

70 ARTHUR STREET – R.J. WHITLA & COMPANY BUILDING
James H. Cadham, 1899, 1904; John H.G. Russell, 1911



One of a handful of Winnipeg Exchange District warehouses that impacts three streetscapes is the R.J. Whitla and Company Building. Built in 1899, by wholesale dry goods dealer R.J. Whitla, this was the third warehouse his company built in less than two decades in the Exchange District, an indication of the growth of his business with the burgeoning markets of Western Canada.

This warehouse displays the familiar elements of the Romanesque Revival style – its use of round arches, its solid brick superstructure resting on a raised stone foundation and its flat roofline. The resulting structures are known for the massiveness of their form. The internal support system of square timber beams and posts and heavy wood floors, known as mill construction, gave these warehouses the strength to withstand heavy loads and the ability to maintain integrity after fires.

The main façades (north, east and west) feature raised rough-cut stone foundations above which are the common clay brick walls of the superstructure. Windows are paired, square headed and feature delicate stone lug sills. They have heavier stone heads on the first to fourth floors and are arched on the fifth floor. Above these openings is a band of corbelled brick (the original roofline of the 1899 warehouse) and the top two floors include square headed windows similar to the lower level openings. Several of the bays on the west side of the building are windowless on most of the storeys and open metal fire escapes are found on both the east and west façades. The entire structure is finished by a modest brick cornice.

The entrance of the original warehouse (facing McDermot Avenue) is stone framed and arched. A second square headed opening further west on the façade was added sometime after 1911. On the east side, the entrance has been modernized and now includes a metal marquee. The dray way, or covered drive, at the south end of the building features a square-headed opening.

The present building was completed in stages; originally it was a four-storey structure fronting McDermot Avenue and Arthur Street. In 1904, a seven-storey addition was built on the south end of the warehouse and included a 3.4-metre wide dray way. At the same time, three more storeys were added to the original warehouse. In 1911, the final phase of construction was completed, adding a large seven-storey addition to the west side and extending the building to King Street. Because care was taken with the design of the subsequent additions, the architectural language of the 1899 warehouse has been continued on all three sides.

The interior is a mixture of old and new materials, conversion to offices and fire protection upgrading was completed in the 1960s and 1970s and has considerably altered the layout of the interior – the actual warehouse space has been divided into small offices on every floor. Some of the original finishes, tin ceilings for example, are still present. Because of its ownership and use as a combined facility, exterior party walls have been cut and doorways created to allow interior access to both buildings.

The structure was designed by James H. Cadham, one of pre-World War I Winnipeg's most prolific designers responsible for dozens of similarly designed warehouses throughout the

Exchange District. Cadham was also responsible for the addition/extension in 1904, but the 1911 western addition was designed by J.H.G. Russell, another well-known local architect.

Irish-born dry goods merchant R.J. Whitla arrived in Winnipeg in 1878 and established a retail shop on Main Street. As with others in the sector, Whitla soon realized the wholesale trade was more lucrative and was soon operating out of a small warehouse on McDermot Avenue. Business success meant the need for large premises and the 1899 structure saw several enlargements. Whitla utilized a network of travelling salesmen and an annual catalogue to provide “British and Foreign” dry goods to retailers in cities and towns as far west as the Rocky Mountains to steadily grow his business. Despite the death of its founder in 1905, the company continued to prosper under former partner D.K. Elliott. It ceased operations in 1931.

The building stood vacant for several years after 1931, but during the mid-1930s, several building permits were taken out to renovate the interior space into various sized offices. As with other warehouses in the Exchange District in the 1940s and beyond, the garment trade was at the forefront of the new occupancy. Representatives of R.J. Whitla continued to own the warehouse at 70 Arthur Street until 1946, although the company had long since vacated the building. In 1947, the building was purchased by Harry Silverberg, manufacturer and president of Silpit Industries Limited, Canadian Sportswear Limited and Gunn Garment Limited. He maintained this ownership until the early 2000s.

Elements of the building that would require approval if alterations were planned are:

Exterior:

- The elongated rectangular plan of the warehouse occupying the width of one block with prominent façades fronting Arthur and King streets and McDermot Avenue
- Exposed, roughly-dressed limestone block base with buff brick superstructure
- Multiple entrances on each façade, including round-arched north double doors, and the east entrance flanked by smooth-cut limestone with a metal Modernist marquee
- East/west dray way running the width of the south end of the building
- Regularly spaced openings; windows with square heads save the round-arched windows of the fifth level, featuring limestone lug sills and lintels and inset panels below

- Details including decorative corbelled brick cornice, corbelled brick banding atop the fifth and seventh floors, pilasters, metal fire escapes on the east and west façades, flagpole atop the roof, etc.

Interior:

- High ceilings with ornamental tin panels
- Plank wood flooring
- Some exposed cast-iron columns
- Arched openings connecting the building to 54 Arthur and sliding metal fire doors
- Simple wooden banisters on staircases
- Plank wood washroom stalls
- Main floor with some wainscoting and decorative tin paneling encasing the freight elevator