

## 428 PORTAGE AVENUE – POWER BUILDING

*Pratt & Ross (1928)*



World War I was one of the major contributing factors to the relatively sudden end of Winnipeg's early 20<sup>th</sup> century expansion era. In approximately a decade, the small urban centre had grown into one of the country's leading cities and at the fore of Western Canada's economic growth. After the War and a short period of economic upswing, Winnipeg's economy witnessed modest expansion up to the disaster of the 1929 stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression.

After 1905, Winnipeg's Portage Avenue had grown into the city's major commercial centre, with office buildings and retail properties locating on both sides of the avenue. T. Eaton Company and the Hudson's Bay Company both chose to open mammoth department stores on Portage Avenue, Eaton's officially opening on July 15, 1905 and the Hudson's Bay Company on November 18, 1926.

One of the few blocks on Portage Avenue that did not see significant development prior to 1930 was the south side of Portage Avenue between Kennedy and Vaughan streets. In 1918, there were still four vacant lots, a modest 2½-storey mixed use retail/residential structure and the Dominion Bank on the corner of Kennedy Street. But in 1928, the six-storey Power Building was constructed on the corner of Vaughan Street.

This limestone-clad retail/office building is an excellent and locally rare example of the Modern Gothic or Late Gothic Revival Style which can be traced back to the medieval, especially church, architecture of England and France. Emerging as a popular North American style in the early 1900s, familiar elements include pointed arches, intricate tracery, buttresses, spires, oriel and bay windows, and pinnacles. By the 1920s, the style had refined – the use of reinforced concrete and steel frame construction allowed for taller, stronger buildings. Gothic ornamentation was simplified in favour of clean, straight lines and reduced ornamental treatments. The Wheat Pool Building, 423 Main Street (built in 1929), the Manitoba Telephones Building, 166 Portage Avenue (1930) and the Federal Building, 269 Main Street (1935) are three other excellent examples.

The partnership of Ralph Benjamin Pratt (1872-1950) and Donald Aynsley Ross (1878-1956) was responsible for the design of the Power Building. Pratt was born and trained in England, Ross was born in Winnipeg and educated in Toronto. The pair both worked in the railway sector for the Canadian Northern Railway prior to forming their architectural firm in 1906. The firm remained active into the 1940s. Among their more notable works are: Garry Block (Belgica Block), 290 Garry St. (1911) – Grade III; Electric Railway Chambers, 213 Notre Dame Ave. (1913) – Grade II; Scott Block, reconstruction after a fire, 272 Main St. (1915) – Grade III; Northern Electric Building (with J.O. Despatie of Montreal), 65 Rorie St. (1928) – Grade III; Sherbrook Pool, 381 Sherbrook St. (1930) – Grade III; and Structural Engineers and Mechanical Equipment Supervisors for the Winnipeg Civic Auditorium (now Provincial Archives of Manitoba), 200 Vaughan St. (1932-1933).

The building measures approximately 39.7 x 26.8 x 25.0 metres, is built on a reinforced concrete and steel frame and its exterior walls are clad in stone (front [north] and west façades) and brick (rear [south] and east façades). Total cost of construction of the building was \$345,000.

The building has two main façades, north and west and both are similarly designed. The Portage Avenue (north) elevation is divided into five bays, the ground floor bays filled with large square-headed openings and several recessed and lighted entrances. A plain stone belt course divided the ground floor from the second floor and ran the entire length of the Portage Avenue and Vaughan Street façades. On the upper floors, stepped stone pilasters created vertical emphasis, the pilasters embellished with stylized lettering and designs on the fifth and sixth floors. Windows on each of the upper floors were paired within each bay, originally double-hung units with undivided glass panes. The flat roofline was animated with raised sections above and between the pilasters, creating a crenellated appearance.

The west or Vaughan Street side carried on the design elements of the front façade and again featured recessed entrances. Much of the ground floor has seen alteration as new tenants modernized their entrances. The upper portion of the building, however, remains almost completely unchanged.

The rear of the building is clad in common clay brick and features numerous square headed windows on all levels. The east side is partially hidden by the neighbouring building; the visible section to the rear is also clad in clay brick and features plain windows in rectilinear openings.

The building's interior has changed significantly over time, with upgrades and renovations changing the layout and finishes of almost the entire building save for portions of the basement and the metal and wood accented rear staircase.

The Power Building was a rental property originally owned by local real estate, finance and insurance company Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner. The original and main tenant of the building was the Winnipeg Electric Company, which used the space as a showroom and retail store, promoting its new line of gas and electrical appliances beyond its lucrative streetcar service. The Portage Avenue location was perfect for the company, which remained in the Power Building into the mid-1950s. Tenancy over the years has been extremely diverse.

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

Exterior:

- Six-storey stone clad building with flat roof located at the southeast corner of Portage Avenue and Vaughan Street, its main facade facing north onto Portage Avenue and west onto Vaughan Street, its east facade partially hidden by the neighbouring building and its south facade facing the back lane;
- Its main (north) facade divided into five bays, a recessed doorway with stepped pointed arch frame at the east end, the upper floors with stepped stone pilasters with stylized lettering and designs on the fifth and sixth floors, paired rectilinear window openings on each floor and flat roofline finished by the raised, squared heads of the pilasters;
- Its Vaughan Street facade (west) with its stepped pilasters, paired windows in rectilinear openings on the upper floors and flat roof with raised, squared pilaster heads;
- The visible uninterrupted brick wall of the east elevation; and
- Its rear (south) facade with common clay brick walls and windows in rectilinear openings on all floors.

Interior:

- Metal and wood finishes of the mid-building staircase.