

"FROM CANVAS TO CONCRETE IN FIFTY YEARS,"

The Construction of Vancouver City Hall, 1935-6

DAVID MONTEYNE

BUILT IN 1935-6, VANCOUVER CITY HALL is a twelve-story, stepped-back, reinforced concrete structure clad in local stone. The building's austere architecture is known as modern classicism, a style widely popular in Western countries during the 1920s and 1930s. Its stripped-down colonnades and precise symmetry of plan and elevation are classical, but its relatively unadorned cubic masses – with limited, low-relief, Art Deco detailing as the only ornamentation – relate it to modernizing trends in architecture. The rhetoric, public events, and Golden Jubilee celebrations that surrounded the construction of Vancouver City Hall reinforced this conflation of tradition with modernity, as did the juxtaposition of images in Figure 1. These oppositions were driven by the social and political conditions that led to the construction of City Hall. Margaret Carter, in the introduction to *Town Halls of Canada*, suggests that town halls became symbols either of progress or of fiscal restraint.¹ For a municipality of Vancouver's size, the belated construction of a city hall, fifty years after the city's incorporation, suggests long-standing civic restraint. Yet it was a large capital project undertaken when the city was virtually bankrupt, and Vancouver City Hall was the only major city hall built in Canada during the distracted years between 1913 and the post-war boom of the 1950s. The building's austere appearance reflects the economic and social upheavals caused by the Depression, though the city hall project was promoted as a progressive solution

¹ Margaret Carter, "Types and Trends: An Introduction to the Study of Early Canadian Town Halls," in Marc de Caraffe, et al., *Town Halls of Canada: A Collection of Essays on Pre-1930 Town Hall Buildings* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1980), 9. For comprehensive historical data and analysis of Canadian city halls see this article and, in the same volume, G.E. Mills, "Antecedents and Influences: The Root Forms of Canadian Municipal Hall Design."



Figure 1: A well-known photograph of Vancouver's past depicts the first mayor and Council posing before City Hall in a tent. This promotional photograph was composed the day after the young city was destroyed by fire in 1886. The tent was the second of six temporary city halls preceding the erection of the present building in 1936, the year of the city's fiftieth anniversary. A superimposition like this, with the caption "from canvas to concrete in fifty years," was published in the *Province*, 26 November 1938, to mark the opening of the new City Hall. The juxtaposition was commonplace in 1936 Vancouver, as in the Golden Jubilee parade float created by the Native Sons of BC which carried models of the tent and new City Hall. The version published here was created for the city archivist in 1937. (City of Vancouver Archives, City P.39 N.28)

to unemployment. The building was also a monumental rebuke to the riotous unemployed who – in the eyes of the project's proponents – had recently breached the restraint of civil society.

Vancouver City Hall was built on foundations of controversy over its suburban site, its architect, its modernistic style, and its cost. This article attempts to untangle the motives, social relations, and political conflicts that affected the process of architectural production. The particular style and ornament of Vancouver City Hall are only one part of its story. The construction of a public building focuses issues of civic and institutional identity.² In the mid-1930s, Vancouver was

² For example, it has been argued that new western Canadian immigrant communities established cultural institutions such as city halls in order to give identity to their settlements. See Dana Johnson, "For Generations to Come: The Town Hall as a Symbol of Community," in de Caraffe, et al., *Town Halls of Canada*, 229-30.

an established community with few public institutions – and no city hall – to reveal its character. It was beginning to promote its position as the third city of Canada and to project an image as the centre of Commonwealth business and political interest on the Pacific Rim. It had recently amalgamated (1929) with the adjacent municipalities of South Vancouver and Point Grey, roughly tripling its area. The city seemed to require a monument that defined its character and importance.

Most histories of Vancouver associate the building of City Hall with Mayor Gerald McGeer. McGeer is seen as the politician with enough influence to get City Hall built during the Depression and to get it built where and how he wanted. He had strong reasons, both public and personal, for each decision he made concerning City Hall, and he had immense popular support. He was elected, often concurrently, as a British Columbia MLA (1916-20; 1933-4), as a federal MP (1935-45), and as mayor of Vancouver (1935-6 and 1947). His values, and the political issues he addressed, reflected the concerns of much of the voting public. By virtue of this popularity and his extensive family and business connections, McGeer wielded a great deal of political power. This article seeks to show that this power, in the context of local and national politics, Depression-era riots, public attitudes, and civic symbolism, largely influenced the construction of Vancouver City Hall.

BACKGROUND AND SITE

Plebiscites to secure capital for the construction of a city hall had been approved by Vancouver voters as early as 1912. Subsequent plebiscites increased the funds allotted, but no political will was found to initiate a building project. As the acting mayor summed it up in 1931: “It seems a fatal indecision has characterized Vancouver for twenty years....It is a humiliating position for the city, which claims to be the third metropolis in Canada, to have no city hall.”³ During this period Vancouverites had been embarrassed by the Victorian red-brick building with turrets, cupola, and balcony (the latter two features had rotted and been removed by the 1920s) that civic government had shared with the city market since 1894 (Figure 2). Built originally as a market hall in 1888, and progressively annexed by the civic bureaucracy, the building stood at the corner of Main

³ *Province*, 2 November 1931.



Figure 2: Old Vancouver City Hall in 1901. (City of Vancouver Archives, City P.47 N.40)

and Hastings Streets, ten blocks from the new business district. Although combined markets and town halls were common in the nineteenth century, by 1900 most Canadian cities had purpose-built municipal halls; a combined institution began to denote small-town status.⁴ In addition, a majority of Vancouver voters disliked the location of the old City Hall: it was surrounded by Chinatown, Japantown, the Italian and East European immigrant neighbourhood of Strathcona, and hotels for dock workers and visiting sailors along Hastings Street.

In seven plebiscites between 1912 and 1934, voters made it clear that they did not want the new City Hall to be located on the old market site. In all but one vote, they favoured the Central School site, nearer the heart of the city's business district (Figure 3). Although banking, retail, and government institutions were located a few blocks to the west around Granville Street, this site was central to outlying residential areas and was well served by public transportation. Adjacent to Central School was the lot where the old provincial

⁴ Mills, "Antecedents and Influences," 51.

Potential Sites for Vancouver City Hall, 1914-1935



Figure 3: Map of potential sites for Vancouver City Hall, 1914-96. (Dean McKay)

courthouse had stood until 1913, and which became Victory Square with the completion of the cenotaph in 1924. Other sites included in the various plebiscites were: Thornton Park, located at Main Street and Terminal Avenue, facing the two railway stations at the east end of False Creek; and a site near the intersection of Burrard and Davie Streets in the West End, overlooking English Bay. Suburban Strathcona Park, at 12th Avenue and Cambie Street, located across False Creek and up a hill from downtown, was the eventual site of City Hall (Figure 3).⁵

⁵ City of Vancouver Archives (CVA), Nomination Book and Record of Elections, 1924-49, MCR-4-2; and Public Documents, PD 532 and PD 547.

In 1914-5, the city held a competition to produce a site plan for a city hall and a civic centre to be built on the Victory Square-Central School site. The winning entries represented the grand manner of the City Beautiful Planning Movement, which favoured broad, straight axes cut diagonally through gridded city fabric and framed by symmetrically arranged buildings conforming in scale and classical ornamentation. Vistas and plazas formed by these broad axes were the privileged locations for monuments and public buildings. One plaza was typically reserved for an impressive city hall and flanking cultural or administrative buildings.⁶ The competition was won by young partners Theo Korner and R.H. Mattocks, whose entry included a perspective and elevations showing colonnaded buildings and a classical, domed city hall (Figure 4). Second place went to Fred Townley, the future architect of Vancouver City Hall, whose entry included only a site plan anticipating the symmetry of his 1935 design.

There was little discussion of a civic centre or city hall during the First World War and the following years of economic instability. In the late 1920s, just prior to the amalgamation with South Vancouver and Point Grey, the city engaged an American planner, Harland Bartholomew, to create a city plan for Vancouver. In contrast with the City Beautiful plans of the 1910s, the Bartholomew Plan of 1928-9 reflected the now dominant City Efficient Movement.⁷ Bartholomew made detailed recommendations for transportation and traffic management, health and recreation, and the functional zoning of the city. The report also included a small section in which the planners urged that all public buildings and their settings be "creditable" to the city and in which they proposed construction of a civic centre on English Bay. This is the Burrard Street site, which appeared on subsequent plebiscites. A city hall would be flanked by other administrative and cultural buildings surrounding a terraced plaza in an ensemble

⁶ The City Beautiful Movement had spread across North America in the two decades after the 1893 World Exposition in Chicago, and it produced famous plans for that city and many others before losing its momentum in the early 1910s. A well-known West Coast example of the principles is the civic centre built in San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. See Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 670-3. One of the foremost British practitioners of City Beautiful planning was T.H. Mawson, who settled in Vancouver briefly after 1912 and produced an unsolicited scheme for a widened Georgia Street axis connecting a downtown plaza of city administrative buildings with a cultural centre at Coal Harbour. Mawson's presence in the city prompted the formation of an association that sponsored the civic centre competition.

⁷ A good analysis of the goals of Vancouver's City Beautiful and City Efficient Movements is found in Graeme Wynn, "The Rise of Vancouver," in Graeme Wynn and Timothy Oke, eds., *Vancouver and Its Region* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), 118-29.

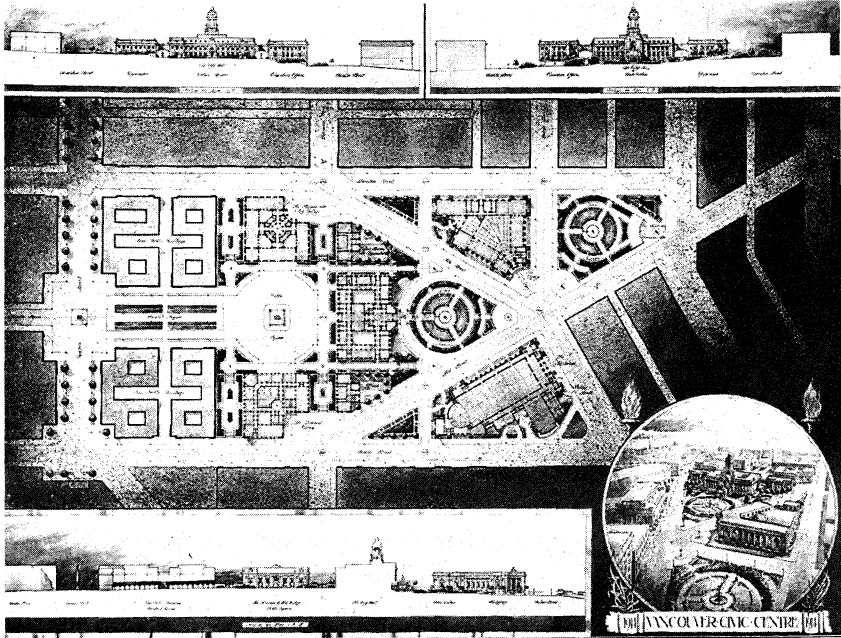


Figure 4: Winning entry of Korner & Mattocks, 1914 civic centre competition, (UBC Library, Special Collections)

reminiscent of City Beautiful tenets: Burrard Street would become the broad, monumental axis, and the complex would be approached by a new bridge over False Creek.⁸

Over the years the city adopted many of the recommendations in the Bartholomew Plan, particularly with regard to zoning. Of Bartholomew's civic centre recommendations, only the Burrard Bridge was built (in 1932), but his implied critique that the city's public buildings were not "credible" hit close to the mark with citizens and elected officials. In addition, a growing bureaucracy in an amalgamated city needed more office space. In 1929 the city finally moved out of the old market building, renting space in a nearby office building on Hastings Street. On several occasions City Council considered buying an office block in the business district. For example, when the Depression bankrupted the speculative developers of the Marine Building, they offered to sell it to the city for half its construction cost. With a prominent site terminating the west end of Hastings Street, and a decorative scheme evoking regional marine history, the Marine Building could have

⁸ Harland Bartholomew and Associates, *A Plan for the City of Vancouver British Columbia* (Vancouver: Town Planning Commission, 1928), 237 ff.

made a splendid city hall, but without the money or a mandate to purchase, the city declined such offers.⁹

The construction of a civic centre in Vancouver was never pursued with resolution. Grand plans required the political will to effect land appropriations and the capital to commission large buildings. Although Vancouverites repeatedly approved construction of a city hall, the councils they elected did not initiate the project. The 1933 plebiscite was the only one in which the Central School site did not win, coming second in this vote to Thornton Park in east False Creek. City Councillor L.D. McDonald made the construction of city hall at Thornton Park his personal mission during the 1933-4 term of office. Sketches were made for a building that reflected the *Beaux-Arts* classicism of the railway stations across the park. Critics of the site argued that the area was a low-rent industrial district situated on unstable landfill (the site was previously part of False Creek) and that other locations were better. The city engineer pointed out that three sewer outflows passed through the site and would need to be redirected. Finally, the Town Planning Commission argued that a city hall at this location would interfere with the recommendations of the Bartholomew Plan: the area around Thornton Park was zoned for industry and the site's relatively small size would undermine the idea of a civic centre. McDonald could not generate support for the project, but he did force action on a new city hall. In August 1934, after months of debate, council voted to build on the Central School site in spite of the most recent plebiscite. Discussions were held with the Architectural Institute of British Columbia, but an architectural competition was postponed because council had no money for prizes. In the December 1934 election, the voters approved a bylaw to spend \$630,000 to build a city hall on the Central School site, but the project continued to flounder in controversy.¹⁰

THE NEW MAYOR AND POLITICAL CRISES

During the same election Gerry McGeer became mayor. At this time, McGeer was serving his second term as an MLA and was well known

⁹ The lack of parking near the Marine Building was also stated as a deterrent for the city. Other buildings offered or investigated by the city between 1922 and 1933 include: the Winch Building, next to the old general post office on Pender Street; the Dominion Building and the Sun Tower, both next to Victory Square; and the Canadian National Railways station facing Thornton Park. See *cva*, Add. mss. 177, Vancouver Golden Jubilee Society, "City Hall newspaper clippings."

¹⁰ McDonald himself kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings regarding his proposals for the Thornton Park site, which is now in the *cva*, Add. mss. 134. Plans for a competition are also mentioned in *cva*, City Clerk, Special Committees, v.68 f.70.

for his oratory and views on monetary reform. He had made his reputation in the 1920s as lawyer for the provincial government at the Board of Railway Commissioners in Ottawa.¹¹ On behalf of the province McGeer had argued, with some success, against railway rate structures that favoured grain shipments to Great Lakes over West Coast ports. He had played a role in allowing Vancouver to challenge Winnipeg for the business of the Prairie hinterland, a competition in which Vancouver made great ground.¹² McGeer had also impressed international audiences with his compelling speeches condemning the private banking system as the root cause of the Depression. He advocated a radical reform of the national monetary system in which the federal government would assume the control of credit and the issuance of currency, particularly for public projects.

Despite his radical arguments on finance, on most social and political issues McGeer represented the ideals and played on the fears of the voting and business classes that supported him. He was committed to Empire and the values of Anglo-American society, and he appealed to the business class (except financiers) with his vociferous boosterism of Vancouver as a commercial centre. During the upheavals of the 1930s he was vituperatively anti-communist: in a radio speech as mayor, he described an international communist conspiracy that would “turn our city into a shambles, destroy our business institutions, our plan of government, our liberty, the morals of our children, and our right to worship in our churches in our own way.”¹³ Later, during the war, McGeer became a patriotic anti-fascist while sharing many ideas with the fascist movement. For example, McGeer won as a Liberal in both the 1933 provincial and 1935 federal elections, when the party won on explicitly racist platforms. In 1935, when McGeer published his views on government control of banking in a book entitled *The Conquest of Poverty*, he flirted with anti-Semitic rhetoric:

we must drive the money changers out of the temples of government and put the spirit of Christ in charge. By such changes the

¹¹ For the biography of McGeer, see David Ricardo Williams, *Mayor Gerry: The Remarkable Gerald Grattan McGeer* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1986). Raised in Vancouver, the son of a dairy farmer, McGeer's first job was in iron working. As a union representative to a 1909 labour conference in Quebec City, he decided he would need to understand law in order to become successful. He attended Dalhousie University and entered provincial politics soon after his 1915 return to Vancouver.

¹² Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 238.

¹³ “Radio Speech by Mayor G.G. McGeer over ckwx, September 8, 1935,” 15, in Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library.

sovereignty of usury can be overthrown and the elected representatives of the people may become the rulers of the "economic bloodstream of the nation." Responsible government as an expression of Christian Democracy may then be maintained.¹⁴

McGeer's politics appealed to a majority of Vancouver voters who clamoured for creative, even radical, solutions to the economic problems of the Depression, while fearing the social upheavals linked with immigration, unemployment, and the popularity of left-wing politics.

In his campaign speeches for mayor, McGeer had portrayed himself as the city's dynamic saviour and had castigated the incumbent mayor and council for perpetuating a status quo that included the city's deficit, relief payments, police corruption, and the failure to build a city hall. McGeer pointed out that the Holden Building, then rented as city hall, was owned by an old friend of the incumbent mayor. Indeed, McGeer made the construction of City Hall a key plank in his populist platform – a way of creating employment and fostering civic pride. Restoring civil, moral, and financial order to the city in the face of high unemployment, unrest, and bankrupt ratepayers was the overlying theme of his campaign.¹⁵ The first years of the Depression had taken a heavy toll. City revenues had fallen as the unemployed and bankrupt could not pay their property taxes, and the cost of welfare relief, then a municipal responsibility, had soared. Caring for its unemployed citizens without the revenue normally gained from them, Vancouver had defaulted on payments to its international creditors. McGeer vowed to stand up to these creditors, and the largest ever voter turnout gave him a landslide victory in the December election.¹⁶

¹⁴ Gerald McGeer, *The Conquest of Poverty* (Gardenvale, PQ: Garden City, 1935), i-ii. The Liberal Party portrayed itself as protecting Canadian values by opposing the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (ccf) platform that proposed legalizing the vote for those of Asian descent; Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 153-4.

¹⁵ See Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 167ff. Williams re-creates a typical campaign speech on pages 169-71. The Vancouver *Province* supported McGeer's campaign, arguing that Taylor was happy in the "shoddy" and "embarrassing" Holden Building, and relating the two candidates' views on a new city hall to their overall platforms of reform versus status quo. See, for example, the *Province*, 6 December 1934.

¹⁶ McGeer received 71 per cent of the vote. See Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: National Museums of Canada, 1980), 112-4. In his victory speeches, McGeer said he had received a mandate to force change on "reactionaries" like Prime Minister R.B. Bennett and provincial finance minister John Hart. See Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 171.

McGeer's first actions as mayor were to fire the police chief because of unsubstantiated allegations of systemic corruption and to replace him with a retired army colonel, W.W. Foster. This set the tone for a mayoralty that relied on extensive police action and a symbolic military presence in the city to counteract fears of radicalism and unrest. Unemployed men from eastern Canada and the Prairies had been riding the boxcars across the country looking for work in each city. The end of the line was Vancouver and its "jungles," or shanty towns, built on the shores of False Creek and Burrard Inlet. As the municipal welfare program was limited to Vancouver residents, these migrants relied on private charity. Beginning in 1931, the federal and provincial governments funded interior work camps, but the conditions and wages led many men to abandon these camps. The large body of unemployed in Vancouver began protest marches in the spring of 1935. In April, after several weeks of relatively peaceful protest, the marchers damaged the interior of the Hudson's Bay Company department store and vandalized streetfronts on their way to a rally at Victory Square. The mayor met them there and, on the recommendation of Chief Foster, officially read the Riot Act. This act orders the peaceful dispersal of a crowd within thirty minutes, failing which the police can legally use force to restore order. The Criminal Code holds mayors liable if they fail to read the act when requested to do so by their chief of police. For his action McGeer was branded "the worst fascist in Canada" by a strike spokesman.¹⁷ The Riot Act dispersed the crowd in Victory Square, but protest and damage to private property continued. Many unemployed left Vancouver on 3-4 June for the historic "On-to-Ottawa" trek, which was violently halted by police in Regina. To the outrage of British Columbians, the Saskatchewan government paid for the transit of hundreds of the protesters back to Vancouver. Meanwhile, a violent longshoremen's strike had erupted in Vancouver and culminated on 18 June in a two-hour battle in which police used tear gas and cavalry charges to subdue the crowd.

INITIATING THE PROJECT: FUNDING, SITE, ARCHITECT

Amid this furor, McGeer revived the city hall project. On April 15, eight days before he read the Riot Act, he presented a proposal to

¹⁷ *Province*, 14 June 1935. For details of the strikes, see Roy, *Vancouver*, 95-102; for the reading of the Riot Act, see Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 187-8.

raise funds by floating Baby Bonds. On 5 June, the day after the longshoremen went on strike, council approved Strathcona Park as the site. There can be no doubt that labour unrest in mid-Depression Vancouver had a significant influence in shaping the city hall project. The prominent site, on a hill overlooking Vancouver, allowed panoramic views of the assailed areas of downtown and of the low-income neighbourhoods of the east end. The monumental aspect of the building acted as a reminder to the surrounding city of the authority vested within; that is, the recently exercised power of the Riot Act and of tear gas. The project would also create jobs for an "idle" labour force, for McGeer held that "the real answer to Communism is work with decent wages."¹⁸

However, the city needed money to create those jobs, and the Baby Bonds were intended to raise money locally. The small increments of the bonds (i.e. "Baby"-sized) would allow ordinary citizens to contribute to the construction of City Hall, thereby encouraging public pride while alleviating the city's financial problems (Figure 5). McGeer could not print money to fund public works, something he encouraged the federal government to do, nor would he borrow from "greedy" lending institutions. McGeer intended to raise \$1.5 million through the Baby Bonds: \$1 million for a city hall, the remainder for infrastructure works around the city.¹⁹ In essence, McGeer proposed to use the money to create a local version of the Public Works Administration (PWA), the agency funding building projects to create jobs in Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" America. Roosevelt appears as a monetary sage in McGeer's book, *The Conquest of Poverty*. In the spring of 1935, neither Canada nor British Columbia had instituted many policies of the New Deal type. The relief camps and related road-building projects were some of their few solutions to the Depression. For its part, the provincial government tried to introduce a "little New Deal" to British Columbia, but Ottawa had refused to supply the money. The federal government – both R.B. Bennett's Conservatives between 1930 and 1935, and W.L. Mackenzie King's Liberals before and after

¹⁸ *Province*, 11 June 1935.

¹⁹ *cva*, City Council Minutes, 10 June 1935, in reference to the Baby Bonds, suggests how things worked during McGeer's mayoralty:

The rules were suspended and a By-law to amend By-law No. 2368, being a by-law to raise by way of debentures the sum of \$1,500,000 for the construction of a city hall and for ... public works generally, was introduced and read the first time. The rules were again suspended and this By-law was read the second time. The Council then resolved itself into Committee of the Whole to consider this By-law, His Worship the Mayor in the Chair. The By-law was read clause by clause and adopted.

– preferred to wait for problems to recede of their own accord. Bennett’s deathbed conversion to Rooseveltian policies came on the eve of the 1935 election, in which he was soundly defeated. One of his few solutions to survive the change back to the Mackenzie King government was the Public Works Construction Act (PWCA) of 1934, which set aside \$40 million to be spent on infrastructure works and buildings across Canada over a period of several years. Compared to the American PWA, or even to the federal government’s own report recommending an outlay of \$70 million annually, this was an extremely modest solution – and most of the money went initially to Conservative ridings, of which there were none in Vancouver.²⁰ When the Liberals came to power in 1935, they did authorize a large extension to the downtown post office. Built between 1935 and 1937 in the modern classical style, this federal building would play a part in the eventual choice of style for Vancouver City Hall.

Soon after becoming mayor, McGeer attended two conferences of Canadian mayors to discuss strategies for pushing upper levels of government to act on unemployment and municipal debt. A delegation from the second conference, led by McGeer, presented its concerns to Cabinet and Senate in Ottawa but was refused speaking time in the House of Commons.²¹ As the federal and provincial governments continued to avoid financial and political responsibility for what they considered to be municipal problems, McGeer looked for a solution by extending municipal powers. He described the Baby Bonds as “our first attempt to establish local financing of the city’s affairs.”²² In the end, most of them were purchased by larger businesses, such as Imperial Oil and Canadian Pacific Railway.²³ As well, the contractors for the building agreed to take a large percentage of their remuneration in bonds.

Well aware of the years of controversy over the location for a new city hall, McGeer had appointed a site selection committee in April

²⁰ Janet Wright, *Crown Assets: The Architecture of the Department of Public Works, 1867–1967* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 175–6, 293 fn. 35. For federal and provincial policies, see J.L. Granatstein et al., *Nation: Canada Since Confederation* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1990), 328–31; and Craig Brown, ed., *The Illustrated History of Canada* (Toronto: Lester, 1991), 448–53. Governmental rejection of responsibility for relief issues is also discussed in Jill Wade, *Houses for All: The Struggle for Social Housing in Vancouver, 1919–1950* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), 45–7, 84–90. McGeer explicitly used New Deal terminology, as in his victory speech on election night, 13 December 1934, CVA, Add. mss. 54, “Major Matthews Topical Files, Mayors, McGeer, G.G.”

²¹ Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 181–4.

²² *Province*, 11 June 1935.

²³ Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 197.

1935. This three-member committee consisted of McGeer's old friend and admirer Chief Justice Aulay Morrison; G.L.T. Sharp, chairman of the town planning commission, who, expecting to be chosen as architect, had good reason to please the mayor; and Dr. Leonard Klinck, president of the University of British Columbia, who was probably accustomed to following Sharp's professional lead in the latter's role as campus architect. The committee officially recommended the Strathcona Park site because of its visibility and its centrality to the newly amalgamated suburbs. On 5 June, city council reluctantly approved the choice of the site selection committee. At the time, the area around Strathcona Park was mainly residential, and the site bordered farm land and bush to the south. The site had almost always placed last in the different plebiscites.

The announcement provoked widespread public outcry. Because the site had never done well in the plebiscites, ratepayers complained that their previous votes had been disregarded. The Town Planning Commission held that the Strathcona Park site had never been considered as, and was utterly inappropriate for, a civic centre. Its chairman, Sharp, admitted to voting for the site against his true feelings. Businessmen were irate that the location was so far from downtown. A member of the Vancouver Board of Trade scrawled on a blank bond form that "the location selected is a *most* unpopular choice, and many would-be subscribers have withheld their subscriptions on that account." Even the Ratepayer's Associations from Point Grey and Kerrisdale, districts closer to Strathcona Park, argued in favour of the Central School site, thus repudiating the common argument that recent municipal amalgamation led to the choice of site.²⁴

In response, McGeer claimed that, unlike some of the other sites, the property was already owned by the city. However, the old city hall site, Thornton Park, and Central School were all city-owned; only the Burrard site would have required extensive land purchase, appropriation, and demolition.²⁵ To deflate accusations of bias, McGeer pointed to the "impartial" site selection committee, claiming that

²⁴ cva, City Clerk's Files, 16-C-1.

²⁵ An additional attraction of the Strathcona Park site was that the Canadian Pacific Railway had offered to give the city a parcel of land to replace the park, which would be lost to construction. The CPR knew that a city hall in that location would spur development of their huge landholdings in South Vancouver. See cva, Add. mss. 177, "City Hall news-clippings." Although council had rejected the idea in 1934 by choosing the Central School site, the city would eventually take advantage of the offer. The land was deeded to the city by the CPR on 19 October 1936 and became Hillcrest Park. See cva, Parks Board Correspondence, 1936, "Park Sites."

Thornton Park would have been his personal choice. However, McGeer knew that, despite the 1933 plebiscite in its favour, the Thornton Park site had been thoroughly discredited in council and newspaper debates over the previous two years. He had other motives for forcing his desired Strathcona Park site: it was at the edge of a middle-class neighbourhood, separate from the working-class and immigrant areas of the east end, and distant from the central business district. McGeer had gained his fame by advocating governmental control of credit and money, and he spoke virulently against the downtown banks and credit companies. This was surely a factor in his preference for a site that was physically out of reach of banks and big business.

Strathcona Park was also a strategic choice in relation to the civic strife in the downtown core. While building City Hall the construction workers would be separated from the main areas of strike agitation: the Riot Act had been read in Victory Square, adjacent to the Central School site. The choice of Strathcona Park represented a retreat from the notion of a civic centre and public gathering place. The site had little extra land on which to establish a public space. It was eventually landscaped as a narrow driveway encircling the building, with a sloping, treed park to the north, protected by a steep berm to Cambie Street.

On June 10, council announced that Fred Townley, of Townley and Matheson, had been named architect of City Hall. The official explanation was that Townley had placed second in the 1915 competition, that he had already done “considerable work in connection with the plans for a City Hall,” and that his father had been mayor of Vancouver in 1901.²⁶ No one added that Townley was an old friend of McGeer’s.²⁷ The possibility of an architectural competition was circumvented, and the peremptory nature of the announcement provoked a flurry of criticism. The Architectural Institute of British Columbia wrote a critical letter addressed to the mayor and to local newspapers:

²⁶ cva, City Council Minutes, 10 June 1935; *Province*, 6 June 1935. Two 1935 ink-on-photograph sketches by Townley of potential city hall designs survive in the collection of his daughter. One sketch for the Central School site portrays the building much as it was built; the other sketch, for the Strathcona Park site, shows a decorated building with a tower, akin to the rendering in the Bartholomew Plan.

²⁷ In campaign speeches, McGeer had referred to his “architect friend,” Fred Townley, who had already drawn up “a sketch of what a decent city hall ought to look like.” See Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 170. For McGeer’s opposition to an architectural competition, see Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 195–6. So grateful was Townley for the commission that, as a gift upon completion of City Hall, he presented the city with a life-size portrait of McGeer. See *Province*, 3–5 December 1936. Despite some contemporary councillors who refused to countenance the portrait after McGeer left office, the painting hangs today in the council chamber facing the portrait of Captain George Vancouver.

You have been strongly adverse to holding a competition ... for what reason we can only surmise, and you declare by virtue of Mr. Townley winning a competition for a landscape design of a civic centre on the Central School site some twenty years ago ... (at a time when some of us were in France), you give his firm the right to expect that they would be chosen ...

By your own line of reasoning, it is plain that Townley and Matheson are not entitled to the work and should be replaced by Korner and Mattocks, who were selected winners of the competition. It is true that the latter gentlemen have no forebears who at any time occupied the position of chief magistrate of this city, but this in no way should be held against them.²⁸

Perhaps most disgusted was Sharp, who angrily resigned after ten year's service on the Town Planning Commission.

For several months councillors and citizens continued to call for reassessments of the project. To counteract them, the mayor declared council out of order for re-introducing an issue that had already been decided by council vote. He bullied groups that did not support him, such as the Vancouver Real Estate Exchange, which he said seemed "willing to sacrifice Vancouver's progress to advance the interests of downtown real estate holders." Other opponents of McGeer's city hall project challenged the legality of the Baby Bonds. Although the city continued to sell the bonds, the uncertainty caused by this litigation hindered sales until March 1936, when T.D. Pattullo's Liberal provincial government repaid political favours by passing legislation specifically to legalize the bond issue.²⁹

CONSTRUCTION RITUALS AND GOLDEN JUBILEE EVENTS

Despite the controversies of 1935, the new City Hall was being conceptualized as the focal point for Vancouver's Golden Jubilee

²⁸ *Province*, 12 June 1935. Korner and Mattocks no longer existed as an architectural firm in 1935. In official letters, council rebuffed both the Architectural Institute and Sharp's firm, who had requested a position of "professional collaboration" on the design. See *cva*, City Council Minutes, 17 June 1935.

²⁹ Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 196-7. For McGeer's relations with city council, and votes on aspects of City Hall, see Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 172-3; and *cva*, City Council Minutes, particularly the fall and winter of 1935-6. Newspaper editorials at the time complained of "yes-men" on council bowing to McGeer. See *cva*, Add. mss. 177, "City Hall newsclippings." For the letter to the Vancouver Real Estate Exchange Ltd. and more, see *cva*, Add. mss. 54, "City Hall."

celebrations of the coming year, and McGeer was determined to push forward immediately with the project. These celebrations were elaborately staged by the mayor in the summer of 1936 while the building was under construction, and they emphasized the themes of governmental authority, reform, history, and progress. The first event was the groundbreaking ceremony held on 5 October 1935 – a show of confidence since many of the bonds had not yet sold. The theme of civic pride, outlined in McGeer speeches and Baby Bonds advertisements, was further emphasized at this ceremony, which included the presentation of “Good Citizen” awards and police bravery medals. The police band provided music, and the mayor reviewed a troop of eighty officers.³⁰

In architectural rituals like the groundbreaking, and in Jubilee activities and rhetoric, the city was reminded that order had been restored to Vancouver by strong leadership. A slight upturn in the construction industry and changes to the welfare relief programs also contributed to the calming of tensions. Nevertheless, Vancouver would not quickly forget the violent spring of 1935, and Jubilee publications, parades, and ceremonies invariably reflected the presence of the police and military. The *Official Pictorial Souvenir Program* of the Jubilee devoted several pages to Colonel Foster’s police force as well as to the “Administration of Justice,” which “moves relentlessly” in the city.³¹ On the opening day of the Jubilee, an estimated 100,000 spectators witnessed the largest military parade held since 1914. The parade ended in Stanley Park, where 2,000 troops and members of four police forces filled the centre of Brockton Oval, in front of 8,000 spectators. In his address to the gathering, the former prime minister and Opposition leader R.B. Bennett specifically mentioned the “well-behaved crowds” witnessing the events.

Bennett and his audience did not misinterpret the surveillance and control over the city represented by the panoramic prospect of City Hall. The next day, at the cornerstone dedication, Bennett praised the new City Hall, “set high upon a hill,” as the “guardian watchtower” and “sentinel” for an era of “unselfish citizenship,” in a city under the “reign of law” and the “rule of reason.”³² Construction workers hung

³⁰ A time capsule placed behind the cornerstone contains, among other things, a police badge, a Baby Bond, a Jubilee program, and photographs of McGeer, Bennett, Townley, the site in 1890, and a panorama of the city; *Province* 3 July 1936.

³¹ Vancouver Golden Jubilee Committee, *Vancouver’s Golden Jubilee Official Pictorial Souvenir Program* (Vancouver: the Committee, 1936), 76-9; cVA, Add. mss. 177, “Programs.”

³² The Jubilee opening and cornerstone dedication were reported in the *Vancouver Province*, 2-3 July 1936, with the writer noting the presence of the construction workers who are

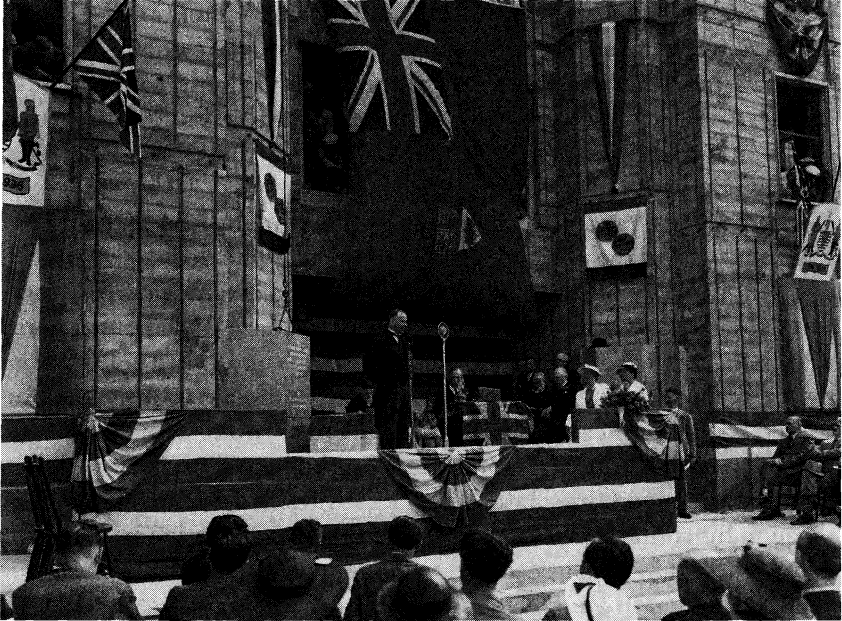


Figure 6: Mayor McGeer speaking at the City Hall cornerstone ceremony, 3 July, 1936, (Vancouver Public Library, Special Collections, vPL 4691)

out of unfinished window openings behind the speakers, a backdrop of happily employed citizens (Figure 6). This represented symbolic consensus building, as citizens participated in events choreographed under the direction of civic authorities.

Minority ethnic groups participated in the Jubilee celebrations on this symbolic basis. An encampment was set up in Stanley Park for visiting representatives of First Nations peoples from across the continent, who wore traditional costumes and performed for the public in dances and canoe races.³³ The Chinese and Japanese held Jubilee carnivals in their neighbourhoods. The Chinese carnival included a ceremonial gate, an elaborate pagoda, and other structures prefabricated in China and erected adjacent to Chinatown. Because of the Asiatic Exclusion Act, 1923, McGeer had to secure special permission from the federal minister of immigration for the visit of twenty Chinese scholars and performers, and the Golden Jubilee Society posted a bond to guarantee the twenty would “engage in no other wage earning occupation” and would return to China immediately upon completion

readily visible in the photographs. The transcript of Bennett’s speech may be found at cva, Add. MSS. 54, Topical Files, “R.B. Bennett.” See Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 206–9.

³³ cva, City Clerk’s Records, 80-C-5; *Province* 18 July 1936.

of the events. Although popular with the general public, these ethnic displays were treated as carnival ephemera or exotic entertainments while civic authority erected permanent monuments to itself, such as City Hall and the Jubilee fountain in Stanley Park. Chinatown was a fine tourist attraction, but a distant City Hall demonstrated that civic power lay elsewhere.³⁴

In one of his Vancouver speeches, Bennett identified the nature of civic power with the phrase "men of our breed." The dedicatory prayers and Anglican hymns at City Hall and Jubilee ceremonies also indicated the Anglo-Christian focus of the events. So did the British pomp associated with that summer's official visit to the Jubilee celebrations by Sir Percy Vincent, the Lord Mayor of London. McGeer was presented with a replica of London's mace (the symbol of its municipal power), and a statue of Captain George Vancouver was unveiled in front of the new City Hall.³⁵ McGeer intended the visit, arranged through his contacts in Ottawa and London, to emphasize Imperial ties and the decorum of political hierarchies represented by the Lord Mayor.

Businessmen in Vancouver anticipated that Imperial capital would flow through the port of Vancouver, and the Jubilee Society hosted cultural delegations from Asian countries in an attempt to bring those places within the city's shared realm of Imperial influence. The *Official Program* stated that "the Vancouver of tomorrow will be the mistress of the trade that is making its way to the great Pacific basin."³⁶ The

³⁴ Of Vancouver's approximate population of 250,000 in 1935, 190,000 were of British ancestry, 40,000 were from elsewhere in Europe, and 20,000 were of Asian descent (despite a significant recent decrease due to the federal Asiatic Exclusion Act, 1923). Of those with British ancestry, about 70 per cent had been born in Canada or the United States. See Bruce Macdonald, *Vancouver: A Visual History* (Vancouver: Talon, 1992), 72-3. I am indebted to Kay J. Anderson's analysis of race relations in Vancouver's history. She notes that the Jubilee carnival first brought Chinatown's potential as an exotic tourist attraction to the attention of the rest of the city. See Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*, 157. As an MP, McGeer was a great promoter of the national tourist industry, and, indeed, the desire to draw tourist money to Vancouver was an important theme of Jubilee planning. See Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, var. pag. Of course, there is irony in the fact that, only a few months after his election on the Liberal anti-Asian slate, McGeer officially opened the Chinatown exhibition. For descriptions of the Chinese carnival village see *Province*, 13, 18 July 1936; and the booklet by Quene Yip, *Vancouver Chinatown: Specially Prepared for the Vancouver Golden Jubilee, 1886-1936*, p. 40, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, which describes the temporary village as possessing "a 100% celestial atmosphere." The Chinese carnival was erected on reclaimed False Creek land that had been appropriated from Chinese occupants in the 1910s, filled, and used as the temporary depot for the two railway stations then being built across from Thornton Park. When the stations were complete the land reverted to the city, who allowed its use for the carnival.

³⁵ For the Lord Mayor's visit, see *cva*, Add. mss. 177. The celebrated mace is on display outside the mayor's office, third floor, Vancouver City Hall.

³⁶ Vancouver Golden Jubilee Committee, *op. cit.*, 60. The Jubilee Society, with the new city hall as one of its key symbols, attracted a significant amount of attention to Vancouver

endsheets of the same publication showed how “World Trade Routes Converge on Vancouver.” Inside the first page is a perspective view of City Hall with an inset portrait of the mayor. For McGeer and “men of his breed,” the new City Hall was critical to the image of an international metropolis.

During and after the summer Jubilee, other ceremonies evoked themes of history and progress (Figure 7). “Romance of Vancouver,” an open-air dramatic presentation held in Stanley Park with a cast of nearly 400, depicted the city’s “historical highlights” in fourteen episodes, while a fifteenth projected a prosperous future. Historian David Glassberg has analyzed how, in the early twentieth century, the community production of historical pageants presented “an idealized portrait of local social relations” and provided a framework or coherent plot “within which local residents could interpret their recent experiences and envision their future progress.” By the 1930s, however, the representation of a continuous, progressive history had given way to an emphasis on the differences between past and present as the rapid technological changes of the later era invalidated guidelines based in old traditions.³⁷ Both themes can be found in the Vancouver of 1936. Because the city was only fifty years old, the smooth, inevitable progress from forest to city was easily comprehensible to many citizens, whereas the style of the building and McGeer’s attempted reforms represented a disruption of tradition. At the many ceremonies – the groundbreaking, the cornerstone, the unveiling of statuary – the speeches always emphasized that the building project represented both unshakable confidence in the city’s progress and the potential for an immediate, transformative effect on social relations.

ARCHITECTURE

This tension between tradition and change is reflected in an amalgamation of architectural styles.³⁸ The newspapers commonly described City Hall as “modernistic,” rather than fully modern, suggesting that

from across North America, Europe, and the Pacific Rim, as is attested to by the media coverage, letters, telegrams, and international visitors recorded in the society’s papers.

³⁷ David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 126, 139, 258–70. For a description of the “Romance of Vancouver” and other Jubilee events, see CVA, Add. MSS. 177, “Programs”; and *Saturday Night* 51, 4 July 1936, 15.

³⁸ Contemporary municipal buildings in the United States also employed architectural styles to provide citizens with a mental escape from the woes of the Depression. These city halls either evoked the early days of the Republic with revivalist styles or envisioned the United States’ future with Art Deco and other modernist skyscraper styles; William L. Lebovich, *America’s City Halls* (Washington, DC: Preservation, 1984), 32–3.

many Vancouverites would have been uncomfortable with a complete break with tradition. The architecture of a city hall needed to conform to certain public expectations regarding appearance, dignity, and symbolism, and not every citizen was enthralled with the style of Vancouver's new building. One letter to the mayor cried: "Have you no eye for beauty? Why put up an eyesore and a headache of a pile of concrete like that modernistic monstrosity ...? It is a crime to put up a filthy looking structure like that ... Change the style of the City Hall, for God's sake. (Sgd.) Yours, Here for 30 years."³⁹ In this negative view, the word "modernistic" becomes an alliterative epithet for a building thought to threaten cultural traditions. There was no place for concrete in the traditional hierarchy of materials that proceeded from canvas and wood to the carved masonry of civilized society. Because of such feelings (plus a petition from local groups such as the Stone Cutters' Association),⁴⁰ the concrete of City Hall was masked by stone veneer. Likewise, the modern style of City Hall, and the platform of progress and reforms proposed by the mayor, were tempered by historical sculpture and pageantry.

"Here for 30 years" argued for a style similar to that of Victoria's legislative buildings – which McGeer stated were "really the cause of the terrible government we get in British Columbia."⁴¹ McGeer associated the quality of architecture with the quality of government, and his frustrations as a politician in Victoria and Ottawa suggested to him a need for a monumental municipal hall comparable to, yet distinct from, the legislative buildings in those cities. A radically different style for City Hall would indicate Vancouver's independence. Although concrete and modern styles were threatening to some, McGeer saw them as essential to the image and spirit of cultural and economic vitality he wished to promote for Vancouver.

Modern classicism had become internationally popular for government buildings in the late 1920s. Although the style was less popular in Europe, the fascist parties in Germany and Italy used forms of the style in the 1920s and 1930s, and the USSR also experimented with a stripped-down classicism combined with heroic sculpture.⁴² In the

³⁹ CVA Add. mss. 54, "City Hall." Architect Richard T. Perry wrote to the Vancouver *Province*, 14 June 1935, comparing the city hall design to a warehouse and a "stack of packing crates." He said that the design would be an embarrassment to the profession.

⁴⁰ CVA Add. mss. 54, "City Hall."

⁴¹ Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 195. The Parliament Building in Victoria is an ornamental Romanesque pile designed by Francis Rattenbury and built between 1893 and 1897.

⁴² Kostof, *A History of Architecture*, 719. For instance, Barbara Lane Miller, in *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), explains

United States, versions of the style were chosen for several state capitols and city halls in the 1930s. As well, modern classicism was the de facto style of the New Deal. The use of a style by authoritative governments at either end of the political spectrum is not unusual. As the expatriate German architectural historian Siegfried Giedion pointed out during the Second World War, “there is one point where the governments of all countries meet. And that is in their conception of ‘monumentality.’”⁴³ The spatial needs of burgeoning bureaucracies and governments’ lingering desire for monumental public architecture developed a less decorated form of classicism that allowed government buildings, now essentially office towers, to retain some of the dignity associated with the great democracies and empires of classical eras.⁴⁴

McGeer, who studied international politics and travelled widely in Canada and the United States, was undoubtedly aware of these architectural developments. In Washington, DC, which he visited several times during this period, there were several recent buildings that attempted to evoke modernity and change while responding to the overt classicism of most of Washington’s government architecture and to its City Beautiful plan. The leading practitioner of the new classicism was architect Paul Cret who, in the words of architectural historian Elizabeth Grossman, “used classicism as if it were an active pattern in the mind of the viewer.”⁴⁵ This pattern was educed through

that, though Nazi architecture was stylistically diverse, Hitler preferred a modernized classicism (see 185 ff.). Also, George Baird, in *The Space of Appearance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), discusses fascist preferences for classical styles, concluding that “the German [mode] was a sort of austere and unsupple stripped classicism that ... probably stands to this day in the western popular imagination as the generic architectural imagery of totalitarianism” (258-9). For the Canadian use of the style, see Wright, *Crown Assets*, 177-81; and Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture, Vol. 2* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994), 754-60.

⁴³ Siegfried Giedion, *The Problem of a New Monumentality* (1944), quoted in Baird, *The Space of Appearance*, 139. For contemporary state capitols, see H.R. Hitchcock and William Seale, *Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the USA* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 274-87.

⁴⁴ David P. Handlin, *American Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 171-4. Mills, “Antecedents and Influences,” 31-2, confirms that by the late nineteenth century city halls had begun to surpass provincial and federal buildings in scale, as municipal bureaucracies became responsible for more aspects of daily government. See Lebovich, *America’s City Halls*, 35-6.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Grossman, *The Civic Architecture of Paul Cret* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182. Cret was the main design teacher at Pennsylvania from 1904 to 1937. Among many other modern classical structures he designed in the United States and France in the 1920s and 1930s, Cret had recently completed the high-profile Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington (1928-32) – a severe, modern, cubic mass alleviated by classical elements like fluted pilasters and relief sculpture. See Grossman, *Paul Cret*, 165-83. One project that would have been particularly appealing to McGeer’s personal politics was that of a new building for the Federal Reserve Board. After 1933, President Roosevelt re-vamped and empowered the board to reform the structure of banking in the United States. Cret won the competition for the building in early 1935, and the results were published that

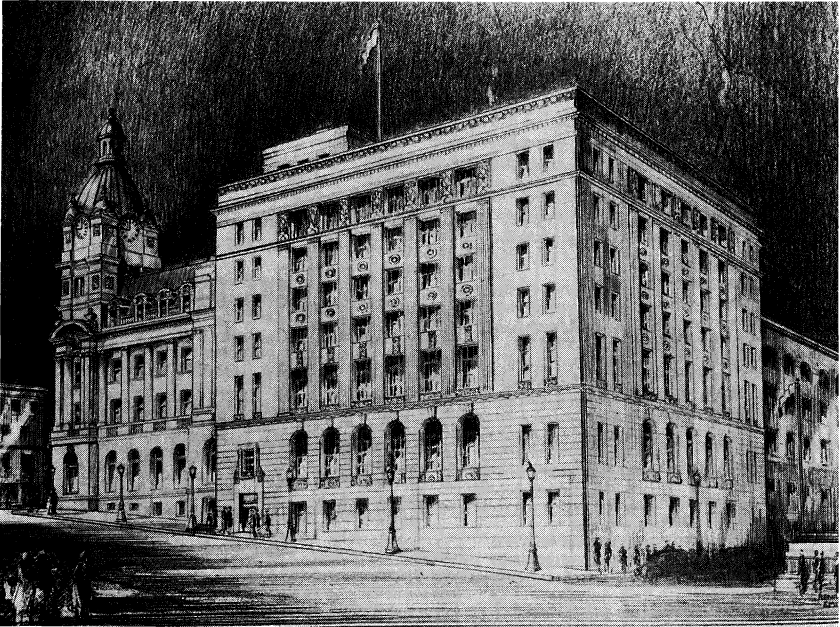


Figure 8: Post office extension, built 1936-37. The old post office is to its left, with the clock tower. (City of Vancouver Archives, Bu P.18 N.30)

precise symmetry of elevation and plan, light decoration to indicate cornice lines, and a façade organization in which tall, regularly spaced window openings separated by consistent wall treatment create a sense of the classical rhythm of column and void. This description evokes the basic visual elements of Vancouver City Hall. Cret had been Townley's instructor at the University of Pennsylvania. A building inspired by Cret's theories was already under construction in Vancouver: local architects McCarter and Nairne employed the style for the federal post office extension on Granville Street (Figure 8). This reserved, six-storey block with fluted pilasters and a ground-floor arcade of windows perfectly represents Cret's "federal style," and it characterized many projects built by the Canadian government under the Public Works Construction Act. Modern classicism, with its trademark pilasters and low-relief decoration, had also been used by Canadian banks in the late 1920s: Vancouver has a modest example in the Bank of Nova Scotia on Granville Street (1929).⁴⁶

July, just as Townley embarked on his design for City Hall. See Grossman, *Paul Cret*, 184-99, 262 fn. 32.

⁴⁶ Harold Kalman, Ron Phillips, and Robin Ward, *Exploring Vancouver: The Essential Architectural Guide* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 84, 104.

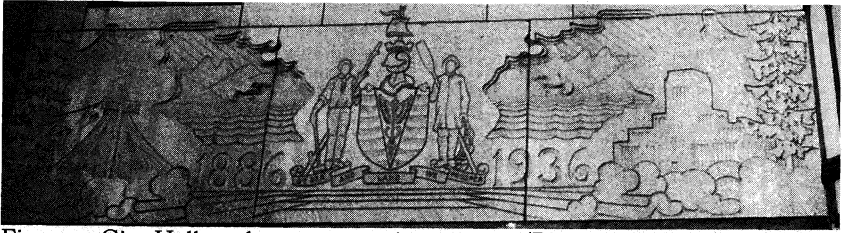


Figure 9: City Hall, sculpture over main entrance. (Photograph by the author)

However, since McGeer's political predilections forbade an exact stylistic replication of banks and federal buildings, Townley was forced to differentiate his design for City Hall in order to express the city's independence from financial and federal powers. His solution is based on a classical, symmetrical plan and elevation but goes far beyond the banks and federal projects in stripping away classical ornament: only the suggestion of a colonnade remains on the façade. Pilasters are severe, without fluting or capitals, and the limited decoration on the cornices and spandrels is Art Deco in nature. The Art Deco style, popular in the late 1920s and 1930s, looked for alternatives to classical and traditional sources of ornamentation and often turned to local symbolism. The abstracted wave and sunset incised along the top edge of City Hall were appropriate West Coast symbols. Art Deco coincided with North American building bylaws that required skyscrapers to step back at certain heights to allow natural light to reach the street. Appropriately, a writer in the *Vancouver Province* made a flattering comparison of City Hall to New York's Art Deco Rockefeller Centre (1932-9), commenting on its "severe lines, practical utility and incorporated beauty." The press made much of the modern mechanical systems, and Townley explained to the lay reader how the efficient and streamlined design "was evolved from none of the orthodox styles of architecture, but rather, avoids them in its expression of the spirit of modern life."⁴⁷ Juxtaposed with this modernity, low-relief sculptures over the two main entrances recall common Jubilee imagery by depicting the city coat of arms flanked by the new City Hall and the 1886 council and tent (Figure 9). This carving self-mythologized the building in the continuum of Vancouver history. If the tent portrayed the past, and the representation of the 1936 building signified the present – as is made explicit by the incised dates – then the building itself became a manifestation of the future.

⁴⁷ *Province*, 3-5 December 1936.

CONCLUSIONS

The style, size, and site of City Hall distinguished it from any other building in Vancouver: it was a unique symbol of civic government.⁴⁸ The use of local symbolism, materials, workers, and architect made City Hall a homegrown project, giving the city a spiritual and economic boost during the Depression. By erecting an ambitious City Hall, Vancouver demanded the attention of the federal and provincial governments as well as of international capital and tourism. R.B. Bennett admitted at the cornerstone ceremony that “within the orbit of its powers the City Council deals with questions as fully and effectively as a Legislature or Parliament.”⁴⁹ Previous city governments, though, had failed to address the issue of their own premises, and many proposed projects had foundered in financial and political inertia. McGeer had acted so forcefully because he had been elected to build a new city hall to represent his and his electorate’s moral and political vision of Vancouver’s future. The urgency with which he drove the project through loopholes was mandated by the political tensions played out on the streets of Vancouver in 1935.

In response to these tensions, City Hall was protected by the moat of False Creek and by a long hill that marchers needed to climb in order to besiege it. To continue the metaphor, the building is set upon a podium that, to the viewer approaching from the downhill, downtown side of City Hall, works visually as a rampart complete with arrow slits (Figure 10). The building is capped by neon clocks on the four faces of its tower, visible from most locations in Vancouver. Clocks are traditional symbols of social control, and city hall clock-towers are common tokens of order and good government.⁵⁰ The symbolically defensive nature of City Hall is enhanced by the landscaping of the sloping site: the driveway sits atop the podium and acts as the no-man’s land between approach and entrance. The rest of the site is dedicated to gardens rather than to a plaza – a lack of

⁴⁸ Johnson, “For Generations to Come,” 238, suggests that the city hall in London, Ontario, as it is a modernist building lost among modernist downtown office blocks, is symbolically subservient to private interests.

⁴⁹ cVA, Add. mss. 54, Topical Files, “R.B. Bennett.” See also cVA, Add. mss. 177, Vancouver Golden Jubilee Society.

⁵⁰ Mills, “Antecedents and Influences,” 26; Lebovich, *America’s City Halls*, var. pag. The concept of clocks and timekeeping as a form of social control is commonplace. See, for instance, Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), 13-8. The “arrow slits” on City Hall have been altered – some were widened and glazed when the area under the driveway (originally used as a parking garage) was converted to office space – but the stark wall still evokes a rampart.



Figure 10: City Hall from the north, 1936. Note the podium and slit windows. (Vancouver Public Library, Special Collections, VPL 4688)

urban public space, representing a fear of mass demonstration, that marks Vancouver to this day.

The case made here is that institutional politics determine architectural production. Vancouver City Hall was formed by civic political issues as well as by the personal politics of a popular politician who had experience at three levels of Canadian government. The jobs and distractions created by City Hall and the associated Jubilee celebrations probably did lessen tensions in the city, but poverty was not conquered, and violent strikes continued.⁵¹ McGeer did not run in the civic election that was held one week after the opening of City Hall in December 1936. A decade later, after retiring from the House of Commons and being appointed to Senate, he again became mayor of Vancouver and died in office in 1947. His body was laid in state in the lobby of City Hall, and thousands of citizens paid last respects to the mayor who had monumentalized their civic identity.

⁵¹ For example, in June 1938 further actions saw the occupation of the art gallery and the post office by unemployed men for a period of four weeks. Thirty men were injured when police stormed the buildings before dawn on what came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.” See Roy, *Vancouver*, 102.