

### 3. Modern Architecture in Manitoba: A Brief Guide

The exciting and vibrant activity that drove Modern architecture in Europe and the eastern United States in the second and third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was also experienced in Manitoba, though its effects were felt somewhat later. Following is an outline of the adoption and adaptation of modernist approaches in Manitoba buildings. It is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of the architecture of the period, or to address every important site, but the examples illustrated provide a good idea of the significance of the mid-century built environment in the province.

#### The Early Years: c. 1925 to 1934 and beyond

The early stages of the radical Modern movement were largely ignored in Canada, at least outwardly.<sup>1</sup> Canadian architects continued to work with familiar styles for several more decades, with Manitoba not seeing its first International Modernist buildings until the 1950s. Architects and others debated what the most appropriate style might be for their time, but generally concluded that Modernism was too radical and unsuitable for the Canadian situation, preferring instead to adapt various historical styles. They did, however, adopt new materials and approaches, and many an early twentieth century Manitoba building features traditional ornament over a wholly modern structure.

Aesthetically, the influence of modernism began to appear in the simplification of detail and flattening of planes, particularly in the classical idiom. The resulting style, often known as “stripped classicism,” allowed architects and clients who were wedded to traditional styles as a way to express certain notions—such as the solidity and grandeur appropriate to a bank building or court house—to continue to draw on those ancient associations while bringing their designs somewhat up to date in the modern context.

As ornament and historical precedent were gradually stripped away, the streamlined style that emerged in the thirties and forties came to be known as “**Moderne**.” This style was used particularly for residential and small commercial buildings. An early manifestation of Modernism in Manitoba, this style had been outdated in Europe for two decades before it made its appearance here.

Often, Moderne appears as a vernacular expression of Modernism—an adaptation of some Modernist characteristics into the work of designer-builders. It is generally identified with plain wall surfaces of concrete, stucco or masonry (usually brick), often with curved corners. Windows may be placed asymmetrically, and glass block is a common material. Moderne commercial buildings may feature small cantilevered canopies, usually with curved corners, and lettering used with decorative effect. The Moderne style offered an elegant, up-to-date appearance and could be quite affordable to build since it did not depend on the expensive materials and ornament of Art Deco. It also lent itself well to an inexpensive updating of earlier buildings. It was commonly adopted for low-rise apartment buildings in the city.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture*, volume 2 (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 705.



**Frank R. Lount, Winnipeg Clinic (before additions), 1942**

This original portion of the Winnipeg Clinic illustrates many features of the Moderne style. It is horizontal in orientation, and has an asymmetrical façade with a flat roof and no cornice or other projection at the roofline. The overall impression is of a streamlined shape, with sleek limestone walls and the rounded south side (at right) accentuated by the use of glass block. Except for some subtle incised details around the entrance there is neither ornamentation nor reference to traditional architectural styles. The building has received two additions, and the windows have been altered.

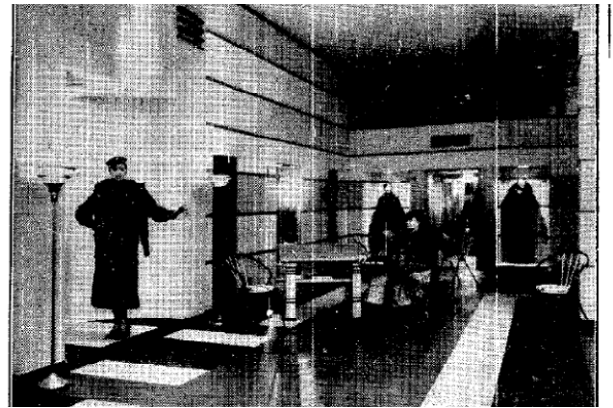


**Moderne door canopy addition to the Peck Building, Winnipeg, (building by Charles H. Wheeler, 1893)**

A minor facelift such as this could update a building without too much financial outlay. This door canopy, in which the lettering is a key element of the design, may have been added in 1928 when the building underwent somewhat extensive interior alterations.

## Opening the Doors to Modernism: 1934-1955

In 1935 the *Winnipeg Free Press* hailed the arrival of what it called “the first example of true modern architecture in Winnipeg.”<sup>2</sup> The building, by the firm of Green, Blankstein, Russell and Ham (later Green, Blankstein and Russell), was a new retail shop for the Hurtig Fur company, at 262-4 Portage Avenue. The newspaper article is instructive, as it clarifies how Manitobans approached Modernism in that time. The architects reportedly asserted that the building was modern only in that it was “simply a development to meet the owners’ needs and wishes in a straight-forward manner in good, suitable materials. There is no unnecessary ornament, and no attempt has been made to follow any particular architectural style.” The large plate glass windows (now obscured by signage) and elegant, streamlined interior (wholly altered) must have made an impression on Depression-era Winnipeggers.



**Green, Blankstein, Russell and Ham,  
Hurtig Furs, Winnipeg, 1934**

This building is faced in Tyndall stone with simple incised Art Deco motifs. The words “Hurtig Furs,” spelled out in aluminum letters thirty inches high, would have provided an aesthetic focus. The “vast expanse of glass,” as the newspaper called it, was obviously a radical sight for Manitobans in the mid-1930s.

The Great Depression and the war years were quiet ones for the building industry in Manitoba. Even in the early 1940s, though the prairie drought had ended, construction remained restricted by the war effort; relatively few large buildings were erected until later in that decade. By the time building began again in earnest, architecture had undergone a sea change. Even Manitoba, which was not given to charging ahead in the vanguard of style, was moving steadily in the direction of Modernism, with historic ornament and extensive detail increasingly rarely to be seen. Modern approaches were more and more affecting the skin as well as the bones of buildings.

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<sup>2</sup> “First Example of New Architecture Features Hurtigs,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (January 4, 1935): 8.

Historians have identified the 1950s and 60s as a period of Renaissance for Manitoba after a long difficult period that had lasted since the beginning of World War I.<sup>3</sup> In Manitoba, as in areas across the developed world, the mid-twentieth century saw vast changes to society and culture. Not surprisingly, these were reflected in both the types of structures that were being built, and the styles and materials used for them. Although agriculture remained the province's driving economic force through much of the period, Manitoba's population became increasingly urban, resulting in expanding cities and shrinking or disappearing small towns and villages. In 1941, 55% of the province's population lived in rural areas, but a decade later this had declined to 43%.<sup>4</sup> Ten years later the divergence had increased still more dramatically.

## University of Manitoba Faculty of Architecture

All this population movement demanded new buildings in new places, and when the province was ready to build again, the School (later Faculty) of Architecture at the University of Manitoba was prepared with architects eager to work in the new style. Indeed, the university's School of Architecture has produced some of the foremost Canadian practitioners of Modernism, and with its help Winnipeg became what has been called "a kind of crucible of Canadian Modernist architecture."<sup>5</sup>

The school was established in 1913. John A. Russell, who had taught in the school since 1928, became its first dean in 1946. Trained at MIT, the American-born Russell maintained connections with prominent architects and schools in the United States and Britain, encouraging his students to go abroad for work and learning. Through Russell, and through the students who sought enrichment at places like MIT and IIT, the school had early connections to some of the architects and designers who had been in the vanguard of Modernism in Europe and the United States—including Gropius, Mies, Eero Saarinen and Louis Kahn. Thus, Manitoban architects were well aware of international developments and ready to bring architectural innovations to the province.

Several of these University of Manitoba-trained architects remained in the province after graduation, and they, together with local architects trained elsewhere, created a collection of high-quality modern buildings in Winnipeg and elsewhere in the province. By the 1950s, they were producing buildings in the International Modernist style.

In 1955, the *Free Press* sought to introduce the new style to the public, with an article on "Modern Design in New Winnipeg Buildings." Author Gordon Sinclair defined "the new trend" as follows: "functional, devoid of unnecessary frills, and with cleancut lines; buildings composed, in some cases, largely of glass."<sup>6</sup> The article provides several examples of the new style, including the recently-completed Manitoba Power Commission building on Portage at Dominion (now Manitoba Highways) and the new post office on Graham It also mentions the Dayton Building, then under construction at the corner of Portage and Hargrave. Completed in November of 1955, "Winnipeg's first experiment" in the "ultra-modern" commercial building was afforded an article

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<sup>3</sup> Serena Keshavjee, citing Edward Whitcomb, "Introduction: Modified Modernism," in *Winnipeg Modern: Architecture 1945-1975*, edited by Serena Keshavjee (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Manitoba 125: A History*. Volume Three: *Decades of Diversity* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 1995) p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Keshavjee, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Sinclair, "Business in Glass Houses: Modern Design in New Winnipeg Buildings," *Winnipeg Free Press* (1 January 1955): 21.

of its own.<sup>7</sup> The chief attraction was its glass facades, and the building was said to reflect “the planning of the future.” Its architects, Green, Blankstein and Russell, were clearly identified as the local innovators in Modernism.



**Green Blankstein, and Russell, Dayton Building, Winnipeg, 1955**

At the time of its construction, this building was hailed as Winnipeg’s first all-glass-faced structure. The development over two decades from the same firm’s Hurtig Furs building illustrates Manitoba architects’ transition to International Modernism; ornament is provided only by the structural elements themselves and by the lettering, and the structure is clearly expressed—with the glass curtain walls revealing the support columns inside. The building is now home to a sports bar; the ground floor and interiors have been altered, while the curtain wall has recently been with large-scale decals.

By the end of the decade, High Modernism was established, for the moment, as the principal style for government and institutional buildings, with several major projects having been carried out as International Modernist designs. With its underlying progressive ideology, this style was remarkably appropriate for a rapidly-growing government with a vision of progress and an improved society.

Generally, International Modernism offered a fairly uniform solution to the challenges and opportunities presented by building programs. Manitoba architects have been credited with creating regional variants through, for example, the use of the visually-characteristic Tyndall stone for cladding on the Norquay building, the airport terminal, and others. Slightly later, several Manitoba architects developed more truly regional styles based on modernist principles.

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<sup>7</sup> “Ultra-Modern Block on Site of Ruin,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (18 November 1955): 14.



**David Thordarson for Green, Blankstein, and Russell, Norquay Building, Winnipeg, 1959**

With its glass curtain wall set slightly behind strong vertical piers, a flat canopy over its entrance, and its placement in a compact plaza (all that the small site would allow) the Norquay building is a textbook essay in International Modernism. Tyndall stone for the cladding on the side walls creates some harmony with earlier surrounding buildings. The style, with its promise of a bright future, was particularly appropriate, as this building represents the crest of a wave of expansion of government in Manitoba that occurred between 1958 and 1969, under the premiership of Duff Roblin. During this time, provincial expenditures increased fourfold and the civil service doubled in number.

## **Prairie Regionalism and Major Firms and Designers**

In Manitoba and elsewhere in the 1960s and 70s, many architects began to see that a general architectural solution had its limitations, and that cities filled with such generic buildings could easily become quite characterless. These Late Modernists began to modify the forms of High Modernism, introducing more sculptural shapes and producing buildings that were more individual. As International Modernism began to give way to a series of creative innovations, it is not necessarily possible to attach a style name to each building, and architectural historians differ as to the names they assign to the stylistic variations that arose. A common thread, however, is that architects in this later mid-century period were almost invariably reacting to International Modernism; its ideologies, its materials, its technologies and its forms were embraced or rejected or stretched to greater or lesser degrees to develop the buildings of the later decades of the century. In Manitoba, several prominent architects who had begun in the Modernist School began to develop their own approaches in response to the opportunities and exigencies of prairie conditions and the existing built environment. These notable Manitoba firms are briefly profiled, with major projects illustrated, on the following pages:

### **Major Firms**

Green, Blankstein and Russell (GBR)

Libling, Michener, and Associates

Moody, Moore Partners

Number Ten Architectural Group

Smith, Carter (with various associates)

Waisman, Ross and Associates

Architectural firms have a tendency to form and re-form under different names, with varying combinations of associates. The firm names here are those by which the firms were probably best known during the 1950s and 60s. It is important to note that architectural firms frequently consist of members with different specialities, including design work and engineering, but also the business details. Quite frequently, the design architect for a specific building might not be a principal in the firm, and thus the designer's name might not be normally associated with the building. In addition to multi-person firms, there are also architects who operate independently. These individuals are presented at the end of this section (It is well worth noting that most of the province's prominent mid-century architects were both born and trained in Manitoba):

### **Major Designers**

David Thordarson (associated with GBR)

James Donahue (associated with Smith, Carter)

Gustavo da Roza II

Étienne Gaboury

Leslie Stechesen

## Green, Blankstein and Russell (GBR)

Lawrence J. Green, Cecil N. Blankstein, and G. Leslie Russell were also partners with Ralph Carl Ham (as Green, Blankstein, Russell and Ham) until 1944. All of the principals were Winnipeg-born and received their architectural training at the University of Manitoba; Russell also worked for a time with a firm in Chicago. GBR was the pre-eminent modernist firm in Manitoba, and was responsible for designing several of the iconic modernist buildings in the province—including Winnipeg City Hall and the airport—as well as Hurtig Furs, the building described by the *Winnipeg Free Press* as Winnipeg’s “first example of true modern architecture.” GBR had a national presence in the mid-century period, and in 1954 had won a competition for a new building to house the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. Though the project was never realized, the gallery occupied, for some three decades from 1958, the Lorne Building, which was also designed by the firm.



Left: Overall view with Council Building at left. Below left: courtyard and entrance of Administration Building. Above: Council Building.



## David Thordarson and Bernard Brown for Green, Blankstein, Russell and Associates, Winnipeg City Hall, 1962-65

The City Hall project is a particularly fine example of the optimistic mission of Modernist architects. Placed on Main Street a few blocks north of Portage, it was intended to rejuvenate a struggling area. Shortly thereafter, it was followed by the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the Planetarium, and the concert hall. These major civic projects were part of a broader scheme of urban renewal that was occupying the city in the late 1950s and early 1960s.



## **Libling, Michener, and Associates**

Gerald A Libling and Mel P. Michener (the latter born in Winnipeg) received their training at the University of Manitoba before forming a partnership in 1955. They won the Massey Medal for the International Style Executive House apartments (designed by Leslie Stechesen, see below under his name) and branched into Brutalism with the Public Safety Building.



**Libling, Michener and Associates, St. Paul's College High School, Winnipeg, 1964**



**Libling, Michener, and Associates, Lord Selkirk Park, Winnipeg, 1967**

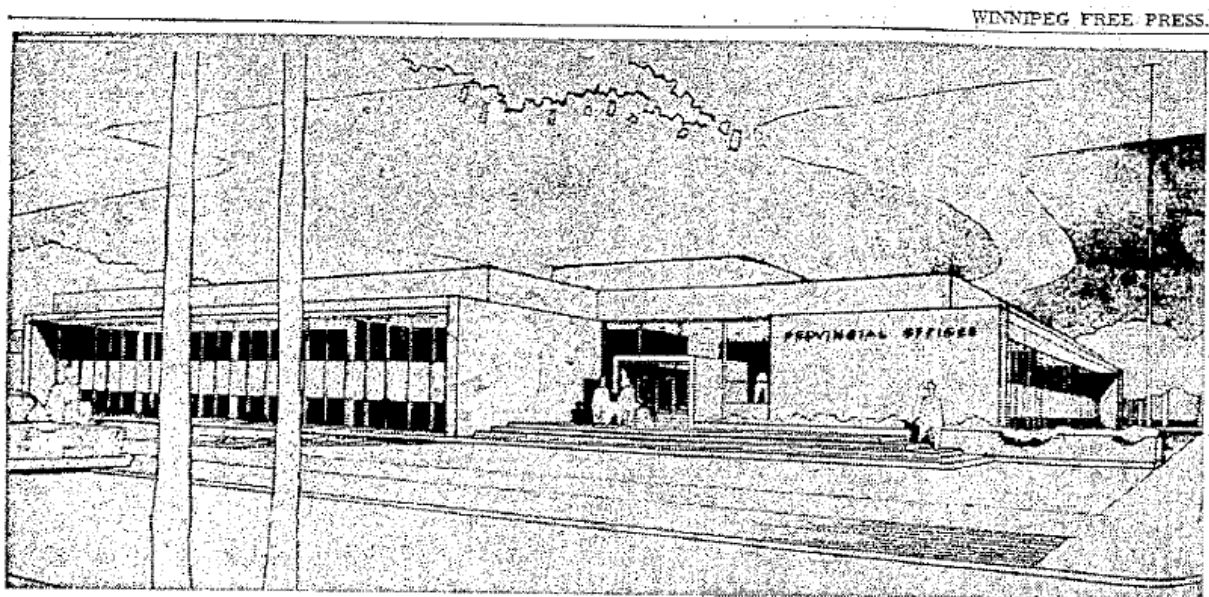
This housing replaced a rundown mixed residential and commercial district. The new project, intended to improve the lives of residents and decrease crime, was a descendent of the housing envisioned most famously by Le Corbusier in the 1920s: residences (in this case medium density), set in areas of green space. Lord Selkirk Park is another interpretation of some of the ideas that had driven the development of Wildwood Park (see below), modified for the poor and set in an urban situation. Many such urban renewal schemes failed to deliver the improvements they had promised, and they often destroyed forever what had been vibrant—if poor—communities.

## Moody, Moore Partners

Herbert Moody and Robert Moore were both born in Winnipeg and took their training at the University of Manitoba; Moody also spent time with firms in Boston and Toronto in the late 1920s and early 30s. The firm was responsible for a number of International Modernist buildings, including the Manitoba Hydro building on Taylor Avenue and the Provincial Building in The Pas.



Moody, Moore Partners, Manitoba Hydro Head Office, Winnipeg, 1958



Artist's Sketch Of Proposed Provincial Building At The Pas

Moody and Moore, Provincial Building, The Pas, 1958-59; second floor (not shown here) 1969-70

The glass curtain walls are recessed behind deep reinforced concrete overhangs, emphasizing the non-load-bearing nature of the skin. A second storey was added a decade later.

## Number Ten Architectural Group

In 1959, Winnipeg-born Morley Blankstein and Isadore Coop joined together with Allan Hanna and Doug Gillmor to form a partnership, all four having received their initial architectural training at the University of Manitoba. Blankstein and Coop went on to study at IIT under Mies van der Rohe, while Hanna and Gillmor chose to attend MIT, where they came into contact with renowned modernists Louis Kahn (Hanna), Buckminster Fuller (Gillmor) and Eero Saarinen (both). They were joined five years later by Alan Waisman and Jack Ross, to form Waisman Ross Blankstein Coop Gillmor Hanna Architects/Engineers. In 1969, the firm became Number Ten Architectural Group.



### **Number Ten Architectural Group, Manitoba Theatre Centre, Winnipeg, 1969-70**

Designed by Alan Waisman, the Manitoba Theatre Centre is carried out in raw concrete in the Brutalist style. Its sculptural forms provide visual interest at street level and create a dialogue between the outdoors and interior; where the earlier Public Safety Building evokes a fortress, the Theatre Centre uses a similar vocabulary to draw the public inside. The building was designated a National Historic Site in 2009.

## **Smith, Carter (with various associates)**

Ernest John Smith, born in Winnipeg, and Dennis H. Carter, born in Montreal, both received their architectural training at the University of Manitoba. Smith also spent time at MIT. With various partners, Munn, Katelnikoff, Searle, Parkin and others, Smith and Carter were responsible for a number of prominent Manitoba buildings, ranging from Rae and Jerry's Steakhouse to the School of Architecture at the University of Manitoba.



**Smith Carter Architects, Assiniboine Park Zoo Bear Pits, 1955**



**James Donahue for Smith, Carter & Katelnikoff, John A. Russell Building 1959**

This building looks to Mies's Crown Hall for its low temple form and vertical members reflecting the support structure within. In 2008, LM Architectural Group won a Heritage Winnipeg Preservation Award for the restoration of the building envelope.

## Waisman, Ross and Associates

Winnipeg-born Allan Waisman and Jack M. Ross, both trained at the University of Manitoba, formed this firm in 1953. They joined with BCGH in 1964 to become the Number Ten Architectural Group. Waisman and Ross designed the Northern Sales Building, an early Manitoba example of the International Style, and were also responsible for probably Winnipeg's best remaining example of Space Age architecture in the Perth's Drycleaner on Main Street.



### Waisman, Ross and Associates, Perth's drycleaners, Winnipeg, 1962

With its undulating roofline and dramatic, brightly-coloured sign, and set back from the street line to allow for parking in front, Perth's drycleaners is an excellent example of the popular modernism that was used in the 1950s and 60s. The building itself—designed to catch the eye as one passes at speed—is like a billboard for the business. Sadly, the sign was taken down in December 2011 and the building has lost much of its effect.



### Waisman, Ross, and Associates, University of Manitoba Residence Cafeteria, 1964

## David Thordarson

Born in Winnipeg and educated at the University of Manitoba, Thordarson was a design architect with GBR from 1949 until 1991. His works with that firm include St. George's Anglican Church, the Winnipeg International Airport and the Winnipeg City Hall and Administration Building.



**David Thordarson for Green, Blankstein and Russell, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, 1951.**

The opening of this building has been identified as “the moment when Winnipeg’s architectural culture shifted irrevocably towards the modern” (Kelly Crossman, “The Meaning of White,” in Serena Keshavjee, [ed.] *Winnipeg Modern: Architecture 1945-1975* [University of Manitoba Press, 2006], p. 131).



**David Thordarson for Green, Blankstein and Russell, St. George's Anglican Church, Winnipeg, 1957**

## James Donahue

Born in Regina, Donahue was the first Canadian graduate of the Harvard School of Design, where he studied under Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius. He joined the architecture faculty at the University of Manitoba in 1946, remaining there until 1963. He designed a number of notable buildings in Manitoba, including, for Smith, Carter, Katelnikoff and Searle, the Monarch Life (now Worker's Compensation) Building in Winnipeg.



**James Donahue, for Smith, Carter, Katelnikoff and Searle, Monarch Life/Worker's Compensation Building, Winnipeg, 1959-63 (*currently being re clad*)**

## Gustavo da Roza II

Da Roza was born in Macau and educated in Hong Kong. He taught for a time at the University of California at Berkeley, and then spent some time in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he met Walter Gropius and studied his work before becoming a professor at the University of Manitoba in 1971. He remained on the faculty for thirty years. His work has been identified as marking a transition between high International Modernism and Post Modernism. Although his best-known work is the Winnipeg Art Gallery, he also designed a number of modernist houses, ranging from relatively humble self-effacing examples in the early 1960s through a range of highly personal designs using unexpected angles and mannerist features such as oversized house numbers and exaggerated proportions.



### **Gustavo da Roza, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1970**

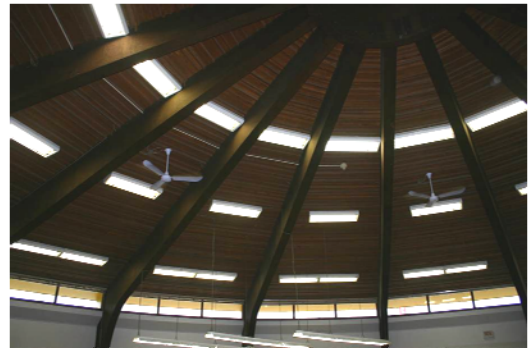
In its complete absence of ornament or historical reference, Da Roza's building is ultimately modern. But the architect's choice of Tyndall Stone harmonizes it with surrounding buildings, and he carefully composed the building so that, looking down Osborne Street towards the Legislature, the sight line along the gallery emphasizes, rather than detracting from, the provincial legislative building.





## Étienne Gaboury

Gaboury was born in Bruxelles, Manitoba and was educated at the University of Manitoba and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He began his career with Libling, Michener, designing the Massey-award winning Manitoba Health Services (now Blue Cross) Building before branching out on his own. He had been deeply inspired by Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp, and he began to develop a vocabulary of expressionist spaces in which, as he observed of Le Corbusier's chapel, "space [was] created by light."



### **Gaboury and Lussier, Regional Library, St. Pierre, 1964**

Originally a gymnasium for St. Pierre Collegiate, this building has made the transition well to a library; its skylights and high windows, first protected from errant basketballs, now make way for bookcases below.



### **Étienne-Joseph Gaboury, Église du Précieux Sang, Winnipeg, 1968**

The regular geometry and stark exterior with externally expressed (in wood veneer) beams on the St. Pierre library (top) contrast with the dynamic, swirling form of the shingled roof and the undulating brick walls of this church from four years later, marking the development of Gaboury's regionalist style.

## Leslie Stechesen

Stechesen received his architectural degree at the University of Manitoba, and then completed graduate studies in planning and urban design at the Architectural Association in London. Before going into private practice, he was head of design for Libling, Michener from 1957-71. Principle works with that firm include Executive House apartments and the Manitoba Teacher's Society Building, both in Winnipeg.



Leslie Stechesen, Bridge Drive-Inn, Winnipeg, 1958



Leslie Stechesen for Libling, Michener and Associates, Executive House, Winnipeg, 1959



## Leslie Stechesen and Associates, Leaf Rapids Town Centre, c. 1975

Leaf Rapids Town Centre was designed to incorporate all the features of a conventional downtown, protected from the weather under one roof. It included a school, church, community health centre and hotel, as well as cultural, recreational and sports facilities. The town won a Vincent Massey Award for Urban Excellence in 1975, and this approach became a model for other northern communities.