

166 PORTAGE AVENUE

MANITOBA TELEPHONE SYSTEM BUILDING

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings & Resources Committee
Researcher: M. Peterson
January 2016

This building embodies the following heritage values as described in the *Historical Resources By-law*, 55/2014 (consolidated update July 13, 2016):

(a) Its age 1930-1931, makes it a rare large-scale Depression-era development in Winnipeg;

(b) Its association and long-term headquarter role with Manitoba Telephone System;

(c) Its architect, Alexander D. Melville, was a well-known local practitioner;

(d) Its design, materials and construction methods are all excellent examples of the period;

(e) It is located near the historic Portage and Main intersection and is an important contributor to its streetscape and area; and

(f) Its original exterior features and finishes are intact.

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Horace F. McDougall, local manager of the Northwest Telegraph Company, began the telephone communication era in Winnipeg by placing two phones in the company's office.[1] By January 1878, several sets were in use and in March, McDougall paid for the right to use Bell Telephone's patented machines, renting their use to willing subscribers.[2] In 1881, McDougall sold his interest to the newly formed Bell Telephone Company of Canada and in May, the company opened the city's first telephone exchange in the Caldwell Block, McDermot Avenue and Main Street.[3] Over the next decade, the system greatly expanded into many areas of Winnipeg and in Portage la Prairie and Brandon. In October of 1896, the company moved its headquarters to a new building at 166 Thistle Street (now Portage Avenue East – Plate 1).[4]

Despite several additions, the Thistle Street facility was soon outstripped by demand, brought on by the large population increase. Plans were drawn up for a new exchange building. Work began at the corner of Corydon Avenue and Daly Street in 1907 and completed in 1908, although the building was not put in operation until March 1909 (Plate 2).[5] The reason for the delay was caused by the Government of Manitoba's involvement in ensuring telephone service by purchasing the Bell Company interests for $3.3 million in January 1908 and creating Manitoba Government Telephones, Canada's first provincially-owned telephone system.[6]

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1 R.R. Rostecki, "St. John's Telephone Exchange, 405 Burrows Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba" report for the Historical Buildings Committee, 1991, pp. 1-3; and Gilbert A. Muir, "A History of the Telephone in Manitoba," in MHS Transactions, Series 3, 1964-1965 Season, online version.

2 Manitoba Free Press, November 23, 1877, p. 1 and January 15, 1878, p. 1; and "An Historical Document," Telephone Echo, July-August 1949, p. 2.

3 "Our Telephone System," Winnipeg Daily Times, May 21, 1881, p. 1.

4 Manitoba Free Press, October 26, 1896.

5 "Branch Exchange for Fort Rouge," Winnipeg Telegram, July 18, 1906, p. 9.

6 James Mavor, Government Telephones - the Experience of Manitoba, Canada (Toronto, ON: Maclean Publishing Company, 1917), pp. 15-33; and "Manitoba Provincial Heritage Site No. 26 – Garry Telephone Exchange Building, 474 Hargrave Street, Winnipeg," http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/hrb/prov/p026.html, 2015.

The new Manitoba Government Telephones moved quickly to increase its capacity – the 1910 Annual Report stated the system included nearly 30,000 telephones (Plate 3)[7] – by constructing its Sherbrook Telephone Exchange, 297 Sherbrook Street (Plate 4), opened July 4, 1910, the St. John's Telephone Exchange, 405 Burrows Avenue (Plate 5), opened November 5, 1911 and the important downtown Garry Exchange, 474 Charlotte Street (now Hargrave Street), opened January 8, 1911 (Plate 6) as both an telephone exchange and the office headquarters.[8]

The Garry Exchange functioned as the Manitoba Government Telephones' headquarters for many years as the system expanded and modernized. This expansion necessitated the construction of many new exchange buildings across the province and in 1921, the institution took on a new name, Manitoba Telephone System (MTS). By 1926, Winnipeg had been converted to fully automatic service, making it the first large city in Canada to do so.[9]

The government announced in the Legislature in September 1930 that MTS was embarking on a major expansion program that included the construction of a modern new downtown headquarters, located on the site of the old Bell Telephone Building.[10] The MTS Building, 166 Portage Avenue, was officially opened two years later (Plate 7).

STYLE

The building was designed in the Art Deco style, popular throughout North America from 1920s to 1940s. As a reaction to classically-based architecture, Art Deco emphasized smooth façades, hard edges and low-relief ornamentation, often a series of repeating geometric forms around windows, doors and along the roofline. The straightness of the style often found expression in square-headed windows, arranged in prominent vertical bays. In the case of this building, the architect also

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7 Second Annual Report of Manitoba Government Telephones Annual Report, 1910, quoted in Manitoba Free Press, February 22, 1911, p. 13.

8 R.R. Rostecki, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

9 Nineteenth Annual Report of Manitoba Government Telephones, 1926, p.17.

10 Manitoba Free Press, March 22, 1930, p. 1.

included elements of the Gothic Revival style in the design: pointed arched openings and stylized trefoil shapes in spandrels.

In terms of rarity, this building is among only a handful of structures built in the Art Deco style because of the lack of available capital during its most popular years. The Federal Building, 269 Main Street (built 1935), the Civic Auditorium (now the Archives of Manitoba Building), 200 Vaughan Street (1932) are the Women's Tribute Memorial Lodge, 200 Woodlawn Street (1931) are the best examples (Plate 8).

CONSTRUCTION

This six-storey building rests on a structural system of steel and reinforced concrete on basement walls 33.0 – 45.7 centimetres thick. All upper storey walls are 33.0 centimetre brick with the front (north) façade clad entirely in limestone (see Appendix I for additional construction data). The building measures 32.9 x 39.0 metres.[11]

DESIGN

The front (north) façade is symmetrically designed and clad entirely in stone except for a band of dark stone at grade. It is divided into five vertical bays by slender pilasters running the entire height of the building and above the flat roof (Plate 9). The central bay is thinner than the outer four bays and within each are thinner pilasters dividing each bay into three. These secondary pilasters run from the second floor to just above the roofline. Window openings are arched on the ground floor (the centrally-placed entrance is set in a pointed arch opening) and rectilinear on all upper storeys. The slender windows of the second floor are heavily embellished, with stylized logos on the separating pilasters and trefoil with pointed heads filling the spandrels above (Plate 10). Window openings on the upper floors are rectilinear and regularly spaced and sized (Plate 11). The roofline is highlighted with unadorned stone panels and geometric shapes in the raised pilaster ends (Plate 12).

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[11] City of Winnipeg Assessment Record, Roll No. 12093825300.

The west façade faces a narrow side lane and the east wall of the Bank of Montreal Building, 335 Main Street. The elevation includes modest brick pilasters and windows in rectilinear openings on the upper floors (Plate 13). The east façade is also divided by unadorned brick pilasters with windows in rectilinear openings with stone lug sills on each floor (Plate 14). The neighbouring building nearly abuts the south façade, which includes plain brick pilasters and windows in rectilinear openings (Plate 15).

INTERIOR

Original plans for the building show a basic office layout for each floor; the ground floor included a large private office in the northwest corner, open office space in the middle and washrooms, locker rooms along the south wall and a storage vault near the rear stairs (Plate 16). Three passenger elevators were placed near the northeast corner and staircases were located in the northeast and southeast corners of the building. The second and third floors appear to have been organized for use by the telephone company; the top floors are undivided office space, ready to develop for tenants.

In 1936, a City of Winnipeg Building Permit was issued to build a radio studio for CKY in the building.[12]

Alterations to the interior, as seen by the number of City of Winnipeg Building Permits, have been extensive. Today, most of the space has been altered as the needs of the telephone company have changed. Equipment takes up the bulk of space in the building (Plate 17). Some original windows and washroom space remains on some of the floors. The most interior original space is the main entrance and elevator lobby at the Portage Avenue entrance and includes terrazzo floor with "MTS" lettering, vaulted ceilings and brass accenting and lighting (Plates 18-21).

The building is connected to 191 Pioneer Avenue via an overhead bridge on the 6th floor.

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[12] Winnipeg Free Press, July 6, 1936, p. 10.

INTEGRITY

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition for its age. The front façade does not appear to have suffered major alteration from its original design.

STREETSCAPE

The MTS Building has been an important contributor to its busy streetscape since construction (Plates 22 and 23).

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS

Alexander Melville (1873-1949), Scottish-born and trained architect, designed the MTS Building, along with many other telephone exchange buildings throughout his long career. Arriving in 1903, he worked for over a decade with his older brother William, and the pair was responsible for creating the base plans from which dozens of the City's pre-World War I fire halls were built.

He has received 10 points from the Historical Buildings and Resources Committee.

PERSON/INSTITUTION

MTS expanded its service rapidly throughout the province during the 1930s. This necessitated the construction of telephone exchanges in towns like Hamiota, Miami, Virden and Rivers (Plate 24). Expansion over the decades has required increased staff and office space and MTS now occupies the newer buildings at 191 Pioneer Avenue and 333 Main Street although it still maintains its ownership and partial occupation of 166 Portage Avenue.

EVENT

There is no known important historical event connected with this building.

CONTEXT

Built at the beginning of the Great Depression, the MTS Building is one of only a few major projects taken on during these dire economic ties and, like the others, was government funded. The need for telephone service and its expansion into rural areas of the province was an ongoing policy of the company and the government and the large headquarter building on Portage Avenue was part of this expansion program.

LANDMARK

Its scale, location and the uniqueness of its ornamentation heighten this buildings conspicuousness, even surrounded by much taller structures.

Historical Buildings & Resources Committee
THE CITY OF WINNIPEG

APPENDIX I

CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report

Building Address: 166 Portage Avenue

Building Name: Manitoba Telephone System Building

Original Use: offices

Current Use: offices

Roll No.: 12093825300

RSN: 141828

Municipality: 12

Ward: 1

Property or Occupancy Code: ---

Legal Description: 3/4 St. John, Plan 6096, Lots 4/8 +

Location: south side between Main and Westbrook avenues

Date of Construction: 1930-1931

Storeys: 6 plus penthouse

Heritage Status: NOMINATED LIST

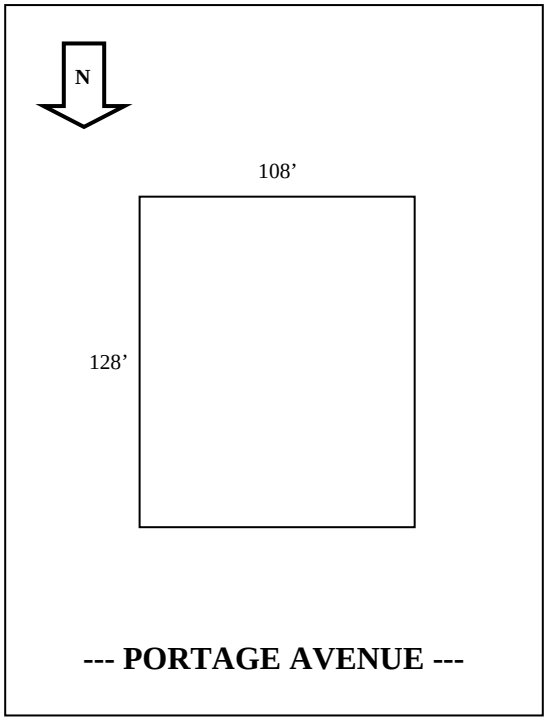
Construction Type: reinforced concrete, brick and stone

Building Permits (Plans available: **[CS]** City Storage; **[M]** Microfilm):

SEE NEXT PAGE

Information:

- 108 x 128 ft. (plus 1,064 sq. ft. penthouse)
- 13-18" concrete raised basement walls; 13" brick 1st-6th floors
- ceiling heights: B- 11.8'; 1st- 15.8'; 2nd- 16.5'; 4th-6th- 8.0-9.0'



ARCHITECT: ALEXANDER D. MELVILLE

CONTRACTOR: J. McDIARMID COMPANY (GENERAL CONTRACTOR); HAZELTON & WALIN (FOUNDATION); DOMINION BRIDGE CO. (STEEL)

BUILDING PERMITS:

AVAILABLE PLANS: (CS- City Storage; M=Microfilm)

YEAR	NO.	PLANS	AMOUNT	DESCRIPTION
1930	2955	CS	$36,900	Excavation and caissons
1930	3039		$100,000	Structural framing
1931	191	CS	$180,500	Superstructure
1936	2644		$50,000	Alterations
1947	6524		$1,800	Alterations
1954	835	CS	$25,000	Interior alterations
1957	2547	CS	$15,000	Interior alterations
1961	3156	CS	$10,000	Alterations
1962	8092	CS	$5,000	Interior alterations
1967	6500	M 424	$10,000	Alterations
1970	82	M 1	$21,000	Alterations
1970	155	M 2	$196,000	Alterations
1972	54	M 173	$6,000	Alterations
1974	6621	M 636	$1,000	Interior alterations
1975	56		$200,000	Interior alterations
1977	1017	CS	$10,000	Interior alterations
1981	317	CS	$70,000	Interior alterations
1981	4280	CS	$50,000	Interior alterations
1981	7584	CS	$20,000	Interior alterations
1981	7602		$5,000	Interior alterations
1983	9387	CS	$1,800	Interior alterations
1985	10559	CS	$61,000	Interior alterations
1986	5460	CS	$85,000	Interior alterations
1987	2285	CS	$8,000	Interior alterations
1988	1797	CS	$178,000	Interior alterations
1988	9141	CS	$15,000	Interior alterations
1992	890	CS	$15,000	Interior alterations
1993	598	CS	$38,000	Interior alterations
1996	1315	CS	$12,800	Interior alterations
1998	1063	CS	$95,000	Interior alterations
1999	120361		$182,000	Interior alterations
1999	134023		$129,900	Interior alterations
1999	136448		$185,000	Interior alterations
2000	136241		$45,000	Interior alterations
2000	147192		$60,300	Interior alterations
2000	162621		$273,000	Interior alterations
2001	149494		$73,388	Interior alterations
2001	184757		$150,000	Interior alterations
2001	188891		$200,000	Interior alterations
2001	198391		$74,000	Interior alterations
2002	243047		$3,234,000	Interior alterations
2003	291662		$170,000	Interior alterations
2008	113494		$50,000	Interior alterations (4^{th} floor)
2010	111762		$41,350	Construct 1-storey generator shed

YEAR	NO.	PLANS	AMOUNT	DESCRIPTION
2013	178989		$1,100,000	Interior & exterior alterations (4th floor)
2015	127889		$813,023	Interior & exterior alterations (5th floor)

APPENDIX II

Alexander D. Melville-

The Melville brothers, Alexander and William, began their partnership in Winnipeg shortly after 1900. While they are best known today as the designers of many of the early fire halls, they also were responsible for a number of other buildings of various functions throughout the city.

Alexander Melville was born in 1873 in Fraserburgh, Scotland and received his architectural and civil engineering degrees in Aberdeen.[1] His older brother, William Noble Melville, was born in 1871 and emigrated to the U.S.A. in 1900. In 1902, he settled in Winnipeg and convinced his brother to join him and open a private architectural office.[2] The pair worked together until 1914 when William left the practice and the city and it is unknown at present where he moved to.

For many years, Alex Melville was a member of the Manitoba Association of Architects and was one of its early council members (1919-1920).[3] He practiced actively until the 1940s and then was named a provincial government draftsman for a short period prior to his retirement. He died in Winnipeg in 1949.[4]

An incomplete list of Melville Brother and A.D. Melville designs includes:

Fire Halls:	56 Maple Street, 1904 – Grade II
	349 Burrows Avenue, 1904 (demolished)
	470 Gertrude Avenue, 1904 (demolished)
	66 Pearl Street, 1904 (demolished)
	354 Sherbrook Street, 1904 (demolished)
	325 Talbot Avenue, 1906
	1466 William Avenue, 1909 – List of Historical Resources
	845 Sargent Avenue, 1910 – List of Historical Resources

1 "Melville, Alexander," Robert G. Hill, Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1800-1950, online edition, 2015.

2 "Melville, William," Robert G. Hill, Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1800-1950, online edition, 2015.

3 "Alexander Melville" file at the office of the Manitoba Association of Architects.

4 M. Peterson, "56 Maple Street - Fire Hall No. 3 (Fire Hall No. 2)," report for the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, October 1990, Appendix I.

Melville Brother designs (continued):

Fire Halls (continued):

180 Sinclair Avenue, 1910 – Grade III
410 Cathedral Avenue, 1911
1055 Dorchester Street, 1911 – Grade III
161 Lipton Street, 1913
524 Osborne Street, 1913 – List of Historical Resources
596 St. Mary's Road (St. Vital), 1914

Other:

J.C. Scott House, 200 Colony Street
T. Wilson House, 52 Ellen Street
G.A. Glines House (Tremblay Apartments), 55 Hargrave Street, 1906 – Grade III
Ashford Apartment Block, 381 Balmoral Street, 1905 (demolished)
Central Congregational (United) Church, Hargrave Street, 1906 (demolished)
Broadway Court Apartments, 251 Broadway, 1906 (demolished)
Bijou Theatre, 498 Main Street, 1906 (demolished)
Arthur Stewart House, 67 Harvard Avenue, 1907
Touraine Apartments, 410 Ellice Avenue, 1907 (demolished)
Nena Block, 870 Sherbrook Street, 1907 (demolished)
Grand Theatre (Traders Block), 814 Main Street, 1908 (demolished)
Province (Rio or Grand) Theatre, 209 Notre Dame Avenue, 1910 (demolished)
Majestic Theatre, 363 Portage Avenue, 1911 (demolished)
T. Thompson House, Canora Street, 1912
Coliseum Dance Hall, 225 Fort Street, 1912 (demolished)
Colonial Theatre, 634 Main Street, 1912 (demolished)
Rex Moving Picture Theatre (Epic Theatre), 646 Main Street, 1912-1913 – Grade II (demolished)
Linwood School, 266 Linwood Street, 1913 (& 1918 addition)
St. Vital Fire Hall and Police Station, 598 St. Mary's Road, 1914 – Grade III
Pollock Block, Edmonton Street, 1926
W.W. Fleming, 102 Roslyn Road, stable/garage – 1927 (demolished)
Manitoba Telephone Exchange Building, Brandon, Manitoba, alterations & addition, 1929
Manitoba Telephone Exchange Buildings: Transcona, Virden, Beausejour, Miami, Rivers & Elkhorn, Manitoba, 1930
Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, 1930-1931
Manitoba Telephone Exchange Building, Elkhorn, Manitoba, 1932
Dominion Rubber Company Warehouse, Dublin Avenue at Empress Street (alterations for Royal Canadian Air Force), 1935
Manitoba Telephone Exchange Building, Swan Lake, Manitoba, 1935
Manitoba Telephone Exchange Building, Hamiota, Manitoba, 1936
Manitoba Telephone Exchange Building, Winnipeg (Norwood), addition and alterations, 1938
Manitoba Telephone Exchange Building, Carberry, Manitoba, ca.1940
Manitoba Telephone System Garage, Charlotte Street, 1942

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Plate 1 – Bell Telephone Company Block, 166 Thistle Street (later Portage Avenue East), ca. 1910. The west (right) portion was completed in 1896, the east addition in 1904 (additions were also completed in 1900 and 1905). The building was demolished in 1930. (Courtesy of Western Canada Pictorial Index, 474-15197.)



Plate 2 – Fort Rouge Telephone Exchange, Corydon Avenue, southwest corner Daly Street, 1912. (Archives of Manitoba, "Manitoba Telephone System Collection- 27," N9856.)

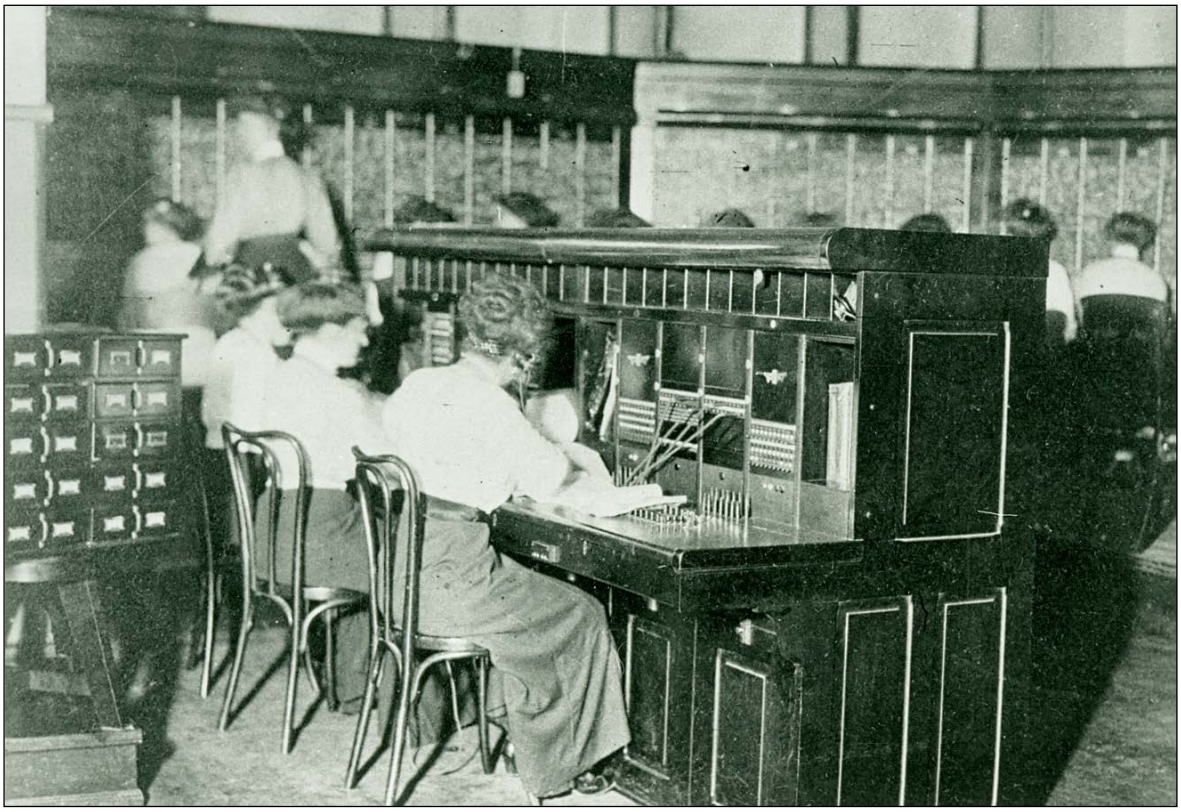


Plate 3 – Typical switchboards in an unnamed telephone exchange in Winnipeg, ca.1912. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, 474-15184.)



Plate 4 – Sherbrook Telephone Exchange, 297 Sherbrook Street, 1912. (Archives of Manitoba, "Manitoba Telephone System Collection- 32," N9857.)

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Plate 5 – St. John's Telephone Exchange, 405 Burrows Avenue, ca.1945. (Archives of Manitoba, "Winnipeg- Buildings- Provincial- Manitoba Telephone/St. John's- 1," N9858.)

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Plate 6 – Garry Telephone Exchange, 74 Charlotte Street, ca.1910. (Archives of Manitoba, "Manitoba Telephone System Collection- 1-1".)

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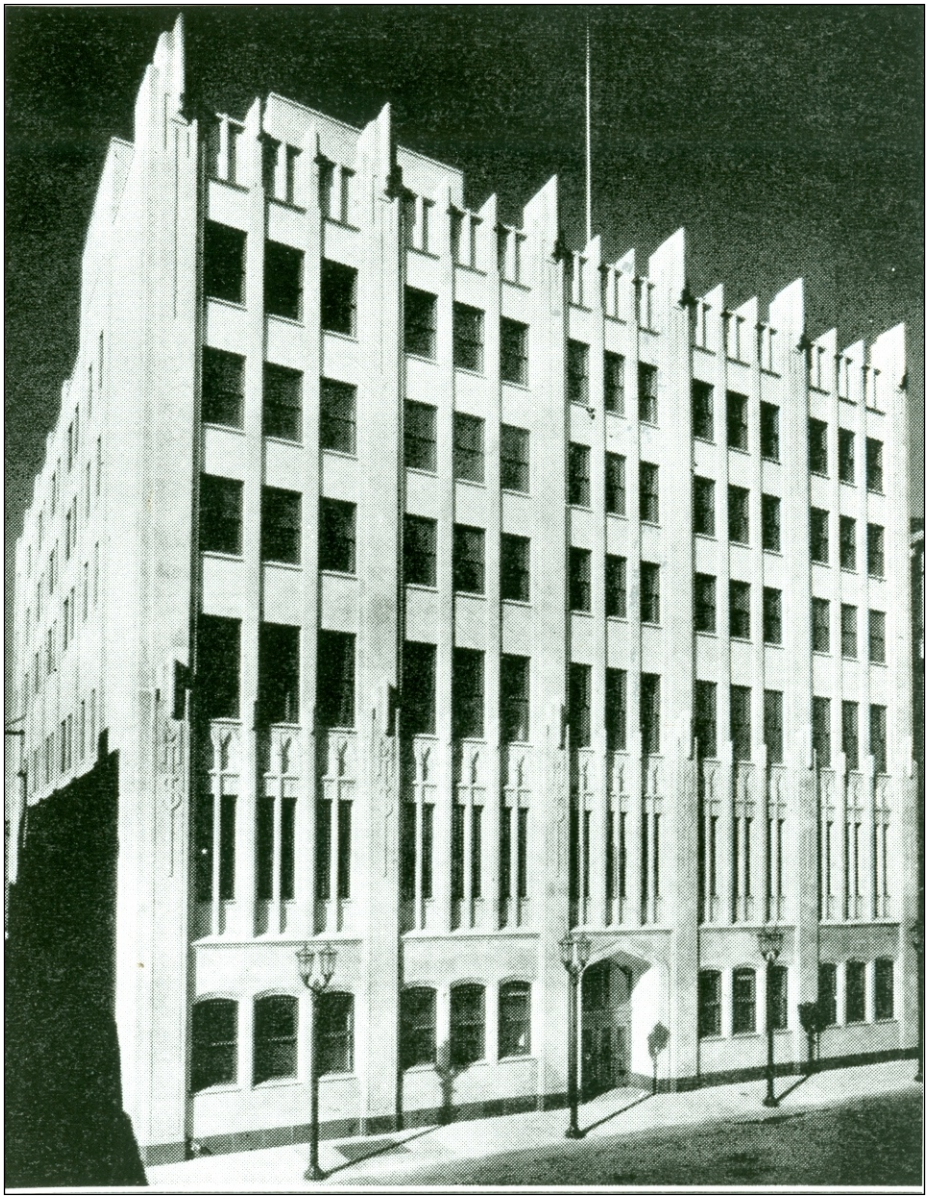


Plate 7 – The newly opened Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, ca.1932. (Courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba, "Winnipeg- Buildings- Provincial-Manitoba Telephone/Portage E (2)-1," N9861.)







Plate 8 – Winnipeg examples of the Art Deco style (top to bottom): Women's Tribute Memorial Lodge, 200 Woodlawn Street; Winnipeg Auditorium (Archives of Manitoba), 200 Vaughan Street; and Federal Building, 269 Main Street. (City of Winnipeg.)

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Plate 9 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, front (north) façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)



Plate 10 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, detail of second floor window openings, front (north) façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

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Plate 11 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, detail of upper floors, front (north) façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)



Plate 12 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, detail of roofline, front (north) façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

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Plate 13 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, west façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

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Plate 14 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, east façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)



Plate 15 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, south façade, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

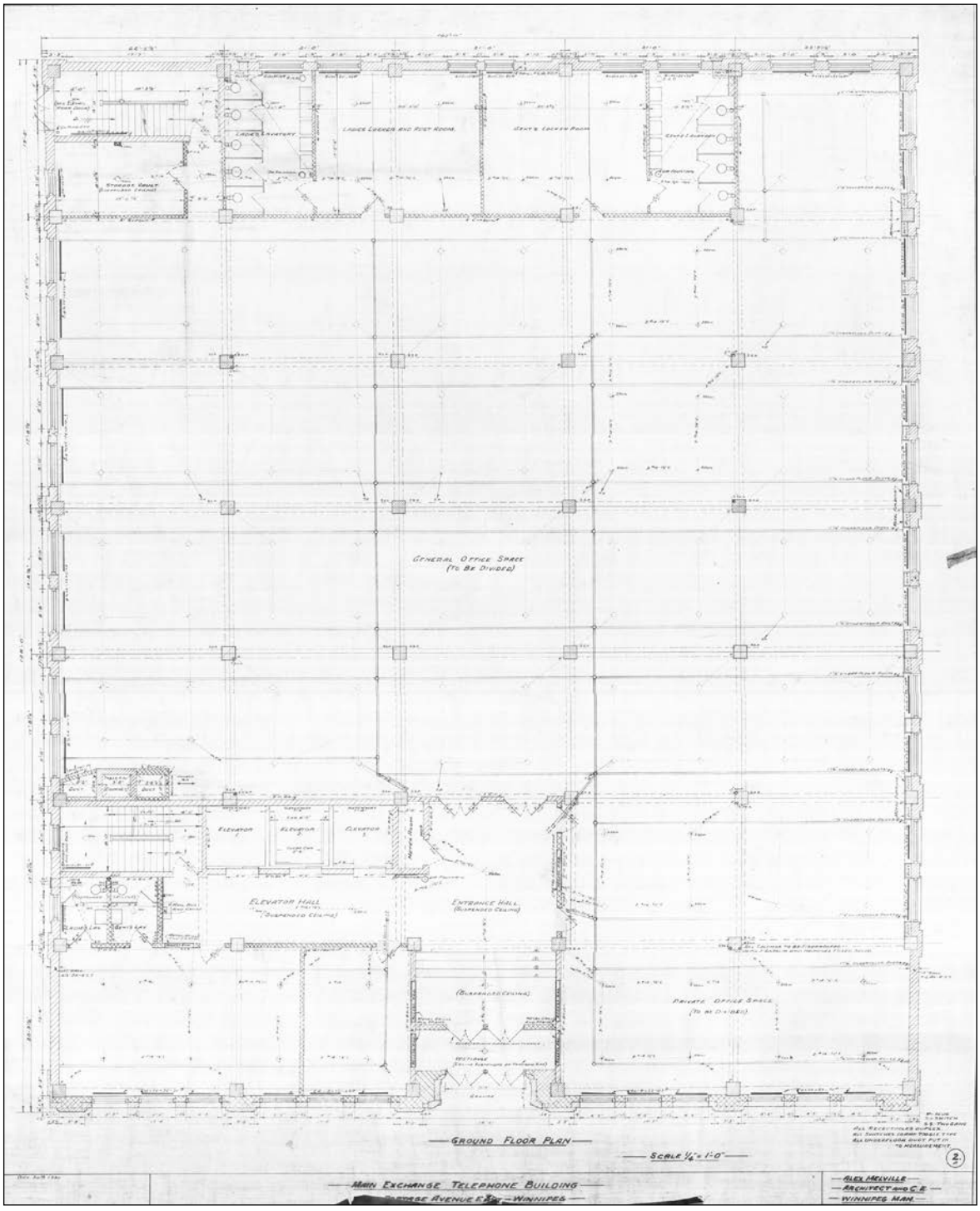


Plate 16 – Architect's plans, "Ground Floor Plan," Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, 1931. (City of Winnipeg, Plan #191/1931.)



Plate 17 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, first floor equipment room, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)



Plate 18 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, entrance lobby terrazzo floor, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)



Plate 19 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, entrance lobby, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)

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Plate 20 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, elevator lobby, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)



Plate 21 – Manitoba Telephone System Building, 166 Portage Avenue, lobby lighting, 2016. (M. Peterson, 2016.)



Plate 22 – Portage Avenue looking west from Westbrook Street, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)



Plate 23 –Portage Avenue looking east from Main Street, 2015. (M. Peterson, 2015.)

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Plate 24 – Carberry Telephone Exchange Building, 121 Main Street, Carberry, Manitoba, n.d.; built ca.1941, designed by A.D. Melville. (Reproduced from Manitoba Historical Society website, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/carberrytelephone.shtml.)