Street (which would later be numbered 33 King Street). The second floor was finished with battleship green linoleum, acoustic plaster ceiling and, due to the nature of the owner, excellent lighting. The remainder of the building was exclusively used for storage space and had hardened concrete floors. The roof was Celotex insulated slabs with Johns-Manville flat roof finish.¹¹

INTEGRITY

The building occupies its original site but has suffered from many interior alterations to meet the requirements of the building occupants. For example, \$25,000 was spent in 1971 for alterations to the mezzanine to create computer rooms.¹² However, the building has escaped serious design changes except for the moving of the main entrance to the southwest corner of the building in 1971.¹³ The building shows no sign of aging and is in excellent condition.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 16, 18.

¹² BP 438/1971.

¹³ BP 4604/1971.

STREETSCAPE

The former CGE Building is a good example of the type of structure occupying the fringe area of Winnipeg's warehouse district. Along with other nearby structures including theatres and restaurants, this building fits well into the area.

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTOR

Architects for the building were Northwood and Chivers (see Appendix I for biographies). General contractors were Carter-Halls-Aldinger Co. Ltd., a Winnipeg firm responsible for the Banff Springs Hotel and the Civic Auditorium. The list of sub-contractors included many Winnipeg companies along with eastern manufacturers. The beautiful ornamental bronze work was provided by the Architectural Bronze and Iron Work Co., a subsidiary of CGE. Modelling for the bronze work was provided by Mr. Metge of Winnipeg.¹⁴

INSTITUTION

CGE began its Winnipeg operations in c.1893¹⁵ at 350 Main Street. As electrical energy became more common and therefore less expensive and more available to the public, CGE's list of goods increased. The company grew slowly and as a consequence changed locations several times in order to increase space to take advantage of the increased demand for an ever diversifying list of products. Other addresses listed in the Henderson's Directory include 345 Main Street, 272 Portage Avenue and 146 Notre Dame Avenue that the firm occupied from 1906 until its move to 265 Notre Dame Avenue in 1903.

While this structure was built at the beginning of the Great Depression, several factors combined to allow 265 Notre Dame Avenue to be completed while other plans were abandoned. One of the most telling failures was the proposed 17-storey Richardson Office Building at the corner of Portage and Main. James A. Richardson, one of Winnipeg's most influential men had levelled

¹⁴ WCCB, p. 18.

the existing buildings on the site and had begun foundation excavation in late 1929. But as Richardson's economic base became more troubled, his plans were abandoned in early 1930.¹⁶ For CGE, protective tariffs and an economic base not dependent on the wheat economy allowed it to sidestep many of the disastrous effects felt by western Canada's businessmen. Therefore in late 1929 and early 1930, CGE was able to complete its plans for an impressive new home on Notre Dame Avenue. Here CGE's Winnipeg branch carried on its office, warehouse and retail functions for almost 25 years. In 1954 the company moved to a new location at 945 St. James Street and remained there until 1986 when the company's extreme diversification prompted the use of several venues throughout the city for its different departments.

Throughout all this period, CGE remained a retail/distribution entity in Winnipeg, choosing to continue to manufacture its products in factories in Peterborough, Toronto and Montreal. The striking feature of this Company's Winnipeg history is the move from simple household appliances and light fixtures into large industrial ventures such as mining equipment and generators and recently into new fields such as medical systems. CGE has also recently been awarded a \$100M contract to supply ten hydraulic turbines and generators for the Limestone Project on the Nelson River and by 1986 had over \$1B (US) in sales (96% of which was generated within Canada).¹⁷

At 265 Notre Dame Avenue Winnipeg and Central Gas Co. took over the building in 1954 and the structure was renamed the Natural Gas Building. Winnipeg Gas Co. occupied the basement and the first two storeys with the remaining space divided among small companies. In 1958 ownership changed to the Canada Life Assurance Co. while Greater Winnipeg Gas occupied the basement and first two levels, and lawyers and insurance companies completed the tenant list. By 1965 Greater Winnipeg Gas had bought the building and remained at the location until recently when the premises were vacated and the structure stood empty (present condition).¹⁸

¹⁵ Henderson's Directory.

¹⁶ R. Bellan, Winnipeg First Century. (Winnipeg 1978), pp. 202-203.

¹⁷ A. Wyatt, Electric Power: Challenges and Choices. (Toronto 1986), pp. 32 and 52.

¹⁸ Assessment Rolls and Henderson's Directory 1930-1986.

EVENT

There is no significant event connected with this building.

CONTEXT

While it appears strange at the outset that any company should endeavour to spend nearly one-quarter of a million dollars on a new building during the Depression, one must remember that many did not believe the economic conditions would last. As one writer so casually put it in 1931, the Depression was only “a period of business readjustment”.¹⁹ Also important was the fact that eastern manufacturers would not really feel the effects of the Depression until 1931 or 1932. CGE’s new building reflected its belief in its future prosperity, and given the growth of electric power in North America this belief was well-founded. Its choice of art-deco as the style of the building also reflected this belief in the future.

LANDMARK

Situated on one of Winnipeg’s busier intersections, the former CGE Building is highly visible and thanks to its interesting design, is a familiar structure to many.

¹⁹ WCCB, p. 16.

APPENDIX I

Northwood and Chivers

Major George W. Northwood (1876-1959) and Brigadier Major Cyril W.U. Chivers (1879-1969) were both distinguished Winnipeg veterans of the First World War. Major Northwood joined the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, the “Little Black Devils,” in peacetime. After 1914 he served in the 8th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Cyril Chivers, for his part, was a soldier in the First Canadian Mounted Rifles where he rose to the rank of Brigadier Major and, like Major Northwood, was decorated with a Military Cross. Following the war the two veterans formed a partnership and established the architectural firm of Northwood and Chivers.

G.W. Northwood came to Winnipeg in 1905 as a graduate of McGill University. Following the war, in practice with Cyril Chivers, he was a member of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and, locally, he sat on the board of the Manitoba Association of Architects. Additionally, he was the Manitoba representative to the Dominion government for discussion of post-war relief programmes. During this period he was also chairman of the Sanatorium Board and a president of the Manitoba Club.¹

Cyril Chivers arrived in Winnipeg in 1898. He was born in Chislehurst, Kent, and as a young man had studied at the London Polytechnic Institute. Throughout his first year in Canada he worked as an apprentice for Winnipeg architect S. Frank Peters and then, for architect George Browne. The following year, lured by higher pay, he took a post with the Engineering Construction Department of the C.P.R. where he designed several buildings, including the railway station at Banff. In 1910 he left the C.P.R. to open his own practice. Cyril Chivers was a life member of the Engineers’ Institute and a Charter member and fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute

¹ See “Obituary Notices,” Winnipeg Free Press, 15/12/59 and the Winnipeg Telegram, 15/12/59.

of Canada. He was also an Honourary Life Member of the Manitoba Association of Architects and had served the association as president in 1928.²

Northwood and Chivers were responsible for the design of a number of notable Winnipeg public and private buildings constructed in the post World War I period. For instance, among their accomplishments were the Canadian Wheat Board Building, 423 Main (1929), the Civic Auditorium, 444 St. Mary Avenue (1932), and the Federal Building, 269 Main Street (1935). The second pavilion at the Assiniboine Park and Zoo (1929-30), the Bank of Toronto Branch on Academy Road (1934).

The Riverbend School for Girls (ca.1934), and the Women's Tribute Memorial Lodge, 200 Woodlawn (1931) all came from the offices of Winnipeg World War I veterans Major George Northwood and Brigadier Major Cyril Chivers.³

² See Manitoba Association of Architects File on C.W.U. Chivers. Also "Obituary Notice," Winnipeg Free Press, 11/08/69 and John Chivers (son), "A History of the Manitoba Association of Architects" (unpublished manuscript c.1966) pp. 26-27.

³ Northwood and Chivers also designed St. Ignatius Church (1928), the General Electric Office Building (1931), the Winnipeg Post Office addition (ca.1935), and the Singer Sewing Machine Co. (ca.1940). Note the similarity in style between the Civic Auditorium and the Women's Tribute Memorial Lodge.

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Plate 1 – Former Canadian General Electric Building, 265 Notre Dame Avenue, 1970. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)