

One Who Stayed: The Career of Calgary Architect William Stanley Bates

by Patricia Jasen

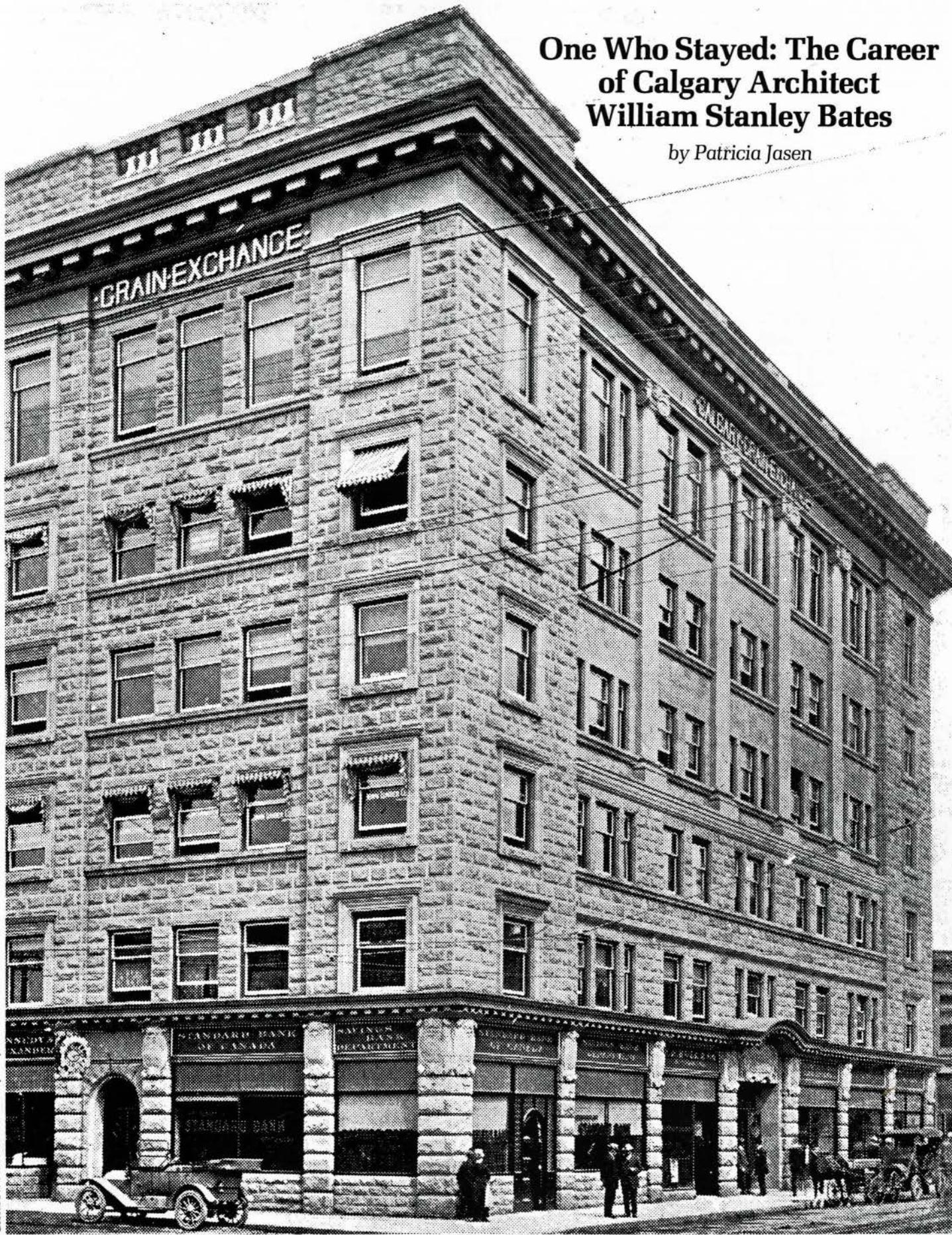




FIG. 53. WOODS RESIDENCE, FRONT ELEVATION. BATES PAPERS, f. 31.

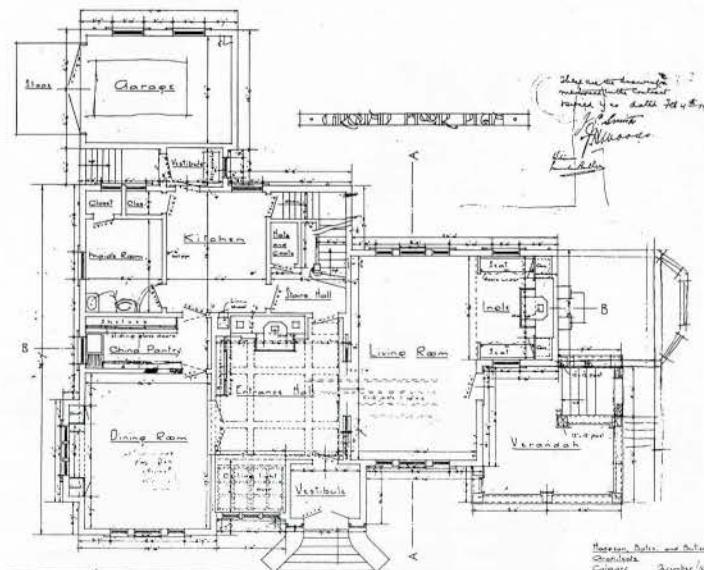
Hodgson, Bates, and Butler
Architects.
Calgary. December 10.

The home of J.H. Woods in Elbow Park, front elevation.

Calgary is the prototypical boom and bust city of western Canada. Before World War I, Calgary experienced a period of frenetic land speculation and construction, which was spurred by an aggressive federal immigration policy pursued in partnership with the Canadian Pacific Railway. This building boom was followed by an economic collapse in 1913 and decades of very slow urban growth lasting until the revival of the oil industry in 1947, after which Calgary's fortunes gradually improved.¹ The effect of this roller coaster economy on the construction industry was profound, and most of the architects who had participated in the pre-1914 building spree moved on to other cities where prospects for their profession were brighter. William Stanley Bates, in fact, was the only architect who remained working in Calgary throughout the boom, the bust, and the long period of economic stagnation which preceded the post World War II recovery.

Bates began his architectural career in Calgary at the ideal time. After completing his apprenticeship in England and becoming a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1897, he emigrated to Calgary, while still in his early thirties, in 1904.² Because he arrived before the building boom was quite underway, Bates had time to establish himself as an architect and make the connections and reputation which would bring him important contracts in the ensuing years. He initially formed a partnership with a young friend from England, Gilbert Hodgson, and with veteran architect James Llewellyn Wilson, who had designed several large sandstone buildings in downtown Calgary. Business contacts were fostered through social and civic activities as well. Bates constructed his family home in Connaught in 1905, which was the area then most favoured by Calgary's *nouveaux riches*.³ He belonged to several organizations to which the elite were attracted, including the Ranchman's Club, built next to his own home. When Calgary was on the verge of its great population explosion, Bates caught the "booster" spirit and, in a promotional volume entitled *Prosperous Calgary*, predicted that Calgary would always remain "the star city of Alberta," and advised readers that "It is only necessary to visit this go-ahead and bustling city to see that there are great opportunities for men with money."⁴

Hodgson and Bates, who soon created a firm of their own, were among Calgary's most successful commercial architects during the boom period.⁵ The rapid growth in trade, finance, and other sectors of the economy provided a steady flow of contracts for office blocks, warehouses, and branch banks. Although some of the most important



GAI Bates Papers

Ground floor plan J.H. Woods, home.

downtown buildings, such as the Canada Life and Calgary Herald Buildings, were designed by eastern firms,⁶ several leading entrepreneurs engaged Hodgson and Bates to design their lavish new office blocks, which were intended to capitalize on the urgent demand for office space and also to serve as a testimony to their owners' prominence in the business community.

The Grain Exchange Building at 9th Avenue and 1 Street S.W. was their first major commercial block and, at six stories, it was the tallest building in Alberta in 1909. It was built for William Roper Hull, a rancher, real estate speculator, and founding member of the Calgary Grain Exchange, which was organized by a group of local businessmen who hoped to profit from the rapidly increasing grain production of western Canada. Although Hull's new office block had not been designed for such a specific use, he agreed that it might serve as the headquarters of the new Exchange.⁷

The beginning of Calgary's building boom corresponded to the period when reinforced concrete came into common use across the continent, and this structure attracted attention both locally and nationally as the first reinforced concrete "skyscraper" to be built in Calgary.⁸ The Grain Exchange was a transitional building in another respect, in that it was the only large office block of this period to disguise its modernity somewhat through the use of a rusticated sandstone veneer, which enabled it to blend in with the older masonry buildings on 8th and 9th Avenues. The design of the facade, however, including the row of Ionic pilasters which rose from the fourth to the sixth stories, emphasized the building's vertical thrust and clearly reflected the pattern of the grid beneath, thus placing it within the tradition of modern commercial construction in North America. Other office blocks by Hodgson and Bates that featured similar neo-classical elements were the C.P.R. Natural Resources Building, finished in smooth-dressed stone, and the Burns Building, which was sheathed in fashionable terra cotta.⁹

Calgarians who made or expanded their fortunes during the boom years were intent on establishing themselves not only as economic leaders but as a social elite as well, and a second field in which Hodgson and Bates were prominent was that of domestic architecture. Most of the homes they designed were in the prestigious new suburbs of Mount Royal and Elbow Park, where restrictions on lot size and the value of homes were imposed to ensure their exclusivity.¹⁰ During the early part of this period, financial success was often expressed through the erection of massive and ornate mansions, and some of these homes owed as much to their owners' desire for "show" (and their insistence on choosing their own decorative materials from mail order catalogues) as to their architects' creative abilities. But within a short time, Hodgson and Bates were designing houses with simpler and more elegant features, which were still typical of the era's eclectic tastes but were especially influenced by Tudor Revival and West Coast Bungalow styles.

Bates himself strongly believed that "an artistic home is an education in itself," and that "badly planned and hideously ornamented" surroundings result in "the degradation of the artistic sense and the loss of that satisfaction which comes from the ownership of something good." In common with many architects and urban reformers in this period, he subscribed to the ideals of the "city beautiful" movement and saw the progress Calgary was making in the design of attractive homes, the cultivation of gardens and lawns, and the provision of civic amenities as just the first stage of a brilliant future. "We have gone far these last few years," he wrote in 1908, "but in reality we are only starting, and it behoves us to use all our powers to good ends, finally to make this a model city."¹¹

The home of J.H. Woods in Elbow Park, built in 1910, possessed many of the features which were fashionable during the Edwardian era and were typical of Hodgson's and Bates' designs. Woods was, at that time, managing editor of the *Calgary Herald*, and was to have an illustrious career in both the business world and in public life.¹² The front facade of the Woods home, with its twin gables, was primarily of stucco with wood trim, although the side and rear gables were ornamented with Tudor-style half-timbering. Inside the home, the large entrance hall with its fireplace, beamed ceiling and panelled walls was a characteristic feature of the period. The Edwardians were also fond of "cosy corners," and to one side of the Woods' living room was an inglenook with the typical lowered ceiling, fireplace and built-in bench seats.¹³

By the time Calgary's era of expansion had ended in 1913, Hodgson and Bates had made a significant contribution to the city's architecture and had enjoyed, however briefly, the most favourable climate their profession would experience in Calgary for decades to come. As the economic boom collapsed, work in the architectural profession became more scarce and altered in nature. Even though the Alberta economy revived somewhat during World War I because grain prices were high, after 1918 it entered into a long period of stagnation caused by falling agricultural prices, rising production costs, and drought. In 1923, a C.P.R. official estimated that eighty percent of Alberta farmers were bankrupt. The market for goods produced and distributed by Calgary businesses

was, therefore, greatly reduced in relation to the pre-war level of prosperity. The frenetic overbuilding of that period, combined with the ensuing recession, produced a ninety percent drop in building permits issued between 1912 and 1920, and, apart from a brief revival in building activity in 1928-9, little in the way of major new construction would take place until after World War II.¹⁴ The architectural profession was dramatically affected. Twenty-three firms had been in business in Calgary in 1912, but by 1925 the number had been reduced to three.¹⁵ Hodgson and Bates dissolved their partnership in 1916, and while the details of Hodgson's subsequent career are unknown, Bates remained working in Calgary on his own until close to the time of his death in 1949.

Generally speaking, the commercial contracts which Bates received after World War I offered him little scope to explore new trends in architecture. The recession resulted in an excess of office and retail space, so that there was little need or demand for new commercial blocks. Most of Bates' work in this field involved renovating existing buildings or, occasionally, acting as associate architect in the erection of buildings designed by firms in the east. He secured contracts for a few small buildings during the interwar period, including a two-storey office block for the real estate firm of Toole, Peet and Company Ltd., which displayed a slight art deco influence.¹⁶

Housing construction was seriously affected by economic setbacks as well. Calgary's population grew slowly during the interwar period and even decreased slightly between 1931 and 1936, so that fewer new houses were needed. In addition, the city was mired in municipal debt, resulting partly from the over-extension of services to far-flung and under-developed suburban areas, and in 1920 the city council introduced a policy of growth restriction so severe that it would eventually lead to a housing shortage. Utilities and streetcar service were maintained only within a reduced urban area, which inhibited new housing construction and encouraged the conversion of large houses into multiple dwellings.¹⁷

Bates, therefore, had far less opportunity to develop his talent for domestic architecture after World War I than during the brief period of prosperity. Few new fortunes were now being made, and businessmen were no longer being drawn to the city in any number. Although he still built houses, including a few substantial dwellings in fashionable neighbourhoods, a large proportion of his contracts were for smaller, modest bungalows, which tended to be highly simplified versions of the styles favoured by wealthier clients in better times. A two bedroom house designed for the Holland Mortgage Company Ltd. in Victoria Park, for example, owed something to the front-gabled Tudor style, but consisted of only five small rooms on the ground level.¹⁸ Bates also prepared plans for housing renovations and conversions to duplexes.

Other contracts were secured which were useful as a source of income but must have been far less satisfying from a creative point of view. These included the design of new horse barns and various alterations to existing structures at the Stampede Grounds, and the erection of the Currie Barracks, which were constructed according to federal government plans.

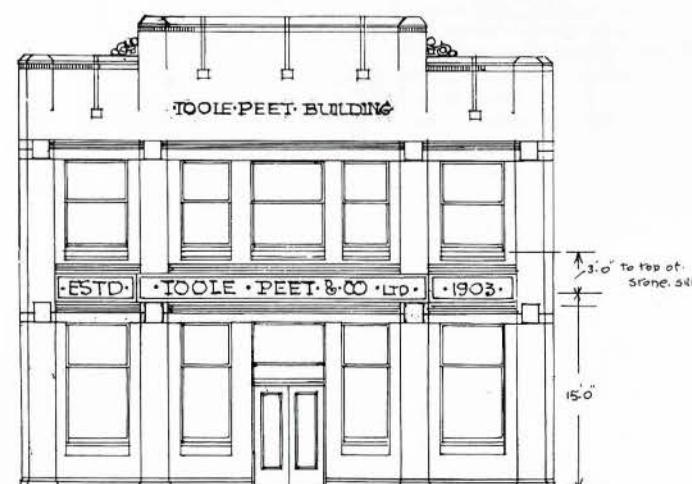


FIG. 40. THE TOOLE PEET BUILDING, 1430 1/2 ST. S.W. BATES PAPERS, F.S.

A small office block constructed in the early years of the depression.

PLANS OF PROPOSED BUNGALOW
TO BE ERECTED ON CORNER OF
FIRST ST. E. & 12th AVENUE, CALGARY for.
THE HOLLAND CANADA MORTGAGE CO. LTD.



SOUTH ELEVATION.

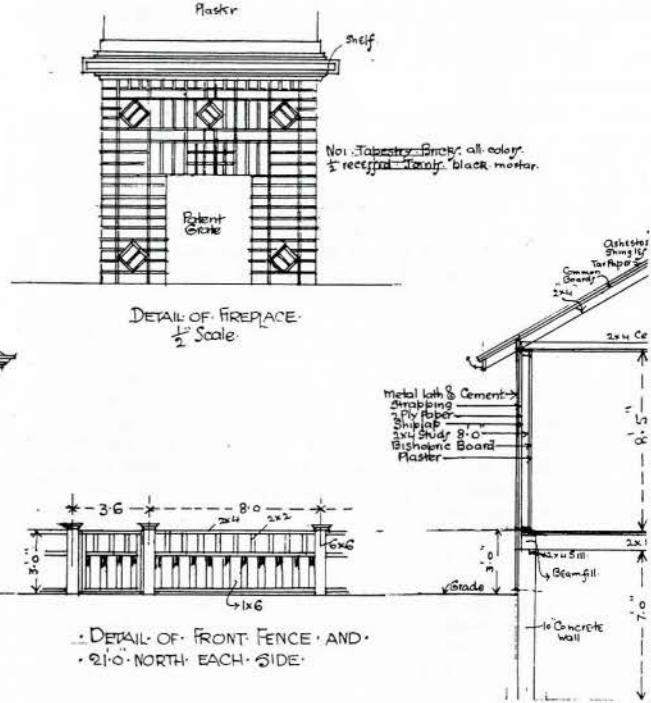
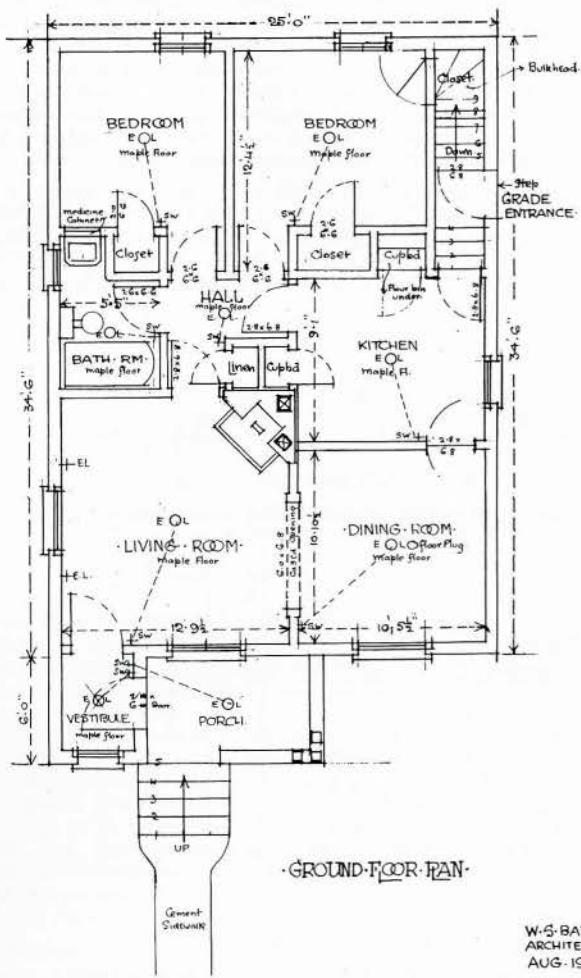


FIG. 72. PROPOSED BUNGALOW FOR THE HOLLAND CANADA MORTGAGE CO. BATES PAPERS, F. 35.

Bungalow designed by Bates during the interwar years. Elevation.



GROUND FLOOR PLAN.

W. G. BATES, ARCHITECT, CALG.
AUG. 1921.

FIG. 73. PROPOSED BUNGALOW FOR THE HOLLAND CANADA MORTGAGE CO. BATES PAPERS, F. 35.

Bungalow floor plan.

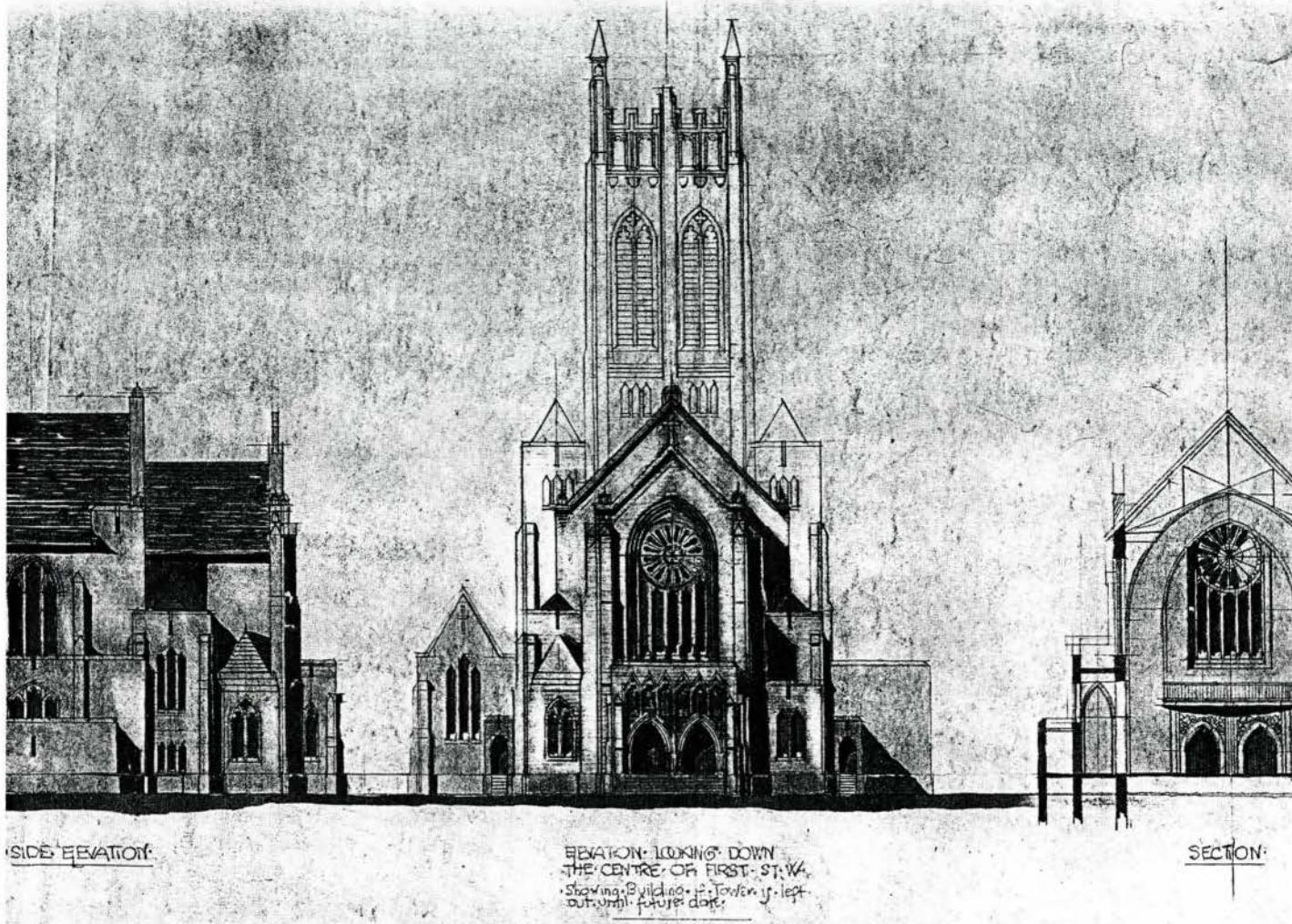
Bates devoted considerable attention to church design during the latter part of his career. As a young man, in fact, he had been apprenticed to Harold Gibbon, whom his daughter recalls as "an authority on the designing and building of churches in England," and this experience may have instilled in him a lifelong interest in ecclesiastical architecture.¹⁹ His papers contain clippings from American and British journals on church design along with a number of sketches of unidentified churches which he never had the opportunity to build. The poor economic conditions of the period affected parish finances as severely as those of any other institution, and the slow rate of population growth meant that, for the most part, Calgary was adequately served by the places of worship built before World War I.

Some new structures and additions were required, nonetheless, and Bates was employed by a number of denominations during these decades—though in virtually all instances, economy of construction was the over-riding consideration. His most important client in this period may well have been the Roman Catholic Church, for he received a series of contracts for new buildings, alterations and additions which began in the early 1920s, continued until the end of his career, and provided an outlet for his abiding interest in church architecture. He was called upon to build and renovate schools and convents, to design a major addition to Holy Cross Hospital, and to produce plans and supervise the construction of the new Sacred Heart Church in southwest Calgary.

Sacred Heart Parish had been planning a new church since before World War I and, by the late 1920s, had finally accumulated sufficient funds to begin to build. With the onset of the Depression, it was vital that this money be used carefully. The high level of unemployment meant that good workmanship could be obtained cheaply but, on the other hand, the limited finances of the parish meant that expensive materials and lavish ornamentation were out of reach.²⁰

The new building consisted of a church and rectory, connected together in an L-shape by the sacristy, which formed the ground floor of the tower. It was constructed of reinforced concrete and tapestry brick, and Bates' fondness for half-timbered dwellings gained expression in the upper storey of the rectory. The exterior of the church was very plain, the only ornament being (as described by the parish historian) "the deeply recessed and chastely moulded arched opening at the main door of the church." As a contemporary observed: "The architect knew that he was planning a small simple parish church, not a cathedral, and that if he desired to produce architectural effect, he must seek it in simplicity."²¹

Poignant evidence of Bates' unfulfilled ambitions in the field of church architecture is contained within his papers. St. Mary's Cathedral, which straddled 1st Street S.W. in the heart of Calgary's original Roman Catholic community, was long due for replacement, and an undated watercolour sketch by Bates suggests that he had cherished the hope



Sketch of a church "looking down First St., W." - the location of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral.

of designing a new cathedral in a traditional Gothic style.²² A new, modern church would, in fact, eventually be constructed on the same site in the mid-1950s by his son, artist and architect Maxwell Bennett Bates.²³

When Bates' career is studied in the context of Calgary's changing economic fortunes, it becomes clear that the assessment of his work is complicated by the powerful influence of external forces. Even though the latter part of his career spanned the decades during which modernism was transforming the practice of architecture around the world, its impact on Bates' work was slight. His innate conservatism is suggested by the fact that, like many Canadian architects, he retained a preference for traditional styles as shown, for example, in the church designs he produced as late as 1948. But it must also be acknowledged that economic conditions in Calgary during this period, which placed severe restrictions on the cost, size, and location of new buildings, must surely have constrained the creative and innovative powers of its few remaining architects.□

Notes

- See Max Foran, *Calgary: An Illustrated History* (1978); Max and Heather Foran, *Calgary: Canada's Frontier Metropolis* (1982).
- Doug Cass, Biographical sketch of W.S. Bates, Glenbow Alberta Institute (GAI).
- Paul Voisey, "In Search of Wealth and Status: An Economic and Social Study of Entrepreneurship in Early Calgary," in A.W. Rasporich and H.C. Klassen, *Frontier Calgary* (1975), p. 221.
- W.S. Bates, "Calgary is Proud of her Modern Warehouses," in *Prosperous Calgary* (1908) comp. Harry Hume.
- The firm of Hodgson and Bates was briefly expanded to include Ernest Butler during 1911 and Owen Keith Beattie between 1912 and 1914.
- Bryan Melnyk, *Calgary Builds: The Emergence of an Urban Landscape, 1905-1914* (1985), pp. 139-41.
- Ibid., pp. 131-2; City of Calgary Heritage File 1-165.
- T. Ritchie, *Canada Builds: 1867-1967* (1967), p. 245; "Reinforced Concrete: Its Advantages and Limitations," *Construction* (March 1911). For photos of the building under construction, see GAI: NA 1370-2; 2909 1-3.
- See Patricia Jasen, "An Introduction to the Architecture of William Stanley Bates" (1987), unpub. manu., GAI, for illustrations and descriptions of these and other commercial, domestic and institutional buildings designed by Bates. Also see the Bates Papers, GAI BB B329, which contain blueprints for many of his contracts.
- Foran, *Calgary: An Illustrated History*, pp. 79-99.
- "Beautiful Residences Show Why Calgary is Called 'The City of Homes,'" *Prosperous Calgary*.
- GAI, Clipping File.
- For blueprints of the Woods home, see Bates Papers, folder 31. On beamed ceilings and inglenooks, see "Growth of Interior Woodwork—Beamed Ceilings and Panelled Walls Gaining Favour," *Construction* (May, 1909); "Recessed Inglenooks a Feature," *Construction* (March, 1909). Also see Alistair Service, *Edwardian Interiors* (1982).
- Foran, *Calgary: Canada's Frontier Metropolis*, 155-6.
- Henderson's Calgary Directories.** And see Trevor Boddy, "Modern Architecture in Alberta," unpub. manu., Alberta Culture, 10, 47.
- GAI, Bates Papers, folder 5.
- Foran, *Calgary: An Illustrated History*, pp. 128-38.
- GAI, Bates Papers, folder 72.
- Correspondence with Mrs. Cynthia Aikenhead, July, 1987.
- M.B. Byrne, *From the Buffalo to the Cross: A History of the Roman Catholic Diocese in Calgary* (1973), pp. 143-7; Sacred Heart Church, Calgary, A Short History of the Sacred Heart Parish in the City of Calgary (1937), pp. 21-3.
- Ibid., pp. 20-1.
- GAI, Bates Papers, folder 83.
- Biography File of Maxwell Bennett Bates, University of Calgary Archives.