

**213 NOTRE DAME AVENUE – ELECTRIC RAILWAY CHAMBERS
(NOTRE DAME CHAMBERS)**
Pratt and Ross; Charles S. Frost (Chicago), 1912



The 11-storey Electric Railway Chambers, one of Winnipeg's earliest skyscrapers, was a bold architectural statement announcing the success and self-perceived impregnability of the controversial Winnipeg Electric Railway Company (WERC).

WERC's achievements were based on its role as a private power and transportation monopoly. As such, the firm had an uneasy relationship with municipal politicians and citizens who chafed at their increasing dependence on WERC's gas, electrical and streetcar services.

The firm, formed in 1892, was known originally as the Winnipeg Electric Street Railway, and later (1924) simply as the Winnipeg Electric Company. Its principals, William Mackenzie and capitalist James Ross, obtained an exclusive 35-year franchise to operate an electrical streetcar system in the city. Mackenzie subsequently joined with fellow railway contractor Donald Mann to develop the Canadian Northern transcontinental railway. Both were knighted for their efforts.

Ross, an engineer who had worked on railway construction with Mackenzie and Mann, invested in urban transportation systems throughout North and South America and the United Kingdom.

By 1906, WERC had absorbed competing power and transportation companies in the Winnipeg region and was supplying electricity to the city from two main sources – a steam generating plant at Assiniboine Avenue and Main Street, and a new hydro-electric plant on the Winnipeg River.

The firm reaped large profits by selling its power at steep rates. Winnipeggers rebelled by voting in a 1906 referendum for City-owned hydro-electric development. However, it was 1911 before the public utility could begin actual delivery of power. In the interim, the City failed in attempts to acquire WERC.

Thus in 1912, WERC was still operating the streetcar monopoly, supplying gas to industrial and residential customers, and providing electricity under exclusive franchises with municipalities adjacent to Winnipeg.

Through Mackenzie, Canadian Northern Railway veterans Ralph Benjamin Pratt and Donald Aynsley Ross were commissioned to design the Electric Railway Chambers at the northeast corner of Notre Dame Avenue and Albert Street in the central business district.

Pratt, an English-trained architect, arrived in Winnipeg in 1892, worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway, then joined Canadian Northern in 1901. The Winnipeg-born Ross also joined Canadian Northern that year, becoming the railway's terminal engineer by 1905. The Pratt-Ross partnership began in 1906, undertaking design or supervision of railway, commercial and residential projects across Western Canada.

Completed in 1913 by Carter-Halls-Aldinger Company, the project's general contractor, the Electric Railway Chambers cost \$800,000, about \$300,000 above estimates.

The building is a blend of modern construction technology and Italian Renaissance design. Its steel skeleton, fireproofed with hollow tile, rises from a caisson foundation resting on solid rock.

Polished granite along the main floor of the Notre Dame and Albert façades gives way to an elegant wrap of light-coloured terracotta alternating with modestly darker shades on the pilasters. These columns, which feature both canted and annulated mouldings, rise to large arches above the tenth floor. Their capitals are marked by a series of lion statuettes and a continuous belt of gargoyles, which encompasses both windows and piers. The deep, dentilated, bracketed and heavily-ornamented cornice covers the eleventh storey; windows appear at this level only on the buff-brick north and east elevations.

Large single windows in the shape of vertical and horizontal rectangles punctuate the first two storeys of the Albert and Notre Dame façades. A series of round decorative lights appears above the ground-floor windows and two Notre Dame entranceways. The building's name is inscribed on both facings underneath a substantial cornice that delineates the second and third storeys. Above are pairs of flat-headed windows separated by elaborately detailed spandrels and piers with shields, quatrefoils and other mouldings. The tenth floor is highlighted by cartouches, larger quatrefoils, barley-sugar columns supporting arches over the windows, and projecting discs. Some 6,000 lights originally ran the length of the building's columns, adding to its show-piece nature.

The interior features marble flooring and wainscoting. Doors and trim are of hollow metal with mahogany veneer. The original cage elevators were finished in ornamental iron and bronze.

WERC initially occupied the basement and first two floors of the building but by 1944 had expanded into about half of the space. The remainder was leased to various professional and financial firms including the Monarch Life Company and Touche Ross accountants.

The Winnipeg Electric Company retained its urban transportation monopoly, successfully managing the transition to gasoline-powered and trolley buses, and competed against the Province's and City's power utilities until 1953. That year, following a period of negotiation and political controversy, the Province purchased the firm's plants, distribution facilities, and bus system. The Greater Winnipeg Transit Commission was formed, operating from the Electric

Railway Chambers until the 1960s. By 1955, arrangements were concluded on the distribution of power generation and delivery responsibilities between the Province's and City's utilities.

Until recent years, Montreal Trust was a major occupant of 213-219 Notre Dame, along with lawyers, accountants and consulting engineers. Some interior alterations and modernization have occurred but much of the original design remains. In 1987, the building's exterior was cleaned and repaired by its owner, Triple S Realty Inc., with assistance from the Winnipeg Core Area Initiative.