259 PORTAGE AVENUE

PARIS BUILDING

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

October 20, 1980
Terra cotta wraps the steel frame of this eleven-storey skyscraper. The Paris Building is graceful in design as well as magnificent in detail, once described as "the most elegantly clothed of the steel frame skyscrapers in the city."\(^1\)

The skeleton is proclaimed in a series of piers with rather delicate cast iron horizontals on the upper floors, the design of which maximizes the light from the south and east exposures. Because the piers run between each set of windows, the windows seem to follow an upwards pattern with the floors appearing as a mullion between each vertical run. Each double window terminates on the eleventh floor in a vaulting arch which drops onto urn-like capitals of the piers, with the vault richly detailed in shades and textures.

The cornice has a plain parapet rising from a bank of scrolls, urns and flowers which creates the effect of iron cresting or scalloping when viewed from a distance. Beneath the cornice on the west and south corners are cupid figures with wings that swirl into leafy tendrils and double curves; the effect is a transformation of a traditional renaissance figure into an art nouveau form. Generally, however, the details in the terra cotta are classical, particularly on the lower five floors.

The Paris Building was erected in two sections. The first five storeys were completed in 1915\(^2\) and the upper six storeys were added in 1917.\(^3\) The lightwells on the west rear elevation were reconstructed in 1925 but this was hidden from public view and made no difference to the façade.\(^4\) It was not unusual for a building to be designed to accommodate additional storeys when the demand arose. From the original plans, it is obvious that the structure was both designed and erected in two related stages.

Professor Bill Thompson cites the owners of the Paris Building as the Paris Canadian Investment Company.\(^5\) There was never a company by that name operating in Winnipeg, but they may have acted through agents, of which there were many right in the building. Both the 1915 and 1917 building permit lists the owner of the building as L. Honnovat, which is not a French-Canadian name.
but could be French. This person did not reside in Winnipeg.\textsuperscript{6} Beginning in 1918, the National Insurance Company of Paris occupied Room 901 for a number of years which may be the link in the ownership.

The original plans for the structure were designed by Woodman and Carey, an architectural firm that designed several Winnipeg buildings. Partners John Woodman and Raymond Carey both designed on their own and worked in combination with other architectural firms. Woodman himself had designed Eaton's warehouse and with Carey, designed several downtown commercial buildings. Carey was the more prolific; on his own, he designed several fine city residences including portions of the former Aikins house (now Cantor) at 218 Roslyn Road and the R.A. Rogers house, formerly at 64 Nassau. In association with George Northwood, Carey designed the Selkirk Hospital for the Insane while Northwood went on to work with John Chivers. It was no doubt Raymond Carey, whose love of ornamentation is obvious on his smaller works, who actually designed the façade of the Paris Building and his name alone appears as the architect of the 1917 addition.

The contractors were Carter-Halls-Aldinger, a well-known Winnipeg firm that was founded in 1907-08. The three partners, W.H. Carter of North Dakota, Frank Halls of Ontario and A.H. Aldinger also of Ontario, had a combined expertise in construction, design and engineering. Halls had specific training in fire-proofing.\textsuperscript{7} The company had previously worked in rail construction for the three transcontinental railways, also in public works such as bridges and subways.\textsuperscript{8} They grew to become Winnipeg's foremost builders and contractors.

In April 1915, the demolition of the old buildings on the Portage Avenue site took place. These were mainly small shops (a cafe, a tobacconist) and a small commercial block. The foundation concrete was poured in early June and the main structure was completed in August,\textsuperscript{9} with the finishing seemingly complete by December. The building received virtually no press coverage nor space in the construction journals, for two reasons. The world was at war in 1915, and this seemed to consume the press to the point where local news was given little prominence. Furthermore, construction was nearing a standstill as men, materials and capital were pressed into the war effort. Towards the close of 1915, the city's building inspection staff was reduced from 21 people to 10 in
the previous year while the value of permits had dropped by $10,000,000.10

The first five storeys of the Paris Building were completed at a cost of $170,000. The first two floors contained retail space which required street access — a clothing store, a news stand, a furrier, a corset shop and a tea room. Insurance companies and manufacturers' agents dominated the upper floors. The building filled up immediately. A photograph of Portage Avenue in 1916 (see Appendix A) shows the Paris Building with only five storeys. The building is just one of several handsome new blocks on the north side of Portage with the Curry Building also constructed in 1915. With the Bank of Nova Scotia, the Hampole Block, the new Sterling Bank Building, now Fort Garry Trust Building), the Builder's Exchange, the Somerset and Eaton's buildings, Portage Avenue had developed to command the high rents that Main Street had for two decades.

In 1917, six more storeys were added to the Paris Building which made it one of the highest of Winnipeg's 'skyscrapers'. This addition, also made by Carter-Halls-Aldinger, boosted the final cost of the block to $330,000 which was a very steep price for the time.11 During construction there was an accident which caused a pier over the main door to be crushed. Into the upper floors moved the Workman's Compensation Board, mining company offices, financial agents but most of all, insurance agents. There seemed to be innumerable small companies, many of which handled overseas financiers. In 1920 the large company of Dingwall's occupied most of the main floor and stayed for years to come. This was a combination jewellery store, diamond dealer, silversmith and optician all in one highly successful operation. The Western Canada Fire Underwriter's Association kept the entire eleventh floor and stayed there until the early 1970s. By 1922, there were no less than a dozen fire insurance companies in the building.

Beginning c.1920, there was a board room on the tenth floor which could be used by any of the companies in the building but this room disappeared after a few years. In 1925, one of the contracting companies located in the Paris Building, Macaw and MacDonald, reconstructed the light wells on the west side of the building and altered some of the offices.12

The pattern of tenants established in the early years held quite consistently until the mid-1950s.
There was always a good variety of tenants (such as the College of Prayer in 1929, the Consulate of France and the Manitoba Teachers' Society in 1952), but the financial and insurance agencies predominated until some of the big companies such as Monarch Life and Great West Life caused substantial amalgamation. Clothing stores and furriers have dominated the retail space on the main floor for many years. In the last twenty years, a real diversity of occupants has existed with an emphasis on professional people such as lawyers, optometrists and accountants. The basement barber shop gave way to the Paris Food Bar Restaurant which has been there for many years. Now a travel agency, a modelling school, Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation offices, architects, the Metis Land Commission and the Western Jewish News count among the offices. There have been some vacancies in the past years.

The C.I.H.B. report cites an assessment of the building made in 1967. This noted changes to the ground floor façade made in 1940, as well as a thorough modernization of the offices and stores of the first floor. The elevators were altered in 1959 with each floor receiving a new entrance. Renovations to the other floors were sporadic, usually for the needs of a particular tenant. A good deal of the original glass partitions remain. The original marble stairs and 3 foot marble wainscotting in the hallways remain throughout. The wooden handrail of the stairway balustrade forms a continuous and fluid run up the eleven stories, supported by cast iron in an art nouveau pattern. The interior was certainly intended as simple but elegant through the use of good materials and clean lines.

Whether viewed as a whole from a distance, or capturing details in the terra cotta from the street, passers-by continue to appreciate this fine office building for its impressive dignity.
FOOTNOTES--

1. William Paul Thompson  *Winnipeg Architecture 100 Years*

2. City of Winnipeg Building Permits No. 419  25 April, 1915.


4. Thompson, *op. cit.*, gives the impression that the building was erected in three stages — 1915, 1917 and 1925. In fact, the building was completed in 1917, which is not an unusual period for construction. This explains the continuity of design. The 1925 alterations were of an internal nature and were not a planned continuation of the original design.

5. Thompson, *loc. cit.*


11. Permits, *op. cit.*  The 1915 cost was estimated at $170,000 and the 1917 cost was a further $160,000.

12. Permits, *op. cit.*, 25 April, 1925.  The cost was $1,800.  The two partners were Arthur Macaw and Robert J. MacDonald.

Plate 1 – Paris Building, 259 Portage Avenue, ca.1928.  (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 2 – Portage Avenue looking west from Notre Dame, 1916. In the centre is the Curry Building and to the left of that is the Paris Building at five storeys. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)
Plate 3 – A similar shot from 1928. The Paris Building became one of the dominant structures on Portage. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N8887.)
Plate 4 – The offices of the Western Canada Insurance Underwriters’ Association in 1940. These offices were on the top floor, evidenced by the fact that the windows are arched. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N8474 [top] and N8476 [bottom].)
Plate 5 – Architect’s plans, “Portage Avenue Elevation,” 1915. (Courtesy of the City Archives, Plan #419/1915.)
Plate 6 – Detail of the Paris Building, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

Plate 7 – Detail of the Paris Building, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)