

Conserving True Collegiate Gothic

by Colin Tennent

As Saskatchewan celebrates its centennial this year, it will also celebrate the completion of one of Canada's major heritage conservation projects.

The College Building is the central edifice at the University of Saskatchewan and the centre of the best set of collegiate gothic buildings in the country. The \$20 million rehabilitation and re-opening will be celebrated this fall.

Stories from the Past

The College Building has some fine stories encased within its greystone exterior. When it opened in 1912, seven years after Saskatchewan became a province, the College Building housed half the university: the labs, classrooms and offices of the chemistry, physics and biology departments; the library; and the president's office.

In the basement of the building was the gymnasium and, attesting to the central importance of agriculture at the university, agricultural rooms for testing milk and for making butter and cheese.

The departments of physics and chemistry obtained their own buildings in the 1920s so a new college, Household Science, moved into the old physics lab. It had poor facilities — one sink, two new Perfection coal stoves, a small ice box, a blackboard, a wall clock and two large cupboards. Bunsen burners under metal covers were used for cooking.

The library had problems too - books and periodicals were in six different locations, including three outside the building.

The Faculty Club began meeting in the College Building every Friday with the minutes from these meetings concluding "adjourned with the usual refreshments."

Later the College of Education occupied the building, as did the Department of Art and Art History. Eli Bornstein, well-known structural artist, had his first studio in the tile-floored dairy room. Professors of Arts and Science had offices there until the early 1960s, including two professors in small offices off Convocation Hall, novelist Ed McCourt and political scientist and humorist Norman Ward.

By the 1960s, the building solely housed administration and year by year it was carved into smaller and smaller spaces. For years it was called the Administration Building. If Convocation Hall could Talk...

Convocation Hall – added to the building so large meetings of farmers could be accommodated on campus – has a full history.

In 1933, the university's first music professor began the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra in that room and soon Convocation Hall became the premier music venue at the university. The room was known for its excellent acoustics and was a favourite recording location for the CBC.

In the 1950s, famous Canadian composer Murray Adaskin performed music in the room while Eli Bornstein displayed his art. On one occasion, while Adaskin was turning pages of music for a pianist, he rolled up the music score and swatted a resident swooping bat. The trio received applause.

The first university film society was held in Convocation Hall, as well as lectures, examinations, registration, convocations and memorials for notable faculty members.

Architectural Glory

Wrapped around its rich history of students and faculty is its outstanding architecture. Built in the Collegiate Gothic style, it was designed by Montréal architects Brown and Vallance, who were hired on the basis of their Collegiate Gothic Medical Building at McGill (the university wanted to hire Canadian architects).

It is a beautiful building. Construction began in 1909 and in 1910 Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier laid a cornerstone in the front façade.

A Parks Canada report indicates that the central five Collegiate Gothic buildings on the University of Saskatchewan campus are the best grouping in Canada, with the College Building being the focal building of the five. All bordered on the central open area and its tree-lined extension.

When Brown and Vallance designed the university layout, the College Building was situated on the highest point, on a slight slope up from the river. An axial line drawn from a small ravine called Devil's Dip (home of beer and wiener roasts in days of yore) ends at the College Building's main entrance. That line also means the campus is off kilter by 7% from the provincial and the city grid systems, and even featured curves.

As Collegiate Gothic, the building is more modest than its contemporaries on other campuses, having no central tower though there is an elevation to mark the main entrance. The building is both ordered, balanced on its front and most visible façade (and whose view has not been impaired in over 90 years) and romantic, with gargoyles, oriel windows and a Gothic arch, all echoes of the ancient English universities of Cambridge and Oxford. The handsome façade creates a sense of both harmony and peace.

Arguably, after the Saskatchewan Legislative Building, the College Building is the most important public building in the province. The building was designated provincially in 1982 and federally in 2000.

Problems, Problems, Problems...

The College Building was partly closed in 1984 and entirely sealed off in 1997. However, even while the building was closed, Nobel Plaza, honouring two Nobel Prize recipients who had taught at the university, was built with an unobtrusive ramp entrance to the building.

But the building had two main faults: a roof held up for years by a jungle of beams and reinforced concrete columns in the basement that were being eaten away by sulphate, some of them reduced to half size.

The problems were there from the beginning. The construction of the College Building utilized a new technology — reinforced concrete — but there were difficulties within a year.

The architect said the builder was poor at implementing the technology. However, the architect may not have understood required concrete strengths and hence the frames were inadequate so that slumping

was present from the beginning. The roof was propped up at an early date. When some concrete columns weakened, new steel beams were installed but were only temporary. (The first great experimental success at the university was Thorburger Thorvaldson's development of sulphate-resistant cement).

Beginning in 1969, a series of engineering studies analysed the structure's weaknesses, which are now being fixed. The central consultant charged with solving the problems was engineering firm Cochrane Engineering, with architectural firm Friggstad Downing as secondary consultants.

The exterior of the building remains untouched. The stone exterior is in fine condition. Most of the original slate was reinstalled on the roof after having been removed and stored. The need for thermal windows is being met on the inside of the building.

The original basement floor was torn out. Steel beams set on new concrete slabs support the new structure. The steel will be on the inside of the building and on each side of the existing concrete columns, some of which will be preserved as an example of that early technology.

The heritage value of the building has been preserved — both the exterior and important interior features. Convocation Hall will have modest interventions: a larger stage, opened skylights and refinished floors. In the main corridors of the building, important terra cotta memorials of university men who fought in World War I will be preserved, as will the main stairwells.

The interior spaces will be larger, more like those in the original building. Acoustic tiles will be removed so office spaces will be closer to their original height. The ceiling will now be above the window line.

Transoms will be kept and so, where possible, will all original doors. Brass hardware will complete the new/old style.

Success and Celebration

The rehabilitated College Building will house administration and a boardroom on the second floor, while student admissions will inhabit one wing of the main floor — making it, in part, an Administration Building again. There will be two new cultural occupants, the Museum of Antiquities and the Kenderdine Gallery, containing the university art collection.

The date of occupancy is fall 2005, in time to celebrate Saskatchewan's Centenary in 2005, Saskatoon's Centenary in 2006 and the university's Centenary in 2007 making the College Building a building for all birthdays.

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