



65 RORIE STREET

NORTHERN ELECTRIC BUILDING

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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This building is presently enjoying a new lease on life as the Rorie Street Marble Club nightclub. Located at the southeast corner of the intersection of Bannatyne Avenue and Rorie Street, the building's success has played an important role in the revitalization of this district after working hours.

The building was erected in 1928 to serve as an office and distribution centre for the Northern Electric Company. Northern Electric, now Northern Telecommunications, was a large Montreal-based firm that manufactured and distributed a broad range of products from telephone components to wires and cables to electrical apparatus and radio sets. The company, which had operated in Winnipeg since 1908, was enjoying phenomenal growth in the west. In Winnipeg, Northern Electric's business had increased 25% in 1927 alone, which made a new building imperative.¹

The second half of the 1920s saw the economy of western Canada growing quickly. Construction, the barometer of the local economy, was extremely active, which in turn stimulated the supply companies of Winnipeg. The increased use of domestic electrical appliances coupled with a greatly expanded industrial consumption of electrical energy necessitated the installation of additional generating units in the power plants on the Winnipeg River. Electrical power was cheap and abundant so that customers and industry did not have to restrict their demand.² As well, rural electrification went hand-in-hand with the greatly expanded use of telephones in both city and country homes. In 1927 alone, Manitoba Telephone System spent \$1 million expanding its services.³ All this was good business for Northern Electric and its major competitors, Canadian General Electric, Fairbanks-Morse and Canadian Westinghouse.

Gradually, Northern Electric came to specialize in telecommunications equipment. In 1954, MTS observed that Canadians were the highest per capita users of the telephones in the world.⁴

Northern Electric stayed abreast of the communications revolution, disappearing from the Winnipeg picture for a brief period in the 1970s but re-emerging by 1979 as Northern Telecom. It continues to work closely with MTS and the private sector in Manitoba.

The plans for the new office and warehouse in Winnipeg for the Northern Electric Company were drawn up by an architect in the head office in Montreal. J.O. Despatie designed the structure early in 1928 using some standard interior components that had been designed for the firm in 1920.⁵ Pratt and Ross of Winnipeg worked as the associate architects while the general contractors were the large local firm of Carter-Halls-Aldinger.

The steel frame warehouse is three storeys high although a fourth floor was originally planned. It is clad in rough tex brick and trimmed with Tyndall stone and reinforced concrete. Ninety feet square on a concrete foundation, the building cost approximately \$110,000 to construct.⁶ It is fully finished on all four sides, although the rear elevation is irregular and contains the loading docks. The design is simple and straightforward but not without ornamentation. Its angular lines are softened by the stone belt course above the first floor, by the stone detailing and lamp of the front entrance and by the curves of the parapet. Originally designed to be built of limestone, the parapet is made of copper coping which has oxidized to a deep green, the colour also used as trim on the mullions of the windows. The pattern of fenestration is triple-light windows in the three centre bays of the two prominent elevations with simple lights trimmed on each end. The doorway which is offset slightly right in its bay, adds interest. The foundation on the Rorie and Bannatyne Street elevations is faced with limestone.

The first floor was the only one which the public was likely to see, so Northern Electric finished this floor with the more expensive materials. The general office and display area were located here. The front entrance had a stairway of wrought iron, slate landings and treads on a limestone base but by the second floor, it was all plain iron. The handrail was maple as are the floors throughout. The first floor has a 14 foot ceiling with 16 inch square columns. The second storey ceiling is 12 feet high with 14-inch columns while the top floor and storage space made up the basement, which is nearly as well lit as the upper floors. Built to store the heavy loads of

electrical machinery and parts, the warehouse had a heavy freight elevator at the rear of the building.

By the late 1950s, this site had become inconvenient for the Northern Electric Company and they relocated to an industrial park near the airport. 65 Rorie Street became the Powers Investment Building, home to a number of garment manufacturers. It had been vacant since 1975 and owned by Richardson's when redevelopment as the Rorie Street Marble Club was undertaken early in 1984. The third floor is still vacant.

The construction and thirty-year occupation of this warehouse by Northern Electric is a reflection of the extensive technological changes affecting Canadian society between the wars and later. The warehouse itself was built very solidly, using modern steel-frame construction in combination with a design that looked back to historical references rather than forward to the art deco influence of the 1930s.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ “Northern Electric Company in New Home”, Western Canada Contractor, November 1928, p. 12.
- ² Ruben Bellan, Winnipeg First Century: An Economic History, Queenston House Publishing Company, Winnipeg 1978, p. 178.
- ³ Ibid., p. 181.
- ⁴ “Forty-Seventh Annual Report of the Manitoba Telephone System”, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1954, p. 6.
- ⁵ Full plans and specifications for 65 Rorie Street, Northern Electric Building, are housed with the Winnipeg City Archives.
- ⁶ City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 1629, 17 May 1928.

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Plate 1 – Recently completed Northern Electric Building, 65 Rorie Street, 1928. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – Powers Investment Building, 65 Rorie Street, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)