

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

The Saskatchewan Association of Architects Celebrates Its Centennial

POST WAR REGENERATION: 1945 to 1965 | Third of a Four Part Series for WORTH Magazine

World War II brought change throughout the world in all aspects of life - from government to literature to clothing to life styles to construction. One of the most dramatic changes to affect the building industry was the creation of new materials.

Some, like aluminum and plastics that had been perfected for military use during the war, were now incorporated into new building designs. And what little remained of the stripped down classical styles of the 1930s, commonly called Art Deco or Art Moderne, also fell by the way as stark sleek lines came into prominence. Flat surfaces, horizontal bands and vertical sightlines, with a major increase in the use of glass, became the norm. Regina's Financial Building, designed by Black, Larson & McMillan, is an excellent example of this.

Experimentation with new building products progressed rapidly, while traditional building materials such as brick and stone became standardized and monochromatic, losing their richness in variance. Never again would there be a Chateau-esque-styled Bessborough Hotel, or a massive limestone Legislative Build-



The Hill Avenue Shopping Centre, established in 1953-54, was one of the province's earliest shopping malls. It was anchored by a food store and a garage.

ing with its Classical columns and distinctive dome. In the new order, the veneer curtain wall replaced the bearing wall.

Saskatchewan's architectural community was not immune to these changing times and materials. Both government and private sector architects embraced the new reality, though the restricted economics of the post-War reconstruction years limited new construction to largely the basics: new houses, schools and hospitals for the growing population. The Baby Boom era had arrived, and much of what was designed and constructed in those early years addressed the needs of that new segment of Canadian society. This need for new construction was quickly re-



flected in the membership of the SAA, which increased from an all-time low of 11 in 1945 to 67 in 1965. Starting in 1949, the number of resident architects began to steadily increase. E.J. McCudden

registered that year – the first new architect to join the Association since Ken Black in 1941. He was followed in the 1950s by an onslaught of 57 additional members, including the first two women: Joy Ann Sundeen (1950) and Ada Lou Watson (1951). A second wind had blown into the SAA.

The new era also required showpieces and legacies. In both Saskatoon and Regina, the federal government erected new Post Offices in the 1950s. These sleek rectangular boxes, with not a trace of past design elements,



were embraced by almost everyone as a fine representation of all that was new and exciting in post-War Saskatchewan.

Residential buildings from the post-War era showed a mixture of designs. Some like the hundreds of what became known as wartime houses, were extremely simplified and stripped down, erected quickly to accommodate the returned soldiers and their new families. In the late 1950s and early 60s, as the pressure for new houses waned, the introduction of the three-room bungalow became a popular option for growing families, or those wishing to upgrade from the old pre-War two storey house.

Older architecture, though perfectly fine and durable, was equated with the past, the hard times of the Dirty Thirties, or the War. New architecture turned its

back on the past, and those who moved into these new homes were deemed to be modern and progressive. The social pressure to put the past behind was everywhere, and hence it was no surprise that Saskatchewan architects reflected this trend in their residential, commercial and institutional buildings.

While many new buildings were erected throughout the country, one emerging building form that had a massive impact on the post-War landscape was the shopping mall, built hand-in-hand with newly developing suburbs. As cities expanded well beyond their core downtown commercial areas, the suburbs became focal points for merchants who grasped this economic opportunity.

One of the earliest shopping malls to be erected in

Saskatchewan, the Hill Avenue Shopping Centre, featured a string of 10 stores with a single row of 25 parking stalls in front. Later malls were generally L-shaped complexes sharing a common facade and massive parking lot. Over time, sheltered walkways in front of the stores enabled customers to park and roam inside a climate controlled corridor. The arrival of the shopping centre marked the beginning of a major and protracted debate on the function, design and viability of downtown throughout North America. W

• **By Frank Korvemaker, S.A.A. (Hon.)**

The sleek vertical lines and glass curtain wall are dramatic features of Regina's Financial Building, erected in 1959.

Francis Henry Portnall FRAIC: A Half-Century of Architectural and Artistic Achievement



Portrait of Frank Portnall ca. 1929
[source: National Reference Book, Vol. 3, 1929-30, p.352]

FRANCIS HENRY PORTNALL, who passed away in 1976,¹ was a prominent British-trained architect who practiced in Regina for more than five decades (1908 to 1961). His architectural career encompassed a succession of popular architectural styles such as Collegiate Gothic, Tudor Revival, Georgian Revival, Arts & Crafts, Art Deco and Modernism. While he is perhaps best known for his designs of educational, ecclesiastical and residential buildings, his design for the 1936 Dominion

(Federal) Government Building and the Provincial Law Courts building in Regina (1961) are regarded by many as his major architectural achievements.

The Early Years

Portnall was born on the Isle of Wight, England on 3 May 1886 and at the age of 14 years travelled to London to study. He articulated with the prominent London architectural firm of Pite & Balfour (in 1901-05), then moved to Carlisle to work as assistant to cathe-



Winning design for proposed City Hall, Winnipeg, 1913 [source: SAB R-P 3.4]





Portnall's residence (from 1927) at 109 Angus Crescent, Regina [author; 2009]

dral architect, James H. Martindale (1905-06), before deciding to emigrate to Canada in late 1906. He settled in Winnipeg where he soon became the representative of the Toronto office of Darling & Pearson and was sent to Regina to supervise the construction of their design for the Metropolitan Methodist Church (now Knox-Metropolitan United Church) on Lorne Street. In 1907, Portnall returned to Winnipeg to assist James B. Mitchell, Chief Architect of the School Board in that city, but returned to Regina the following year to join the office of Clemesha & Coltman as an assistant.²

A Fruitful Partnership

Portnall was in partnership with Frederick Chapman Clemesha until Clemesha moved to California in 1923. The partnership won early recognition when their design for the Manitoba Legislative Building in 1912 placed second in competition. Their status was further enhanced by winning the competition for Winnipeg's City Hall in 1913 (unfortunately, the money bylaw was defeated by ratepayers and the competition abandoned). The architects were the toast of the Regina Board of Trade in 1913!

Although both Clemesha and Portnall, like many of their British col-

leagues, interrupted their careers to serve overseas from 1915 to 1919, the partnership was a very successful one. They designed many schools, residences and other buildings, mainly throughout Saskatchewan. Although officially credited to Clemesha, they also collaborated in winning the competition for the Canadian Battlefields Memorials in France and Belgium (1921). While it was intended that this design would be erected at six significant Canadian battlefields, the memorial was erected only at St. Julien, Belgium (it was unveiled in 1923).³

This iconic monument, which depicts a brooding soldier with arms reversed, would generate considerable local controversy four years later when Regina initiated a cenotaph competition for Victoria Park. The winning design by R.W.G. Heughan of Montreal utilized a brooding soldier image similar to that designed by Clemesha in 1921.

The rules of the competition stipulated that the design was to be original; Clemesha, then living in California, was not happy with the jury's decision and neither were many of Saskatchewan's architects, including Frank Portnall, who protested to the city and the SAA! While the assessors agreed to withdraw their recommendation, the city proceeded with erecting the cenotaph. One need not go to Belgium to see a likeness to the original work of Clemesha and Portnall.

In 1928 Portnall was one of fifteen competitors who submitted proposals for



Willson Stationery Store, Regina (1948) [source: RAIC Journal, xxv, Aug. 1948, 277]

the Saskatoon War Memorial Cenotaph. His scheme for a tall granite plinth incorporating a public clock face was successful, and is perhaps the only war memorial in Canada to include the device of a working timepiece in the architectural form of the monument.⁴

What's in a Name?

After Clemesha moved to California, Portnall continued on his own until Daniel

H. Stock (1915-1996) joined him in 1945 to form **Portnall & Stock**.⁵ Robert Beattie Ramsay (1924-2001) joined Portnall & Stock after graduating in 1949 from the University of Toronto and by 1950 the firm became known as **Portnall, Stock, Ramsay & Associates**. Stock and

Ramsay left the partnership in early 1951 to form Stock, Ramsay & Associates which in turn was dissolved in December 1958.⁶ [L-P, 21 May 1951, p.3]

Once again FHP practiced on his own until Everhard Hendrik (Henry) Grolle (1926-2005) joined him in 1958 to form **Portnall & Grolle**. The firm continued under this name until 1961 when it became **Portnall, Grolle & Lucas** when Antonie Gerrit Lucas became a partner (Lucas moved



St. Julien Memorial, Belgium (source: www.veterans.gc.ca/content/Memorials/mages/StJulien_L.jpg)



Saskatoon Cenotaph [source: Bruce A. Johnson, www.panoramio.com/photo/43310862]





Dominion Government Building, Regina [author; October 2010]

to the USA in 1966 and became a member of AIA in 1968). The name reverted to Portnall & Grolle in 1966 and Henry Grolle became sole Principal.

The firm of Portnall & Stock can be credited with introducing some of the most progressive early modernist works in Western Canada, including the distinctive 1948 designs for the International Harvester Showroom at Yorkton (likely demolished) and the transparent glass cube for the Willson Stationery Store (still in use although the façade has been altered) on the Frederick W. Hill Mall in Regina.⁷

Federal Building, Regina

In the summer of 1934, the federal government appointed a “board of Regina architects composed of F.H. Portnall, F.B. Reilly and J.H. Puntin, for the purpose of drawing plans...”⁸ for Regina’s federal building. Reilly acted as the official architect dealing with the department of public works in Ottawa, including the specifications; Puntin supervised construction of the building; while Portnall “designed the building and prepared the drawings.”

The building was designed in what

was then known as the “restrained modern” style.⁹ A central tower rises 130 feet above sidewalk level. At the time, this was slightly higher than the McCallum-Hill building but shorter than the Hotel Saskatchewan.

“There are two reasons why Regina’s new \$464,000 federal building has that imposing tower rising from the centre of its modernistic mass. One is artistic, one practical.”¹⁰ Artistically, without the tower the building would have been dwarfed by the nearby Hotel Saskatchewan, thereby losing much of its imposing appearance (interestingly, the building is now dwarfed by the Saskatchewan Power Building, Avord Tower and several other buildings). The more practical reason is that the tower houses the elevator machinery and generators and people can climb the stairs and “gaze out from the tower over the city.”¹¹ In the same newspaper article, when asked about the architectural style, Portnall referred to it as “modern architecture of a restrained type, exemplifying modern handling of familiar forms.” We now refer to this Art Deco style as “Art Moderne.”

The Federal Building was opened officially in April 1937.

The National Sites and Monuments Board declined an application by the Saskatchewan Historical Society to erect a plaque in the Federal Building recognizing the site of Louis Riel’s trial in 1885.

Provincial Law Courts Building, Regina

The Provincial Law Courts building (a proposed plan was prepared by Portnall in 1932 which established the concept of a central core of court rooms flanked by corridors) on Victoria Avenue was an integral part of the visionary Civic Centre plan prepared for the Regina Chamber of Commerce in 1960 by architects Portnall & Grolle. The area, bounded by Victoria, 12th, McIntyre and Scarth, included the Civic Health Centre at 12th Avenue and McIntyre Street (Portnall, Stock, Ramsay & Associates; 1951) and also was to include a new city hall (Joseph Pettick; 1976), new public library



Saskatchewan Court of Queen's Bench building, Regina [author; August 2011]

(Izumi, Arnott & Sugiyama;1962) and civic auditorium (not constructed). The plan included demolition of Knox-Metropolitan United Church, the YWCA (demolished 1970), Masonic Temple and Carnegie library (demolished 1961) on the 1900 block of Lorne Street.¹² Knox-Met and the Masonic Temple still remain.

Officially opened in June 1961, the new courthouse was described by one architect at the time as “dispens[ing] with plagiarism of long-past architectural styles...The separate porte cochere, besides sheltering the entrance, calls attention and gives direction to approaching traffic.”¹³ The low massive form still creates an overall impression of dignity.

Professional Involvement

Frank Portnall applied to the newly-formed Saskatchewan Association of Architects on 12 April 1912 and was granted membership No. 47. He served as the Association's President in 1928-29, and was presented with a life membership in 1961 upon his retirement.¹⁴ Frank Portnall was nominated as a Fellow of the R.A.I.C. in 1945.

A Man of Culture

A talented and respected architect, Frank Portnall, or 'Port' as he was often called by his friends, was active in Regina's artistic and musical community.

Port was an accomplished portrait and landscape painter with many of his works being owned by Regina residents. He was a founder of the Regina Sketch Club (formed in 1920 and still



Frank Portnall
(photo possibly taken in the 1960s) with ever-present pipe [via Steve Wolfson, Regina]

active) and their president for many years.¹⁵ Portnall also was a member of the Regina Federation of Artists. Over the years, several of Portnall's paintings have been included in exhibits. “My Hunting Partner,” a charcoal and water colour portrait of Bill Mulligan, was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts show held in Montreal in November 1935. Several other pieces were on

display at the 1955 exhibit at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in conjunction with works by John Nugent and Henry Bonli.¹⁶ Perhaps fittingly, Frank Portnall designed the art gallery in 1953.

Frank Portnall, a tenor, participated in St. Paul's Pro Cathedral choir, in provincial music festivals and was soloist for the Regina Oratorio Society. He also was president of the Regina Choral Society.¹⁷ His wife, Mabel, was a member of the Regina Choral Union & Orchestral Society, the Orpheus Society and the Women's Musical Club.¹⁸

Portnall the Sportsman

Frank Portnall also was an avid sportsman. He particularly enjoyed golf, hunting and sailing. He was an early member of the Regina Boat Club and excelled at swimming, sailing and single sculls. [Portnall apparently designed a plaque for the “Whitmore Trophy” for class sailing in the mid-1950s; I need to follow up]. He and his wife, Mabel, were active members of the [Royal] Regina Golf Club for many years.

Conclusion

By various accounts, Architect Francis Henry Portnall was a man of generosity, integrity and principle. In the years when work was scarce, such as during the 1930s, he was known to decline a commission in favour of a fellow architect.¹⁹

Frank Portnall has left a broad legacy of architectural accomplishments in many communities throughout Saskatchewan. This legacy includes many

public schools, hospitals, churches, public buildings, distinctive residences and war memorials. The Saskatchewan Archives Board in Regina holds an extensive collection of drawings by Clemesha & Portnall, by F.H. Portnall, and by Portnall & Stock.²⁰W

• **By Ross Herrington**

¹ Obituary in Leader-Post [Regina], 15 Sept. 1976, p.15.

² Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1800-1950 [Robert Hill]: <http://dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org/>

³ www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/sub.cfm?source=memorials/ww1/mem/stjulien

⁴ Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1800-1950 [Robert Hill]: <http://dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org/>

⁵ Noted architect Joseph Pettick joined the firm that year as an apprentice.

⁶ Leader-Post [Regina], 21 May 1951, p.3.

⁷ Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1800-1950 [Robert Hill]: <http://dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org/>

⁸ Leader-Post [Regina], 8 August 1934, p.5. It is not known how or why these three specific Regina architects were selected.

⁹ Leader-Post [Regina], 25 May 1935 p.1.

¹⁰ Leader-Post [Regina], 19 August 1936 p.1.

¹¹ At 36 feet in height, the main window was the tallest window in Regina at the time.

¹² Leader-Post [Regina], 26 March 1960, p.3.

¹³ Leader-Post [Regina], 11 March 1961, p.3.

¹⁴ Leader-Post [Regina], 23 Oct. 1961, p.8.

¹⁵ See, for example, Leader-Post [Regina], 15 May 1942, p.8.

¹⁶ Early Domestic Architecture in Regina: Presentation Drawings and Plans, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1982, p.36.

¹⁷ The Leader [Regina], 16 Feb. 1956, p.14.

¹⁸ The Leader [Regina], 12 June 1920, p.32; 7 March 1924, p.2; 25 March 1924, p.6.

¹⁹ “Up the Years with the S.A.A.,” E.J. Gilbert, 1969, p.7.

²⁰ SABAcc. R77-261.

Upcoming 2011 SAA Features

Part 4: The Evolution to Modern Scale and Design: 1965 to 2011

- Introduction of the high rise office tower by Frank Korvemaker
- Article by Don Black on Ken Black and BLM

