6. Architecture & Place

Making the University of Saskatchewan

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1. Introduction

The University of Saskatchewan campus is often noted for its sense of place, its material consistency and its beauty. Its centerpiece is the ‘Bowl’, a large outdoor courtyard that forms the heart of the campus (Figure 2). The Canadian Register of Historic Places has called the picturesque collection of stone buildings that ring this space “the finest grouping of Collegiate Gothic university buildings in Canada.”¹ But the character of the University of Saskatchewan

was never inherent within the nature of its location. With the exception of the wooded banks of the South Saskatchewan River, very little remains of the original natural features of the university site. It is important to recall this environment to understand the relationship of the university as an institution to its setting. The university campus today is characterized by its stone buildings, landscaped courtyards and mature elm trees; however, this is a landscape that has been designed and constructed in every respect. A remarkable photograph exists from 1910, depicting the university site at the moment this construction began. A team of horses and ploughs stand in a flat landscape of natural prairie grasses, assembled to break ground for the construction of the MacKinnon Building (Figure 3). The creation of the campus, not only its architecture, but also its trees and open spaces, has been a collective effort of imagination and will, spanning over a century.

The architectural history of the University of Saskatchewan has been marked by a series of building booms, alternating with periods of relatively slow growth. The campus can therefore be seen as a series of historical layers, each superimposed over the previous set of existing conditions. Each layer is a record of the priorities, concerns and vision of its builders. This Heritage Register deals primarily with the architecture of the first two significant phases of construction at the university. It is a record of the best surviving examples of the architecture and landscapes of the University of Saskatchewan from the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. It describes these buildings and sites in detail, recording

Figure 3. The Bowl, May 28 1910: teams of horses and ploughs assembled to break ground for the construction of the MacKinnon Building. (Image: University of Saskatchewan Archives, A-12)
the elements that contribute to their architectural character and historical significance. It is hoped that the Heritage Register will serve as a guide to the present and future stewards of the campus, ensuring that as the university grows and adapts to new challenges, the achievements of its past will be remembered, treasured and protected.

The first phase of construction at the University of Saskatchewan occurred between 1909 and 1929. The development of the campus during this period proceeded according to a Campus Plan, created in 1909 by the architectural firm of David Brown & Hugh Vallance, of Montreal (Figure 4). Brown and Vallance also designed almost all of the buildings constructed during this period. The early architecture of the University of Saskatchewan was characterized by its traditional, Collegiate Gothic style and by the consistent use of a local dolomitic limestone, known colloquially as ‘Greystone’ (Figures 1 & 5). This first period of construction was interrupted by the stock market crash of 1929, followed by the Great Depression and the Second World War.

**Figure 4.** The 1909 Campus Plan by Brown and Vallance Architects. (Image: University of Saskatchewan Archives, A-5959).

**Figure 5.** A rendering of Saskatchewan Hall, produced by architects Brown and Vallance. (Image: University of Saskatchewan Archives, B-389-C).
As the war veterans began returning home in 1946, construction resumed and over the next quarter-century, the university undertook a massive expansion. Between 1946 and 1970, thirty major construction projects were undertaken. Buildings such as the Murray Library, by Architect H.K. Black (1954-56) and the Arts Building, by Shore & Moffat Architects (1958-64) were typical of a new, functionalist approach to architecture, employing simplified massing, stripped-down and repetitive detailing, and experimentation with new materials (Figures 6-8). Although the style of the post-war architecture at the university differed markedly from its antecedents, with the notable exception of the Arts Tower, an effort was made to maintain the scale and material consistency of the existing campus. The result is a university campus that is remarkable for the degree to which it has achieved a balance between aesthetic cohesion and contemporary architectural expression.

Figure 6. Murray Library, 1956 (Image: University of Saskatchewan Archives, A-617).

Figure 7. The addition to the Arts Tower under construction, 1964. Shore & Moffat Architects. (Image: University of Saskatchewan Archives, A-3520).

Figure 8. Architect’s sketch of the Arts Building, April 1958. The Arts Tower is depicted at its original height of seven storeys, before the addition of the final four floors. (Image: University of Saskatchewan Archives, A-112).
Before the University

To begin, it is important to acknowledge the history of the campus site prior to the creation of the university. People are believed to have entered the northern plains of Saskatchewan at the end of the last ice age, approximately 11,000 years ago. Various aboriginal peoples have occupied the area around what is now Saskatoon over time. Henry Kelsey, the first European to reach the interior of the northern plains, reported in 1690 that the area between the forks of the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers and west was inhabited by the Blackfoot people.\(^2\) By the 1730’s, as part of a general westward migration, the Cree had become established in this part of the plains.\(^3\) From the 1730’s to the 1870’s, the Nêhiyawak, or Plains Cree, developed a nomadic culture supported primarily by the bison hunt. By the 1850’s, aboriginal settlements in the area around Saskatoon also included Metis hunting camps at Moose Woods and Round Prairie, south of Saskatoon.\(^4\) The Whitecap Dakota people took up permanent residence at Moose Woods, just south of Saskatoon, in the 1860’s (Figure 9). Chief Whitecap (Wapahska) led his people to Saskatchewan to

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escape political turmoil in Minnesota, where they were living at the time (Figure 14).

In 1870, when the Hudson’s Bay Company surrendered its royal charter back to the British Crown, a process was initiated to negotiate treaties with the indigenous nations of the region the British referred to as Rupert’s Land (Figure 10). Treaty No. 6, an agreement between the Dominion of Canada and the Cree, Saulteaux, Nakota and Dene peoples, was signed in 1876, covering most of what is now central Saskatchewan.

Before the development of the railroad system, an extensive system of overland trails connected various aboriginal communities and fur trading posts across the territory of modern Saskatchewan. A trail from Moose Woods to Batoche crossed the current site of the University of Saskatchewan, where it joined the South Saskatchewan River on its way north (Figure 11). In the 1800’s, this was a busy route travelled by Metis, Sioux and Dakota people to Batoche and to the Cree reserves near Duck Lake. The Memorial Gates were later built at the location where this trail crossed onto the site of the university (Figures 11 & 12).

In 1872, the Dominion Lands Act was passed, setting up the Dominion Land Survey system, and offering free farmland to prospective settlers. This was a systematic plan to colonize the prairies and establish a new agrarian economy and society. Eventually, the university would be established as a critical feature of that plan. The pace of settlement was

initially slow, so in 1881 the law was amended to allow private colonization companies to obtain blocks of land on condition that they were settled quickly. One of these companies was the Toronto-based Temperance Colonization Society, which aimed to establish a farming community “ever free of the accursed liquor trade.”6 In 1882, the society was granted 21 sections of land in a block extending from the current site of Warman to Dundurn, straddling the South Saskatchewan River (Figure 13). That summer John Lake led a party to inspect the land grant and to choose a site for a new town. Near the southern end of the grant, John Lake’s party came to the Dakota-Sioux reserve at Moose Woods. Chief Wapahska (White Cap) advised Lake of a site suitable for settlement, at a place known as ‘Minnetonka’. The town of Saskatoon was established there. The temperance colony ultimately failed, but the town it established prospered as the new farming economy of Saskatchewan was established and grew.

3. Collegiate Gothic

The Province of Saskatchewan was incorporated in 1905, and just two years later the government of Premier Walter Scott introduced the University Act, creating the University of Saskatchewan as an institution. In 1908, Walter Murray was appointed as its first president, charged with the job of creating a new university from the ground up. That fall, he and two other members of the University board of Governors conducted a tour of several Canadian and American universities, to look at precedents. Murray was particularly impressed by the campus of Washington University in St. Louis. “The buildings are beautiful, my ideal of university buildings,” he wrote to his wife. He returned from the trip convinced that the new university should be built in the Collegiate Gothic style common to many of the universities he had seen.

In June 1909, Architect David R. Brown of the Montreal firm Brown and Vallance was interviewed and hired to plan a campus and design the first university buildings. Brown and Vallance had recently completed the Medical Building at McGill University in the Collegiate Gothic style, and were chosen mainly for their demonstrated ability to handle this style.


Figure 16. Walter Murray, 1931. (Image: University of Saskatchewan Archives).

Also in 1909, Saskatoon had been chosen to host the university, and a site had been selected. The university acquired a total of 1300 acres of land on the east bank of the South Saskatchewan River, across the river from the original town of Saskatoon (Figure 17). The purchase included 300 acres for its main campus and an additional 1000 acres of farm land. The University of Saskatchewan was the first university in Canada to incorporate an agricultural college as part of its main campus, and therefore required a large amount of arable land. The university was a critical component in the plan to develop the agricultural economy of the province.

During the early years of the university, a traditional campus was built. Its precedents were largely European and American. During the summer of 1909, Brown and Vallance developed a master plan for the campus. It was a formal design in the European Beaux-Arts tradition, characterized by a series of grand axial boulevards and landscaped gardens (Figure 4). Grouped arrangements of buildings formed a network of courtyards and quadrangles. The plan took inspiration from Enlightenment ideas of city planning, the English picturesque tradition of landscape design and the architecture of cloistered courtyards common to Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

Despite their concern for tradition, the founders of the university had a remarkable optimism and vision. Saskatoon, in 1909, was a small city of about 8000 inhabitants (Figure 19). It had only recently acquired telephone and electrical systems, and its water supply was still unreliable. But the population of the province was surging. It grew from 258,000 in 1906 to over 492,000 by 1911. In his planning, Walter Murray anticipated a province of two million inhabitants by 1930, and a student population of five thousand. Summarizing his concerns around the founding of the university to a friend, he remarked, “...in laying our foundation we must remember that we are building for centuries.”

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The campus plan developed by Brown & Vallance matched Walter Murray’s ambition, incorporating about 60 major buildings. The quality of the early buildings constructed at the University of Saskatchewan also reflected this vision. They were built to last, and indeed all of the buildings constructed primarily of greystone between 1909 and 1929 remain in service today. ‘Greystone’ is the common term for a form of dolomitic limestone local to Saskatoon and parts of northern Saskatchewan, which was selected as the primary building material. For the early campus buildings, it was gathered from farmland around Saskatoon, and broken up into building stone on site. Other materials were imported from further afield, but all were of the best quality. Cut stone window surrounds and trim were typically of Indiana Limestone. Roofs were of slate. Windows were often steel-framed, and the interiors combined terra-cotta, brick, plaster and oak. These long-lasting materials set a standard for future development at the University of Saskatchewan.

The building systems of the early campus also contained many innovative features. A central power house, one of the first buildings constructed, supplied steam heat, hot water and electricity to the rest of the campus via a system of tunnels. Two coal fired boilers supplied steam and hot water, and steam-driven generators produced electricity for lighting (Figure 20).

12. For further information on building stones used at the University of Saskatchewan, refer to ‘Appendix: Stone’.

The Peter MacKinnon Building, formerly named the College Building, was the first building to begin construction at the university, one of five put out to tender in the spring of 1910. It stands at the head of the ‘Bowl’, and constitutes the architectural centerpiece of the campus. The MacKinnon Building is one of the best examples of the Collegiate Gothic architectural style at the university, both in terms of its conception and realisation.

The Collegiate Gothic style was a branch of the Gothic Revival movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries, which sought to re-establish principles of mediaeval art and architecture. One of its chief proponents was Augustus Welby Pugin, the 19th century English architect and critic. His polemical book *Contrasts* (1836) framed the issue of architectural style within a wider context of social welfare and morality, setting up medieval society as an ideal, in contrast to the secular and utilitarian culture of industrial-era Britain. The Collegiate Gothic style was a later development, adopted by the Ivy League universities of the United States, and used to associate newer North American universities with the architectural and academic traditions of their ancient European predecessors, such as Oxford and Cambridge.

The MacKinnon Building features most of the elements associated with the gothic revival styles. Consider, for example, the central bay of the MacKinnon Building in comparison to the Angel Inn, a medieval building featured in Pugin’s book *Contrasts* (1836) (Figures 21 & 22). Both buildings are symmetrical in composition, with the main entrance forming the central element in the design. Both entrances are recessed within a shallow pointed arch; the use of the arch, particularly the pointed or gothic arch, is a typical feature of the gothic styles. Statuary niches flank the entrances in both cases. Both elevations feature a row of three bay or oriel windows.

Carved stone ornamentation is another common feature of the Collegiate Gothic style. Walter Murray, the university’s first president, requested the depiction of local fauna, such as gophers, ducks, and prairie chickens, in the carved stonework of the MacKinnon Building. Unfortunately, the eastern Canadian stone masons brought in to carry out this work were unfamiliar with these animals. They literally carved their frustrations in stone; one gargoyle, representing a mason, is shown struggling with a prairie chicken (Figure 23). Some of the depictions of Saskatchewan creatures, such as the gopher, are inaccurately rendered. Other more standard decorative motifs include acorns, oak leaves and ivy.
The Stone Barn (Figure 24) was constructed at the same time as the McKinnon Building, reflecting the importance of agricultural education at the university. In its architectural style, the barn is similar to other North American dairy and livestock barns of the early twentieth century, but its large size and high-quality materials are distinctive.

The Thorvaldson Building (originally named the Chemistry Building) represents the apex of the Collegiate Gothic period at the University of Saskatchewan, reflecting the affluence of the roaring twenties in its ambitious scale, rich materials and detailed execution. It was designed by Architect David R. Brown of Montreal and began construction in 1924.
In its form and detail, the Thorvaldson Building also illustrates the European and ecclesiastical roots of the Collegiate Gothic style better than any other building at the University of Saskatchewan. Compare, for example, the Thorvaldson Building (Figure 25) to the chapel of King’s College Cambridge (Figure 26). The imposing scale of the Thorvaldson Building, its verticality, the character of its grand entrance, and its stylistic references to architectural elements such as flying buttresses, spires, and church portals make clear reference to this and other precedents in European Christian architecture.

In total, David Brown and Hugh Vallance designed 14 major buildings for the university in the period 1909 – 1929 (Figure 18). Due to their adherence to a master plan, a consistency of material character and a common architectural style, the early buildings of the University of Saskatchewan form a single coherent composition. Despite later changes in priority, technology and architectural style, the work of Brown and Vallance in establishing the early campus set a benchmark for its later development.
4. Modernism

In the period following the Second World War, a wave of social changes occurred that left an imprint on the physical layout and architecture of the University. In 1930, enrolment had been 1610 full-time students. By 1947, with war veterans returning home, enrolment had jumped to 4,310. The original Campus Plan had been designed for pedestrians, but in the post-war period an increasing number of private cars had begun to appear. By 1954, a series of ad hoc changes had been made to accommodate these cars: vehicular roads had been added and parking lots had been built in ways unforeseen by the 1909 Plan. Photographs from this period reveal the gardens and pedestrian avenues of the original plan cluttered with parked cars (Figure 27).

Between 1954 and 1957, the architectural firm of Izumi, Arnott & Sugiyama was engaged by the University to carry out a series of planning studies (Figure 28). This work was intended to address the issue of increasing traffic congestion, to suggest locations for a number of new buildings and to provide direction for the future growth of the campus. The adoption of Izumi’s plan essentially marks the abandonment of the 1909 Plan. The new plan involved the construction of a ring-road intended to provide vehicular access around the perimeter of the campus, and thereby to separate the campus into pedestrian and vehicular areas. This road was constructed, and is now called Campus Drive. Locations were proposed for several new buildings, including a Humanities complex, a Biology building and some new residence halls. Finally, the plan proposed the division of the campus into a series of functional zones: Arts, Sciences, Medical, Agricultural and Residential. All of these proposals were implemented in some form over the course of the next decade.

A photograph of a model of the campus in 1961 illustrates the effects of Izumi’s recommendations (Figure 29). The construction of Campus Drive and the location of the Arts Tower effectively terminated the Bowl and cut off future development of the campus core from the river. The more direct relationship of the campus to the river implied by the 1909 Plan was altered by this new approach.
The campus was made more insular, focused on the Bowl rather than on the multiple focal points of the 1909 Plan. The Functional zoning suggested by Izumi has proved useful, and is still in effect today, but has also created problems in terms of connectivity between the various parts of the campus. Those buildings that have subsequently been built outside of Campus Drive, such as the Education Building, feel remote from the life of the central campus. However, the Izumi plan allowed the preservation of a pedestrian campus within the context of a growing student population.

Not only the planning but also the architecture of the university changed in the period following the Second World War. The Murray Building, designed by architect Kioshi Izumi working under H.K. Black Architect, was built between 1954 and 1956 (Figures 30 & 31). It is architecturally significant as one of the first modernist buildings constructed at the University of Saskatchewan, and the first to use a full structural steel frame. (The Heating Plant, constructed at the same time, is also in the Modern style). Modernist architecture is characterized generally by the removal of applied ornament in favour of an articulation of material qualities, the manipulation of form and the expression of function. Decorative elements tend to be abstract and geometric rather than figural or representational. Architects of the modern period were interested in expanding the expressive range of forms, and this impulse led to designs that were no longer bound by conventions of symmetrical composition. The asymmetry of the Murray Building, in the arrangement of its forms and its elevations,
is characteristic of the period. However, it is also notable that at the moment of transition between the historicist impulse of the Collegiate Gothic and the modernist idiom of the Murray Building, a decision was made to continue the use of ‘greystone’ and Tyndall stone as the principal exterior materials.

The Arts Building, built in two stages between 1958 and 1964, is often disparaged as ugly and out of scale with the rest of the University of Saskatchewan campus. (Fig. 5) At 11 stories, it is the tallest structure at the university, and it is unique among the buildings facing the Bowl in that it employs an enameled metal spandrel panel system in addition to Tyndall stone cladding. The other buildings facing the Bowl, while of a variety of different ages and architectural styles, have a consistent height of between two and four stories. All, with the exception of the Arts Tower and Marquis Hall (1962-64), primarily employ Greystone cladding with cut limestone trim.

Figure 32. Arts Tower, Shore & Moffat Architects, 1958-60. (Image: Troy Smith, Group 2 Architecture).

Figure 33. Arts Tower, Shore & Moffat Architects, 1958-60. (Image: Troy Smith, Group 2 Architecture).

Figure 34. Law-Commerce Complex, Holliday-Scott & Associates Architects, 1964-67. (Image: John Holliday-Scott).
The best architecture of the mid-twentieth century at the University of Saskatchewan was the work of John Holliday Scott and his firm Holliday-Scott & Associates. Between 1965 and 1979, Holliday-Scott designed three projects on the university campus: the Law-Commerce Complex, the Lutheran Seminary, and the Dental Clinic. Holliday-Scott was one of the most accomplished architects of his generation working in Saskatchewan. In these three projects, Holliday-Scott took the traditional architecture of the University of Saskatchewan and translated it into a contemporary architectural language of his own invention. The Law Building, in particular, is a masterful building in which the principles of modernism are employed not as rigid precepts, but as parts of a broader framework of possible references, selected and manipulated for their expressive potential (Figures 35 & 36). In this way, the traditions of the university and of the legal profession were given a clear and contemporary form.


Figure 36. Law library (Image: University of Saskatchewan Archives, A-4563).
5. Conclusion

The Mexican writer and poet Octavio Paz, writing in 1990, said that “between tradition and modernity there is a bridge. When they are mutually isolated, tradition stagnates and modernity vaporizes; when joined, modernity breathes new life into tradition, and tradition responds by providing depth and gravity.”

Over a century of development, the architecture of the University of Saskatchewan has been most successful where it has sought to create this bridge between its own traditions and its central mission of advancing scholarship and artistic works. The work of David Brown and Hugh Vallance established a compelling vision that has served as a template for the architecture and urban design of a successful university campus. That vision included specific reference to a traditional architectural style, but its lasting contribution has been as much to do with the definition of a spirit of place, reflected in a careful attention to detail, a consistency of materials, textures and colours, a sense of enclosure, and a humane scale for buildings and outdoor spaces. The best architecture of the mid twentieth century sought to reflect and accommodate the changing outlook and requirements of a contemporary university in buildings that both respected and challenged tradition. In this way, by degrees, the University of Saskatchewan was imagined, built and established as a place.


Figure 37. Lutheran Seminary, J. Holliday-Scott and M. Desmond Paine Architects, 1968 (Image: Saskatoon Public Library, CP-5925-B-4).
6. Bibliography


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