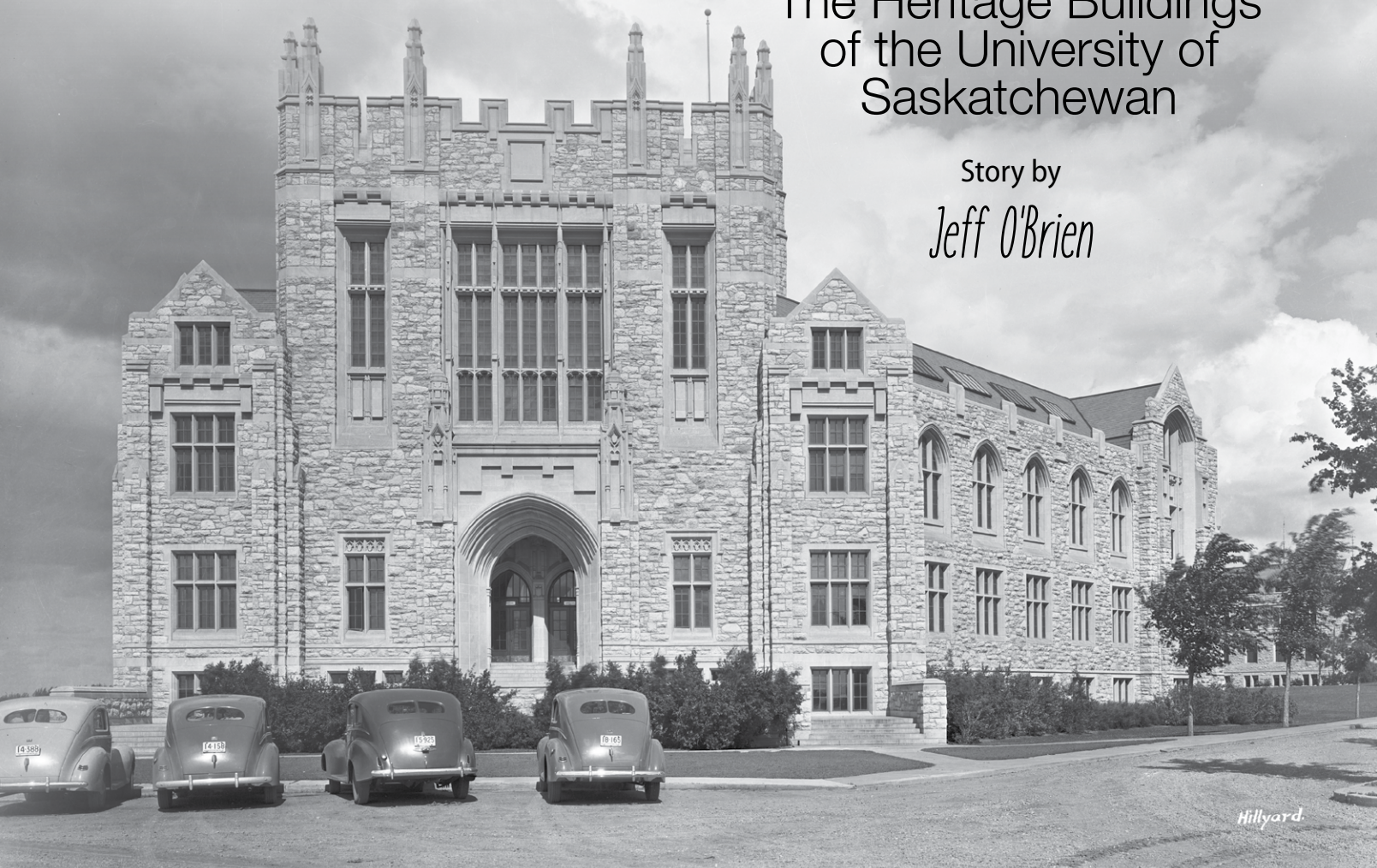


If These Halls of Learning Could Talk

The Heritage Buildings
of the University of
Saskatchewan

Story by
Jeff O'Brien



Chemistry Building / Thorvaldson, 1940.

Photo Credit: Saskatoon Public Library - Local History Room - A-1941

Asked to define what gives a building “heritage value,” most of us will probably start with the physical components: the essential details of form, design, style and construction. These are, literally, the building blocks of architectural heritage. But the reason we care about them is because of the stories they tell, about the people who created them and the ones that used them, all the way down to the present moment. Architectural heritage is only partly about buildings; mostly, it’s about people.

This is a story about the University of Saskatchewan: its history, its spaces and its people, and how they all connect within the wider communities that surround it. Some of this story is true and some is not. That’s how stories work.



Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, A-24

Depending on who you talk to, the University of Saskatchewan was established either by provincial decree in 1907 or by an Act of Parliament in 1883, when a Dominion Charter was granted to Emmanuel College in Prince Albert to establish a University of Saskatchewan. That first University of Saskatchewan had lain dormant since 1886, but then-Archdeacon G.E. Lloyd (for whom Lloydminster is named) had plans to revive it as a theological seminary, and was mightily displeased with the provincial decree. In the end, Emmanuel came to Saskatoon, and so it all worked out.

There was also the question of where it should go. Regina, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw and Prince Albert were all possibilities, and the Board of Governors even looked at sites in Fort Qu'Appelle and Indian Head. In the end it came down to Regina versus Saskatoon, and on April 7, 1909, they picked Saskatoon.

Classes began in the fall of 1909 in an upper floor of a downtown office block where the students liked to drop water balloons on unwary pedestrians. Construction began on a permanent site on the high, east bank of the river that spring, and in the fall of 1912, classes began in the newly-opened College Building.

COLLEGIATE GOTHIC

The University campus was built in several stages, with the oldest buildings completed just before the First World War. Things slowed down considerably during the war itself, but picked up with a vengeance afterwards. By 1930, when the Depression brought everything to a shuddering halt, the U of S had fourteen buildings, most built in the Collegiate Gothic style, chosen because of its historical connection to the great campuses of Europe and because it was pretty. University President Walter Murray and others had toured a number of campuses looking for inspiration and been particularly enchanted with Washington



Photo Credit: City of Saskatoon Archives - Star Phoenix Collection - S-SP-B-3018



Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, A-178

- ▲ (Top) College Building construction, 1911.
- ▲ (Middle) Construction of Memorial Union Building, 1954.
- ▲ (Bottom) Cars parked in the bowl, 1924.

If These Halls of Learning Could Talk



◀ Memorial Union Building Lounge, now "Louis' Loft".

◀ (Middle) Provincial Archives Reading Room in the Murray Memorial Library, 1963.

◀ (Bottom) Student atop the Chemistry Building, late 1920s.

Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, A-591



Photo Credit: City of Saskatoon Archives - Star Phoenix Collection - S-SP-B-5699

University (in St. Louis, oddly enough) which became the inspiration for the original Campus Plan.

When we imagine the University of Saskatchewan, these are usually what we're thinking of. Constructed mostly from greystone—a locally-sourced dolomitic limestone—they are beautiful and mediaeval-looking, festooned with arches and crenellations, buttresses and bay windows, with decorative carvings and other architectural knick-knacks too numerous to detail. They include the College Building (now the Peter MacKinnon Building) at the top of the Bowl, Thorvaldson (the erstwhile Chemistry Building); Qu'appelle Hall and Saskatchewan Hall, the President's Residence, the Faculty Club and others.

THE CHANGING CAMPUS

After the Second World War, the plan began to change. The original campus layout had been one of wide, curving avenues and formal gardens, with buildings arranged to form little courtyards and quadrangles. It was a campus built for pedestrians in an age when few university students drove cars. But when the economy came roaring back after the war, the automobile came roaring back with it. New roads and parking lots began to be incorporated into the campus plan, and by the mid-1950s, the old layout was abandoned and obliterated.

Enrollment grew prodigiously after the war, and the campus with it, adding thirty new buildings between 1945 and 1970. Campus architects adopted a Modernist style, embracing functionality and minimalism and rejecting Collegiate Gothic's ornamental style. The sole exception is the Memorial Union Building, finished in 1955. Otherwise, the path to the future was going to have a lot fewer gargoyles and pointy windows than before.



Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, Jack Lydiard Photograph Album, MG 547, LYD-003

NOTABLE HERITAGE BUILDINGS ON CAMPUS

It would be impossible for us to talk about every architecturally significant building on campus. But three buildings stand out as representative examples: the Peter MacKinnon Building, Thorvaldson, and the Murray Building.



Photo Credit: Saskatoon Public Library Local History Room - HBS-56-3



Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, A-3425

PETER MACKINNON BUILDING (COLLEGE BUILDING)

When the College Building opened for classes in the fall of 1912, it contained not only academic spaces like classrooms, the library and a gymnasium, but also offices for senior administrators, lab space, and rooms for things like butter and cheese making and milk testing. It also contained the university's auditorium—Convocation Hall—which boasted some of the best acoustics in Saskatchewan and was used for concerts, public meetings, student registration and, until university enrollment outgrew it in 1931, convocation ceremonies.

By the 1950s, the College building was being used primarily for administrative offices and was re-named the Administration Building. By 1979, it was showing its age. Parts of it were declared unsafe and had to be closed. In 1997, one of the support columns was found to be crumbling, and investigations determined that the whole building was in danger of collapse.

The repair bill was estimated to be \$20 million. It was an impossible amount for a cash-strapped university with other, equally pressing, maintenance issues to worry about. The cheapest solution would have been to demolish it. It wouldn't have been the first campus building to find itself on the wrong end of a wrecking ball. But this was the College Building: the "heart and soul" of the university's history, it was called "the most important public building in Saskatchewan" next to the Legislative Building in Regina.

It was, in the words of a local newspaper columnist, "Too expensive to fix [and] too important to tear down."

So it languished, empty and abandoned. But not forgotten. It had been designated a provincial heritage property in 1982. In 2001, it was declared a National Historic Site. In 2003, with support from the province, the University embarked on one of the largest heritage conservation projects in Canadian history. Two years and \$20.7 million later, on September 6, 2005, it was re-dedicated, becoming among other things, home to the Museum of Antiquities, art galleries, and the university's prized collection of Amati stringed instruments. In 2012, in recognition of his role in the restoration, it was re-named in honour of out-going University President, Peter MacKinnon.

There are significant differences between the building that re-opened in 2005 and the one that opened in 1913. In the 1980s, a new Administration Building had been tacked onto the back of it, actually incorporating some of the old exterior wall in its interior. During the restoration project, the rooms were opened up and most of the interior partitions removed. But Convocation Hall and the main public hallways and staircases, the places most of us might walk, remain the same as they were, showing the wear of age in the treads of the stairs and retaining the sense of age and the passage of time that we associate with our most memorable buildings.

▲ (Left) Oriel windows in the College Building, 1977.

▲ (Right) The old library in the College Building, 1949.

CHEMISTRY BUILDING (THORVALDSON)

When it opened on August 22, 1924 the Chemistry Building was the most visually striking building on campus, a reflection of the affluence and exuberance of the 1920s. If you like Collegiate Gothic, this building has got all the bells, whistles, crenellations and pointy bits you could ever want.

Although it also housed the colleges of Home Economics and Pharmacy, it was designed specifically for the Chemistry Department. No longer would chemistry students be stuck in dingy, makeshift labs in the basement of the College Building! The official opening was attended by 400 distinguished members of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, who happened to be on a tour of Western Canada at the time. In his remarks, Premier Dunning named the visitors the godfathers and godmothers of this new building which, he promised, would work "for the advancement of science in the interest of humanity and for the service of the people of Saskatchewan!"

After the war, the university bought surplus military huts to use as temporary facilities to accommodate the massive increase in enrollment. These became Chemistry Annex One and Two. They were replaced in 1966 when a new wing was built, at which time the whole thing was re-named for Thorbergur Thorvaldson, former head of the Chemistry Department, who had led research into the development of cement that was resistant to decay from the sulphates in alkaline ground water, a critical problem for construction in Western Canada and other places.



Photo Credit: Saskatoon Public Library Local History Room - PH-2007-342

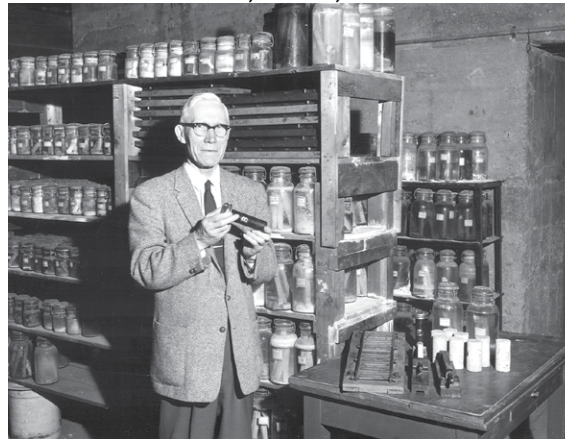


Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, A-1640

▲ Chemistry Building/Thorvaldson, 1925.

◀ Thorbergur Thorvaldson at Cement Testing Lab, 1958.

THE LEGEND OF ROOM 271



Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, A-8712

- ▲ Ceiling of the "Airplane Room", nd.
- Students in the "Airplane Room", ca. 1959.



Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, A-1650

One of the most interesting associations with Thorvaldson is paper airplanes. For decades, students taking classes in Room 271 wrote dates and messages on paper airplanes and threw them at the 68-foot-high, domed asbestos ceiling, hoping to make them stick. According to legend, the tradition began with men taking pilot training in Saskatoon during the Second World War. As long as the planes stayed stuck to the ceiling, the story went, the men would remain safe.

Sadly, it's not true. The asbestos and the paper airplanes (all 366 of them) were removed in 1995. The oldest date was 1961, and while some may have been older, building records showed that the asbestos wasn't added until the 1950s. But if you look on the arms of some of the chairs, you can find student graffiti going back to the 1930s, which isn't as exciting as the paper airplane story but is still pretty cool.

There's also a story that Thorvaldson himself is entombed in the large concrete block that was placed outside the building to celebrate his accomplishments. Again, not true.

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THE MURRAY BUILDING

The first of the Modernist buildings on campus was the 1956 Murray Memorial Library, the university's first purpose-built library building. Although in design it was a significant departure from the original campus buildings, it still used greystone and Tyndall stone for the exterior cladding so as to connect this new building to the ones that had come before. This was a design element that would continue to be incorporated into new buildings on campus, ensuring continuity in its overall design.

In the 1970s, a six-storey addition was built onto the south side of the Murray Library and most of the books and library functions moved into it. According to the university master plan, buildings in the campus core had to be clad in stone. But the Brutalist architectural style, which favoured lots of exposed concrete, was still big on university campuses in those days, and so the Tyndall stone exterior panels of the new building were cleverly treated to make them look like concrete.

From 1956-2019, the Murray Building was also home to the Saskatoon office of the Provincial Archives. Although Regina is the provincial capital, the Provincial Archives was originally established at the University of Saskatchewan. When the Murray Library was built, space on the ground floor was set aside for the Archives. But the Regina Archives office soon eclipsed it in size and importance and, in 2019, the decision was made to pack up the Saskatoon facility and consolidate everything in Regina.



Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, S-672



Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan, University Archives and Special Collections, A-649

▲ (Top) New Main Library building nears completion, 1973.

▲ (Bottom) Card catalogue area at Murray Memorial Library, 1958.

THE CASE OF THE MISSING BOOKS

Our favourite Murray Building story is both urban legend and ghost story rolled into one. As everyone knows, the architects who designed it failed to make allowance for the weight of the books, and so they couldn't fill the bookshelves completely for fear the building would come crashing down. (It's true! My hairdresser used to know "one of the guys from Facilities.") This is also why they had to build a new library in the 1970s. Even worse, the head librarian when it was built, who had worked with the architects on the design, was so mortified when she realized she'd forgotten to tell them about all the books that she leaped to her death from the roof. They say [whisper it] that her ghost haunts the library to this day, spiriting books off the shelves to keep the building from collapsing.

A great story if you're not the hapless head librarian. But, like the ones about the paper airplanes and Thorvaldson's concrete block, not true.



The Peter MacKinnon Building in summertime bloom.

BUILDING THE PEOPLE'S HERITAGE

Stories like the Murray bookshelves or Thorvaldson's paper airplanes are what happens when people interact at an emotional level with their physical spaces. These are buildings that connect directly to our understanding of who we are. There are plenty that don't. Our cities are filled with architectural ephemerae: voiceless, faceless buildings so forgettable that when they tear them down you can't even remember what used to be there. But the best buildings don't just speak to us, they sing. They embody not only the time in which they were built, but all the years that followed. Such buildings allow us to touch the past, literally, and in so doing help to create a community that extends both in space and in time.

This is what it all boils down to:

The reason they were willing to spend \$20.7 million dollars on the College Building wasn't because its Collegiate Gothic architectural style recalls the educational tradition of the great campuses of mediaeval Europe. It was because people loved it, and they loved it because when they looked at it, they saw themselves.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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