

Modern Architecture in Manitoba

An Overview



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On the Cover:

Photograph of Precious Blood Roman Catholic Church, Winnipeg, 1968, Etienne Gaboury Architect, courtesy Bryan Scott.

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- Winnipeg City Hall
- St. Paul's High School
- Manitoba Hydro Building
- Manitoba Theatre Centre
- Assinboine Park Bear Pits
- John A. Russell Building, University of Manitoba
- Pembina Hall, University of Manitoba
- Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba
- St. George's Anglican Church
- Monarch Life
- Bridge Drive-Inn
- Executive House Apartments
- Royal Canadian Mint
- Centennial Concert Hall
- Pan Am Pool
- Shaarey Zedek Synagogue
- St. John's College and Chapel
- Great West Life
- Manitoba Health Services Building
- National Revenue Building
- Richardson Building
- Polo Park Shopping Centre
- Blankstein Residence
- Gaboury Residence
- Donahue Residence
- Waisman Residence
- Grosvenor House apartments
- Richardson International Airport
- Blackwoods Beverages (Image provided by Number Ten Architectural Group)

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1. Introduction

Manitoba is fortunate to have a collection of mid-century architecture that is both extensive and relatively complete. A group of architects, in most cases Manitoba-born and trained at the University of Manitoba, adopted Modernism just as the province was experiencing considerable population movement and societal change; some went on to develop regional variants that make Manitoba's mid-century architecture both representative of world-wide trends and unique to the province. These buildings have now reached an age at which they are beginning to be threatened by various issues, a fact that makes this a good moment to assess the province's mid-century architectural resources.

The decades following the Second World War were a time of optimism and excitement in North America, Canada, and Manitoba. The Great Depression had been survived, the war was over, and science and technology promised to make life longer, better, and more entertaining. These years saw Manitoba evolve into a modern society from the predominantly rural, agrarian community it had been.

Before the war, most Manitobans had lived in small towns and in rural areas with few modern conveniences; now the province had become a predominantly urban society in which more and more people had indoor plumbing, radios, electric stoves, refrigerators and even television sets. Rural areas, too, were beginning to experience modern advances; farm electrification, begun immediately after World War II, was essentially completed by the mid-1950s. The same period saw rapidly-improving telephone service expand across the province. Manitobans began to take control of their environment, as the Red River Floodway, conceived in the 1950s and constructed during the 1960s, protected the city of Winnipeg and the southern part of the Red River corridor from catastrophic floods against which there had previously been no defence beyond sandbags and prayer. Soldiers returned home from the war dreaming of raising families in their own small houses, and many were the first in their families to attend college or university. Those who chose to farm or live in small towns saw their children bussed to new consolidated schools that were replacing the pioneer one-room schoolhouses that their parents had reached on foot or horseback. Many more settled in the rapidly-growing cities, where new industries and an expanding professional sector put membership in the middle classes increasingly within their grasp.

These dramatic developments are marked today by buildings and other structures. Not surprisingly, given the societal shifts taking place, the majority of these structures are located in urban areas – particularly Winnipeg, but also, to a lesser extent, Brandon, Thompson, and Portage la Prairie; depopulating rural areas saw little new construction in the mid-century decades. If we agree that one of the prime reasons for understanding and preserving the built environment is that it is a physical manifestation of history, the buildings and sites of the mid-century period are important as a tangible memory of vast change on every level of Manitoban society: political, social, cultural and technological. Just as archaeological sites hold the secrets of Manitoba's pre-contact Aboriginal peoples and early European explorers, and the buildings of the Victorian and Edwardian ages tell the story of the province's early settler history, so its mid-century buildings stand as witnesses to the decades in which Manitoba as we know it today came into being.

Manitoba has largely avoided the kind of "boom and bust" economy that characterized many jurisdictions in the latter part of the twentieth century, and it has maintained growth at a fairly steady rate. As a result, the province has not seen the excessive development pressure that

can be so dangerous to the built environment, and it retains a large number of mid-century buildings in a range of styles.

The study of modernism was for some time cast largely in architectural, formalist terms. People tend to understand these buildings largely in terms of architectural theory, of the architect as artist, and of the materials, technologies and especially styles that make the buildings. But there is also a host of social and cultural themes that both explain and are shaped by mid-century architecture, and that may also interest a wider group of people. Perhaps the most obviously visible theme is the development of the suburb and of a variety of building types designed to cater to people driving motor vehicles. But mid-century buildings also speak of an age of optimism, when anything seemed possible – from space travel to the eradication of poverty. The buildings and sites of the modern period speak to this zeal for progress and the conviction that the built environment could change the world for the better.