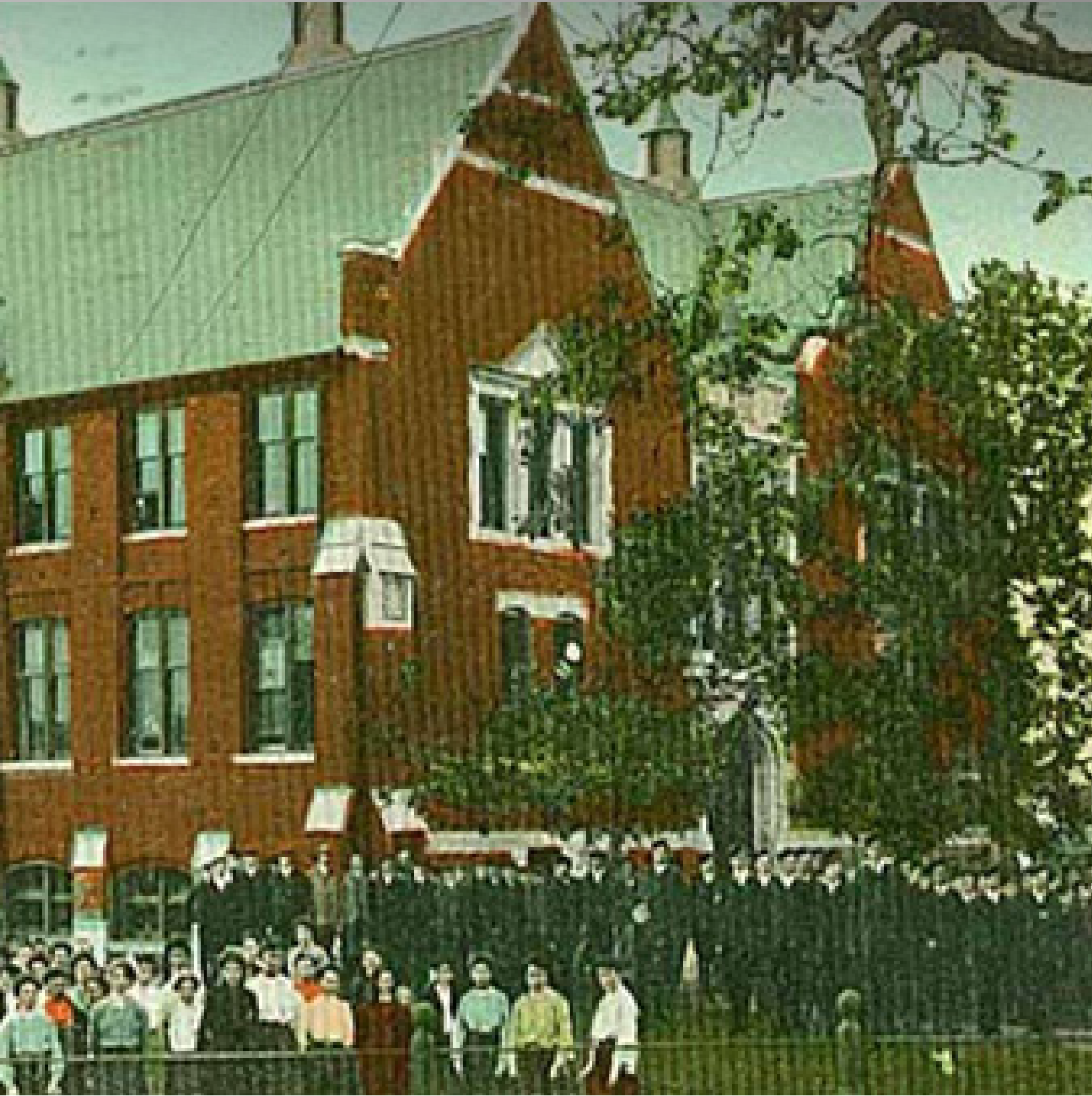


The Heritage of School Architecture in Greater Victoria



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SITUATION BRIEF # 56

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History of Early School Architecture in Victoria: an Overview

During the earliest years of European settlement, and the establishment of Victoria as headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1843, there were few families. The first notable, and surviving school was Craigflower School constructed by the Hudson's Bay Company at its farm settlement in 1855. The two-storey building consisted of one large classroom and six other rooms, including accommodation for the teacher.

After the founding of the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island in 1858, education came within the purview of the Colonial Council. Basic school accommodation was provided; however, by 1870 a lack of funds forced the closure of these schools for nearly two years. The entry of British Columbia into Confederation in 1871 ameliorated the situation, when the new Province assumed responsibility for all school costs. Almost immediately the schools in Victoria re-opened. John Jessop, the first provincially-appointed Superintendent of Education, assisted the local school board in procuring plans for a new building to be constructed on the site of the former colonial school reserve on Fort Street.



Craigflower School House

Thus began the era of early school building that reflected both Victoria's aspirations to civic virtue and also its unique position as Provincial capital. From the 1870s through the 1930s, school accommodation was influenced by rapid growth, the stature of its architects, and innovation.

Built in 1875-76, Central School was intended as a civic monument and considered by Superintendent Jessop as a structure "far superior to anything of the kind on the Pacific Coast." Not only was it the first school in British Columbia constructed in permanent materials, but also the first example of school building designed by a known architect. The plans were drawn by John Teague, an English-born mining engineer and architect who came to Victoria in 1862 following the Fraser River gold rush. Teague's earliest work was for the Royal Navy in Esquimalt, ranging from utilitarian structures to the Admiral's Residence, all executed in ashlar stone and red brick. His career expanded after 1874 when he received an important commission for the Reformed Episcopal Church

constructed in the Gothic Revival style and still standing on Blanshard Street.

Central School was Teague's next important project and the first instance of his use of Mansardic elements in a design. Considered particularly well-suited for civic or institutional architecture, the Mansardic or Second Empire style enjoyed widespread popularity throughout Europe and North America in the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, it was the style employed by the Government of Canada for the Dominion Customs House erected in Victoria in 1876. After Central School, Teague's use of the Mansardic style found fuller expression in a series of key civic buildings, including Victoria City Hall, Victoria Masonic Temple (1878) and Royal Jubilee Hospital (1890).

Hence, the cityscape of early Victoria found its first coherent expression in the work of John Teague, with education as an essential part of that expression.

Superintendent Jessop wrote extensively about Central School, describing its commodious features and amenities. Built at a cost of \$23,134 and paid for by the provincial government, central was the largest and most expensive school building in British Columbia for more than fifteen years. It also set a standard for similar structures in Victoria during the era to follow.

During the 1880s, Victoria's economy fueled a huge increase in building. The population grew from approximately 7,000 inhabitants in 1881 to more than 19,000 in 1891. During this decade, the school population increased from 720 to 2,100 students. A series of smaller wood structures were constructed in James Bay (1883), Springridge (1884) and Victoria West (1884). A major development in school construction occurred in 1893, when a newly-formulated system of local education taxation provided \$85,000 to the school board for building purposes. Two sites, one in the North Ward, the other in the South Ward, were purchased and architectural competitions struck.

A distinguished group of architects, mostly from Victoria, entered the

competition. The terms specified the size (eight classrooms of sixty pupils each), provision for an assembly room of 580 seating capacity, and a structure “substantially built of brick with stone basement not less than 8 feet in the clear, and slate roof, and . . . properly heated and ventilated on the most approved sanitary system.” Vancouver architect R. MacKay Fripp adjudicated the competition, and selected the firm of Soule & Day for the North Ward School, and W. Ridgway Wilson for the South Ward (later South Park) School.

Completed in the autumn of 1894, at a cost of approximately \$30,000, North Ward School was an imposing structure. The overall massing of the building and its restrained decorative detailing derived mainly from the Italianate style, prominent in Late Victorian architecture. North Park School remained virtually unchanged before being demolished in the 1960s.

South Park School, however, is still extant and, as such, has the distinction of being the earliest brick school surviving in British Columbia. Its architect, W.



South Ward (Park) School W. Ridgway Wilson architect

Ridgway Wilson, was born in Hong Kong, China in 1863, and trained in Liverpool and London prior to settling in Victoria in 1887. During the course of a long career, he designed many local residences, commercial blocks, and institutional buildings, including St. John's Anglican Church (1912), the Bay Street Armory (1912) and Colquitz Jail & Prison Farm (1914). Wilson's work as a school architect included the first Lampson Street School (1903) and Victoria West School (1908), two buildings no longer standing.

In South Park School, Wilson employed an effective plan to serve the needs of education. A central section formed the main block with projecting wings on axis and a plain, gabled roof design. This horizontal format permitted a generous number of windows to penetrate the wall surface and allowed for a simple floor plan around a central circulation system. Innovative in British Columbia, the plan for South Park School anticipated the "barbell" layout which became the dominant form of school design in Vancouver in the pre-First World War period.

The exterior articulation of South Park School featured eclectic elements widely associated with the Queen Anne Revival during the Late Victorian period. Most of the ornamentation was concentrated around the entrances on the main façade, an elaborate assemblage of arched windows and door openings, a second-storey balcony and balustrade, and an ornate dormer. Minor details included finials, cresting, and pierced bargeboards in the gables. The City of Victoria has designated South Park School a heritage structure.

By the turn of the 20th century, Teague's school building had become inadequate to serve the rapidly-growing number of secondary students. In order to replace it, the Victoria School Board awarded a contract to Francis Mawson Rattenbury, renowned as architect of the new Legislative Building. Significantly, this was the only instance of a school building designed by Rattenbury, and

certainly reinforced the institutional prominence given to school architecture in Victoria.

Interestingly, however, Rattenbury's plan for the third Victoria High School introduced few innovations to the nascent field of educational architecture. Located on the old colonial school reserve, with its principal façade facing Fernwood Road, the three-storey building was designed in the form of a large block divided into two major rectangular sections with steeply-pitched gabled roofs. The principal entrance featured a suppressed Gothic arch surmounted by a segmented window with trefoil motifs. The slightly-projected stone and brick buttressing at ground level, as well as decorative elements, bespoke the Gothic Revival style.



Victoria High School. F.M. Rattenbury architect

Completed in August 1902, this building only served as Victoria High School for little more than a decade. In 1914, it became an elementary school known as Girls Central or the East Building of Central Junior High. It was demolished in February 1953.

Victoria's prosperous economic climate and the great population influx between 1908 and 1914 resulted in a major boom in school construction. During the immediate pre-war period the financial resources of the school district improved considerably, and the number of classrooms in the city more than doubled with at least one large school added each year. At the same time, a new group of architects, including several younger ones, entered the field and brought with them a more modern outlook toward school design and the use of advanced building technology and a wider range of materials. The majority of these commissions went to two men, J.C.M. Keith and C. Elwood Watkins.



Sir James Douglas Elementary School J. C. M. Keith architect

The contribution of John Charles Malcolm Keith to school architecture was substantial. For several decades he was a prominent institutional architect in Greater Victoria. Born in Scotland in 1858, Keith trained in England and worked for several years in the United States. In 1892, he won the competition to design Christchurch Anglican Cathedral in Victoria. From that time, until his death in 1940, Keith was responsible for many landmarks, including Saanich Municipal

Hall (1911), First United Church (1912), Seamen's Hall (1912), and City Police Courts (1920). The largest number of his public commissions, however, appeared to be school buildings.

Keith designed Sir James Douglas Elementary (1910), Beacon Hill Elementary (1914), Margaret Jenkins Elementary (1914) and South Parks Manual training School (1915). In the manner of many Late Victorian architects, Keith adopted traditional revival elements in his designs. He found both Tudor and Georgian details suitable for school buildings, in contrast to the Gothic Revival which he reserved for his churches (including several on Vancouver Island). In terms of construction technology, however, Keith kept abreast of the latest practices. In the Moss Street School, later Sir James Douglas Elementary, Keith employed the Kahn system of reinforced concrete construction.



Chinese Public School David C. Frame architect

Another Scot, David C. Frame, was retained by the Victoria Board of School Trustees in this boom period. Little is known of Frame, except that he worked briefly for F.M. Rattenbury and lived in Victoria for many years. He designed the Chinese Public School (1908), a redbrick masterpiece on Fisgard Street, featuring eclectic detailing derived from Gothic Revival and the Chinese vernacular. In 1912, Frame designed the Bank Street School, using a basic rectangular plan and a two-storey elevation. Another stylistic exercise in Late Victorian eclecticism, Frame employed a picturesque chateau roof with bold cresting and dentillated window transoms. A neighbourhood landmark, Bank Street School has had a number of education-related uses over many decades.

Charles Elwood Watkins was born in Victoria in 1875 and received his early education in the city before attending high school in Ontario. At the age of fifteen, he apprenticed with prominent Victoria architect Thomas Hooper and eventually became a full partner in the firm. Hooper and Watkins were jointly responsible for many commissions, including Victoria Public Library (1904), Roman Catholic Bishop's Residence (1907), and St. Joseph's Hospital (1908).

The Chambers Street School (later George Jay Elementary) of 1908 represents one of the first examples of Watkins's independent work, and certainly a departure from that of his mentor. Unlike Hooper, Watkins eschewed Late Victorian eclecticism, moving instead towards academic revivalism and new building technology. George Jay School is characterized by its simple, rectangular block forms and spare ornamentation. The exterior is rather austere, relieved only by suggested large-block masonry detailing and flowing voussoirs on its façade. More innovative in its time was the method of construction introduced by Watkins at George Jay Elementary. The so-called "Kahn system" of reinforced concrete construction was a response to the near-collapse of the first Lampson Street School in neighbouring Esquimalt, built in 1903 but demolished only six

years later owing to unsound construction. To prove the strength and stability of this new method, the School Board required a tangible demonstration, as described in the *Victoria Colonist* of November 28, 1909:

To make the test, one of the classrooms on the second storey was selected. Tile brick to the number of hundreds, and weighing in all 73,420 lbs., or a fraction over 36 tons, was piled on the floor towards the centre of the room. This weight has been lying there for a week, and the exact measurements show that the floor has not deflected the thirty-second part of an inch. The pressure amounts to 168 lbs. per square foot.

Following the tragic San Francisco earthquake of 1906, yet another reason for sound school construction was invoked in those years.

Watkins went from strength to strength in his practice of school architecture in Victoria. Advancing in the architectural fashion of the times, he introduced to Victoria the noble simplicity and quiet grandeur of Beaux-Arts classicism and, in doing so, left behind most of his colleagues who were still practising in the Late Victorian idiom. Only months after he completed the Chambers Street School, Watkins was awarded the commission to design the grandest school in the Province: Victoria High School.

In March, 1910 Watkins was selected as architect for the new Victoria High School. The preliminary plans were completed in the autumn of 1911 and set for tender on March 13, 1912. When the doors opened on April 20, 1914 the final cost, including site, equipment and professional fees exceeded \$460,000, making Victoria High School the most expensive school building in the province.

Victoria High School was built to serve the needs of Victoria itself as well as the surrounding districts of Oak Bay, Saanich and Esquimalt. As such, Victoria High was to be an education centrepiece for the community. It was magnificently



General View

THIS building is planned in the shape of the letter "E" and is of impressive dimensions, covering a site 236 by 135 feet. The heavy base course at ground level is of granite. The architectural terra cotta starts immediately on top of this base with rusticated ashlar facing for lower walls and then appears throughout the building in all the light colored trim up to and including the chimney coping.

Brick pilasters, introduced at corners of building, have been relieved with architectural terra cotta capitals and bases, and the brick panels in blank walls are made interesting by white inserts of architectural terra cotta.

All the latest theories of modern equipment seem to have been considered in planning this Canadian schoolhouse. Equipment includes ideal class rooms and classroom furniture; library; reception room; auditorium and assembly hall with stage and stage settings; sunny laboratories with workroom apparatus, including motor-generatory set in physical laboratory; gymnasium with complete equipment; bicycle storeroom; commercial and typewriting rooms; individual steel lockers for each pupil; sanitary drinking fountains; conveniences for supplying pupils and teachers with hot and cold lunches; shower baths; automatic temperature regulators; panic proof exit, locks, and bolts; complete vacuum cleaner plant; stereopticon provision and equipment in lecture rooms.

But what may be named as a distinct innovation is an armory and a miniature rifle range for the Cadet Corps — an accompaniment to the popular Boy Scout movement.



Entrance Detail

VICTORIA HIGH SCHOOL, VICTORIA, B. C.
C. ELWOOD WATKINS, ARCHITECT

Victoria High School Charles Elwood Watkins architect

sited on a high plot of land in Springridge. There was much public debate about its orientation—whether it would face Fernwood or Grant Street—and the latter was chosen to give the building a southern exposure. Watkins arranged the main façade to terminate Camosun Street, thus introducing the concept of axial planning so favoured by academic revivalists.

In every respect, Watkins paid homage to the Beaux-Arts style in Victoria High School. The basic form was a massive, four-storey block capable of accommodating 1,000 students, with 29 classrooms, a gymnasium and theatre-type auditorium. From an architectural viewpoint, Watkins's design exemplified the basic principles underlying Beaux-Arts Neoclassicism—rational planning and studied composition—together with the latest advances in building technology, including the use of structural steel and reinforced concrete. The symmetrical façade consists of a regular system of bays, the central projecting bay featuring engaged colossal Ionic columns. Terra cotta detailing abounds, particularly at the entrance bays. Fine art glass, marble wainscotting, and decorative wrought iron contribute to the rich effect of this structure. Perhaps prescient in this pre-war period, the building included an armory and rifle range for the Cadet Corps. Victoria High School was certainly the apex of Watkins's professional career. As to valorize this achievement, the National Terra Cotta Society of America featured Victoria High School in its 1914 publication celebrating the finest examples of the use of terra cotta for structural and decorative purposes.

As work progressed on Victoria High, Watkins obtained a significant number of commissions for schools in Greater Victoria. In addition to his existing achievements, it was equally apparent that Watkins's success was also related to his ability to produce, for he was called upon to provide five structures within six years. They included Burnside, Oaklands and Quadra in Victoria, and Monterey and Willows in neighbouring Oak Bay.

While not a school building, one major educational monument related to this theme is the Victoria Normal School designed by the Vancouver architect, W.C.F. Gillam and completed in 1913. Magnificently sited on seven and a half acres of rural country side it still commands a dramatic western prospect over the city below. Gillam's design presents as a pair of two-storey wings detailed with terra-cotta ornament and anchored by a central four-story sand-stone clock tower. An Italian garden landscape scheme provides a fitting monumental setting. Originally built as a teachers' training college to serve Vancouver Island and rural British Columbia outside the Lower Mainland (which had its own Normal School) the School has played a significant role in the educational history of Province. Converted for use as military hospital in 1942 it has housed an Institute of Adult Studies, then Victoria College out of which was founded the University of Victoria, and then in 1970 became Camosun College. After a complete restoration in the 1990s it continues to serve as the College's urban campus today.



Victoria Normal School W.C.F. Gillam architect

Victoria's Early School Architecture: Interpretation of Heritage Value

We shape our buildings, and they shape us. Sir Winston Churchill

During the period of colonial settlement and the growth of the City of Victoria from the mid-nineteenth to the first decades of the twentieth century, a new urban landscape appeared. A combination of economic, social and geographical factors coalesced and, under the influence of stable governance, the southern peninsula of Vancouver Island flourished as a community. The architecture that served that community was equally a manifestation of pioneer resolve and pride. It is evident that early school architecture reflected these conditions.

The schools described in this study first and foremost served the growing community. They were nodes of importance in civic life, providing not only education, but also acting as meeting places their respective neighbourhoods. Socially, students gathered and interacted, creating friendships and many lasting kinship bonds. By name, schools denoted not only a place, but also a



specific culture. Hence, the school became a defining agent within families, neighbourhoods and the greater community over several generations. The survival of these historic structures thus provides an essential aspect in understanding both the urban morphology and the social history of Victoria.

Observations

- The seismic upgrading of Victoria's historic red-brick schools represents one of the most significant investments in Victoria's legacy of architectural heritage. With the completion of the largest and most complex, Victoria High School, this story needs to be shared more widely. One tool would be a special series of historic site interpretive plaques linked to an informational website.
- The historic schools of Victoria provide a ready platform for class-room learning units which introduce the community values of our shared history and heritage.
- Local school architecture of the Modern period also provides outstanding examples of contemporary design. Further exploration and documentation of this heritage needs to be pursued and publicized.

Resources

- D. Franklin & John Fleming. *Early School Architecture in British Columbia: an Architectural History and Inventory of Buildings to 1930*. Heritage Conservation Branch, Government of British Columbia, 1980.
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