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Big bang for your block

By: Staff Writer

26/07/2008 3:15 AM | [Comments \(0\)](#)

A Canadian-born, Chicago-based architect says that an Illinois-born, Winnipeg-based architect deserves a page in architectural history books because of the way he helped change our cityscape nearly 100 years ago.

In 17 years of practising here, from 1905 to 1922, John D. Atchison built about 100 buildings, including some of our finest examples of Chicago-style "skyscrapers" that rose on steel frames to seven storeys or more in three sections: a decorative base at ground level, a column of expansive offices and a fancy cornice to top them off.

Architect and self-described "armchair historian" Darrel Babuk thinks Chicago and the rest of the world should know more about what he calls Atchison's best work, three buildings arranged on the same downtown block.

"They took a high level of skill and expertise," says Babuk, who recently wrote an article about the Canadian influence on the Chicago style for the August issue of Canadian Architect magazine. The article focuses on Hamilton-born William Mundie, who practised in Chicago, but it makes note of local work done by Atchison, a one-time Mundie employee before he relocated to Winnipeg.

Babuk names the 1918 Hamilton Building, the 1913 Union Tower Building, and the 1911 Great-West Life Building as his favourite Atchison-designed structures in Winnipeg. These three buildings, all on the same block on the east side of Main Street between Lombard Avenue and McDermot Avenue, "are eclectic in styling, reflecting the ambitions of a growing city," says Babuk.

"They may be some of the purest Canadian (Chicago-style) skyscrapers out there."

Atchison came to Winnipeg from Chicago, where he began his career working at Jenney and Mundie, a firm started by William Le Baron Jenney, who is considered to be the inventor of the skyscraper. Until the late 1800s, common load-bearing brick technology meant that tall buildings had to have thick base walls made of brick in order to hold the weight of the structure. But in 1885, Jenney used an internal steel frame mounted on piles reaching down to bedrock to build the 10-storey Home Insurance Building in Chicago. The steel columns and joists acted like a skeleton from which walls and floors could be hung, eliminating the need to have a shell of exterior brick. That and the development of passenger elevators meant buildings could rise to previously unimaginable heights.

Babuk suggests that Winnipeg attracted Atchison because it was a railway centre, like his hometown of Monmouth, Ill. And by the early 1900s, Winnipeg was full of insurance and trust companies and banks and merchants serving western expansion. They had the wealth required to build skyscrapers, and a developing white-collar class of employees needed the space skyscrapers provided. After finding three moneyed clients who wanted to build on the same downtown block within a few years of each other, Atchison left his biggest mark on Winnipeg.

"Other people directly copied the Chicago style," says Babuk, praising Atchison for wavering from a standard that emphasized plain finishes. For example, the Great-West Life Building incorporates an ornate neoclassical base section, a rare (if not unique) feature in an early skyscraper. Compare that to the relatively plain base on the Electric Railway Chambers on Notre Dame Avenue and Albert Street, which was built in a more traditional Chicago style.

Near the Great-West Life Building, the bright Union Tower Building used highly decorated terra cotta for ornamentation, topped with a massive cornice at the roofline. (The building's owners in 1953 said the cornice was too unstable to maintain and removed it.) While it takes advantage of steel framing to make a fine curve on the corner lot, it doesn't emphasize its steel skeleton as much as its contemporaries, such the 1912 Confederation Life Building on Main Street or the 1912 Electric Railway Chambers.

Finally, the Hamilton Building rounds out the trio of Atchison landmarks. The last of the three to be built, it doesn't make a show of its skeleton but it does present a handsome simple façade, in a gradual progression toward the plainer design that Chicago-style architecture came to exemplify.

In their day, the three buildings that were so close to each other also made a big difference to their block's curb appeal. Visitors approaching from the south could see them all from afar (as well as the Grain Exchange Building on Lombard Avenue and the Main Street Bank of Commerce), years before the Richardson Building and the Fairmont Hotel were constructed nearby. Their diverse styles would have announced the enthusiasm of a boom town.

While Atchison sought big-budget jobs, he also designed some of city's earliest high-end apartment buildings, including the 1905 Wardlaw Block on Wardlaw Avenue and the 1909 Devon Court on Broadway. "He anticipated and prepared for urban conditions to come," says Babuk.

Babuk says Atchison likely learned what was then called "commercial style" from Mundie, but also taught his mentor a thing or two. In fact, he notes that Mundie's 12-storey Besee Building in Danville, Ill., looks very similar to Atchison's Union Tower Building, built four years earlier.

"They would have discussed many ideas together in design sessions," says Babuk, not wanting to call the Besee a copy, but acknowledging the influence of Atchison on a mentor who went on to become well-known in architectural history circles.

Atchison moved to California in 1922 and died in Pasadena around 1944.

ian.tizzard@freepress.mb.ca

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