



575 PORTAGE AVENUE

KIRKWOOD BLOCK (CLUB MOROCCO)

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – FEBRUARY 2009



575 PORTAGE AVENUE KIRKWOOD BLOCK (CLUB MOROCCO)

Date of Construction: 1912

Building Permit: 1978/1912

Architect: Atchison, John Danley

Contractor: Davidson Brothers

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

Conspicuously located on a busy downtown corner, the Kirkwood Block has been an important structure, offering retail and office space for nearly 100 years.

The front (east) façade, clad in dark brick, is divided on the ground floor into a number of retail shops, each with its own entrance and large display windows. A doorway at the east end of the building gives access to the upper floor. A metal cornice visually divides the first and second floors. The second storey features large, square headed windows set in ornamentally treated arched windows. Visually separating these openings are oversized brackets supported the completed entablature above. The building's southwest corner is angled and the materials and design of the front façade is continued the entire length of the west side.



Front (south) façade, 2008

The rear (north) façade is clad in common clay brick and features an open metal staircase from the second floor. Much of the east side of the building is covered by a neighbouring structure.

The two-storey structure cost an estimated \$50,000 to complete in 1912.¹ It is a good example of a Two-part Commercial Style, popular throughout North America's urban centres. Buildings could use a combination of stylistic elements or include no ornamentation depending on the developer and the available capital. The most obvious feature was the visual division of the ground floor and the upper floors, reflecting the division of use of the interior – most often commercial on the ground floor and residential on the upper floor or floors. There are examples of this style throughout the city.

The building features classically inspired detailing but its modest design limited the scope of this detailing. Similar to many other blocks in Winnipeg built in the pre-1915 era, it was a sturdy, well-designed and architecturally simple structure intended to serve a variety of retail and business tenants.

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. Alterations have made serious changes to the original design, including the closing of many of the original storefronts, the renovation of others and the closure of many second storey windows. Much of the original ornamental detailing, however, has not been changed.

The architect of this block was well-known local designer John D. Atchison (1870-1959). Born in Monmouth, Illinois, Atchison was educated in Chicago, studying architecture at the Chicago Art Institute and the Chicago Manual Training School.² In 1895, he opened his own practice in Chicago that continued until the early 1900s. He worked on the staff of the



Rear (north) and west façades, 2008

World's Columbian Exposition and for the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad. His commissions brought him to Winnipeg and by 1905 the city's prosperity and future prospects prompted him to relocate his business there.³

A list of some of the more prominent local buildings designed by J.D. Atchison over his career includes: Wardlow Apartments, 544 Wardlaw Avenue (1905, Grade II), Kennedy Building (Mitchell-Copp), 315 Portage Avenue (1906, Grade II), Dennistoun House, 166 Roslyn Road (1908, Grade III), N.W.C.T.A. Building, 291 Garry Street (1908, Grade III), Paterson Block, 54 Donald Street (1909, Grade II), Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Building, 234 Portage Avenue (1909, Grade II), Canada Permanent Building, 296-98 Garry Street (1909, Grade II), Maltese Cross Building, 66 King Street (1909, Grade III), Chamber of Commerce Building (Great-West Life Building), 177 Lombard Avenue (1911, Grade II) Carlton Building, 354 Portage Avenue (1912, Grade III), Boyd Building, 388 Portage Avenue (1912, Grade III), Union Tower, 191 Lombard Avenue (1912-13, Grade II), Merchants' Bank Branch, 1386 Main Street (1913, Grade III), Curry Building, 233 Portage Avenue (1915, Grade II) and the Bank of Hamilton Building, 395 Main Street (1916-18, Grade I).⁴ In 1923, Atchison left Winnipeg for Pasadena, California, and continued to practice there, adopting the Spanish Colonial style for his residential work. He died in 1959.⁵ He has been given 20 points by the Historical Buildings Committee.



Rear (north) and west façades, 2008

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

The original owner of this block, as named on the City of Winnipeg Building Permit was the North Western Investment Company, but from 1923 to 1956, R.J. Kirkwood (druggist) and Amy Kirkwood (spinster) were listed as owners and tenants.⁶ The pair continued to own the property until the mid-1960s when Harry Smith's Club Morocco became a major tenant, which became a popular night spot into the 1980s.

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

Under the Historical Buildings By-law, this building meets a number of important criteria:

- its historical importance- representative of the type of mixed-use structure built by developers and local businessmen throughout Winnipeg's downtown and surrounding neighbourhoods during the pre-World War I era;
- its associations- its long-term connections to druggist R.J. Kirkwood;
- its design- a good example of the Two-part Commercial style;
- its architect- J.D. Atchison was a respected and important practitioner;
- its location- defines an important intersection and contributes greatly to the historic streetscape of two major arteries in its neighbourhood; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display some of their original elements and design.



Front (south) and west façades, 1978

ENDNOTES:

- 1 City of Winnipeg Building Permit, #1978/1912.
- 2 Winnipeg Telegram, September 18, 1906, p. 55; and F.H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba (Winnipeg, MB: S.J. Clarke, 1913), Vol. II, p. 374.
- 3 F.H. Schofield, op. cit., p. 374.
- 4 Compiled from City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Files; J. Wade, Manitoba Architecture to 1940 (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 1976); Winnipeg Telegram, September 18, 1906, p. 55; Winnipeg Tribune, December 21, 1907; and F.H. Schofield, op. cit., pp. 374-75.
- 5 The Emerson Court House and Town Hall Building (Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Historic Resources Branch, 1985), pp. 8-11.
- 6 City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 13050773000, 1920-1990.