

The other Victoria

John Crosby Freeman

Volume 1, Number 1, 1974

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077462ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077462ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Freeman, J. C. (1974). The other Victoria. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 1(1), 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077462ar>

The other Victoria

PLANNING VICTORIA AS A CAPITALIST CITY

Most visitors to Victoria are persuaded it is more British than Britain.¹ And so it is... if one's impression is taken from a High Tea at the Empress Hotel, a dinner at the Olde England Inn, a visit to Butchart Gardens, and a stroll down Victoria's tourist gauntlet of Irish linen & glass, English woolen & pottery, and Scottish tartan shops. But exploring the historic architecture of this old Pacific Coast city reveals the other Victoria: North American, Western, Canadian.

What distinguished the settlement of Western Canada in the nineteenth century from that of Eastern Canada in the seventeenth and eighteenth was the prevalence of economic motives over ecclesiastic and political ones.² Two capitalist enterprises developed Western Canada from Winnipeg to Victoria. The Hudson's Bay Company led the first wave — bartering furs for British blankets. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company, socking rails across the Rockies, led the second.

The Hudson's Bay Company brought civilization to Victoria in 1843 when James Douglas built Fort Camosun (later renamed Fort Victoria). A wooden enclosure featuring two corner bastions and over-

looking Victoria's Inner Harbour, this trading post occupied an area roughly similar to that marked out today by the intersections of Fort, Government, View, and Wharf Streets. In lieu of anything else, Fort Victoria functioned as the centre of public safety, civil authority, economic security, and public justice. Thereby, citizens associated with the Fort ideas about security, justice, and authority. This, in turn, charged the earth upon which the Fort stood with a kind of sanctity. Although it rapidly became obsolete and was eventually plowed under, this hallowed ground was sown later in the century with other civilizing fortifications. New bastions of economic security were planted at the two corners facing the city of Victoria. Both were banks. One is located at the corner of Fort and Government Streets. Here, in 1885, the first Bank of British Columbia (now the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce) was built. (Fig. 5) The other is at the corner of Government and View Streets. Here, in 1896, the Bank of Montreal put up a building reminiscent of the bastion which formerly stood there. (Fig. 8) Facing the Inner Harbour on what is presently called Bastion Square, a new Court House (now the Maritime Museum) was completed in 1889 from the designs of Herman Otto Tiedman as well as the Board of Trade Building (now offices and shops), erected in 1892 from the designs of Maxwell Muir. Elsewhere in this district were built warehouses, shops, and offices in either the obligatory Italianate or Richardsonian Romanesque style. For much of the twentieth century, the Old Town (as this area is now often called) served the same functions that the Fort did at the beginning: the center of commercial activity, the seat of public justice, and the bastions of economic security.

Today, the most visible architectural legacy of the Hudson's Bay Company is its department store

1. For the fascinating story of how this was done consult Kenneth Lines, "A Bit of Olde England: The Selling of Tourist Victoria" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1972).

2. Although the historic architecture of organized Christianity makes an important contribution to Victoria's profile it is not discussed here because Capitalism, not Christianity dominated the development of Victoria. Governor James Douglas "made it clear that neither he nor the Colonial Office intended British Columbia to have an established church"; however, "to stimulate religious endeavor, he made free grants to four denominations." Margaret A. ORMSBY, *British Columbia: A History* (MacMillan of Canada, 1964), p. 179.

on Douglas Street. Begun in 1913 and not completed until 1921, it is done up in the Beaux-Arts Neo-classical manner by Horwood & White of Toronto. Located on an elevated "City Beautiful" site, its company front of colossal columns dressed up in cream-coloured terra-cotta is an architectural trademark of The Bay and hardly differs from those in Vancouver and Calgary.

When the Canadian Pacific Railway Company refused to select Victoria as the western terminus, a process was initiated which transferred the centre of British Columbia capitalism from Victoria to Vancouver. But the capitalist enterprise that destroyed Victoria's old future gave it a new one. Tourism became Victoria's new industry when the Canadian Pacific Railway Company completed the Empress Hotel (Fig. 9) in 1908 and serviced it with tourists from its own Empress Steamships after which the hotel was named.

Individual capitalists as well as large capitalist enterprises shaped the city of Victoria. James Douglas owned a large farm overlooking James Bay (named for himself) on the Inner Harbour. Although opposite Fort Victoria, it was difficult to reach and, consequently, possessed little development potential. But Douglas was a resourceful man. In 1856 the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island, having acquired a legislative assembly, required a permanent place in Victoria to assemble and legislate. The godfather of Victoria made them an offer they couldn't refuse, and in 1859 H. O. Tiedman's infamous "Bird Cages" legislative buildings (Fig. 1) sprang up in the midst of what had

been the Douglas Farm. It worked like a charm: the muddy slough dividing town and legislature was immediately bridged by an extension of Government Street; the James Bay area became Victoria's chief residential district for the remainder of the nineteenth century; and the ground upon which the "Bird Cages" stood, sanctified by the doings of first colonial and then provincial government, obliged the present Parliament Building (Fig. 6) to locate itself on this less than satisfactory site.³

FOUR PHASES OF VICTORIA'S HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE

Between 1872 and 1912, the civic functions of this North American, Western, Canadian city were given tangible expression by three architects in four ten-year phases.

1872-1882

This post-Confederation decade is concerned with politics and education. Its leading architect is John Teague, an Englishman skilled in construction working in the Second Empire style.⁴ In 1874

3. The main facade is on the north side. Consequently, it is always in shadow — a condition exaggerated by eighty year's accumulation of grime.
4. This French style was popular for civic buildings throughout North America in the 1870s. Mansardic buildings of this period in Victoria, however, are more Italianate than French. The difference is readily apparent in a comparison of Victoria's City Hall of 1878 with Montreal's City Hall of 1872. Italianate detailing and newspaper references to "the Italian Style" or "Anglo-Italian" style mitigated whatever Francophobia existed in Victoria.

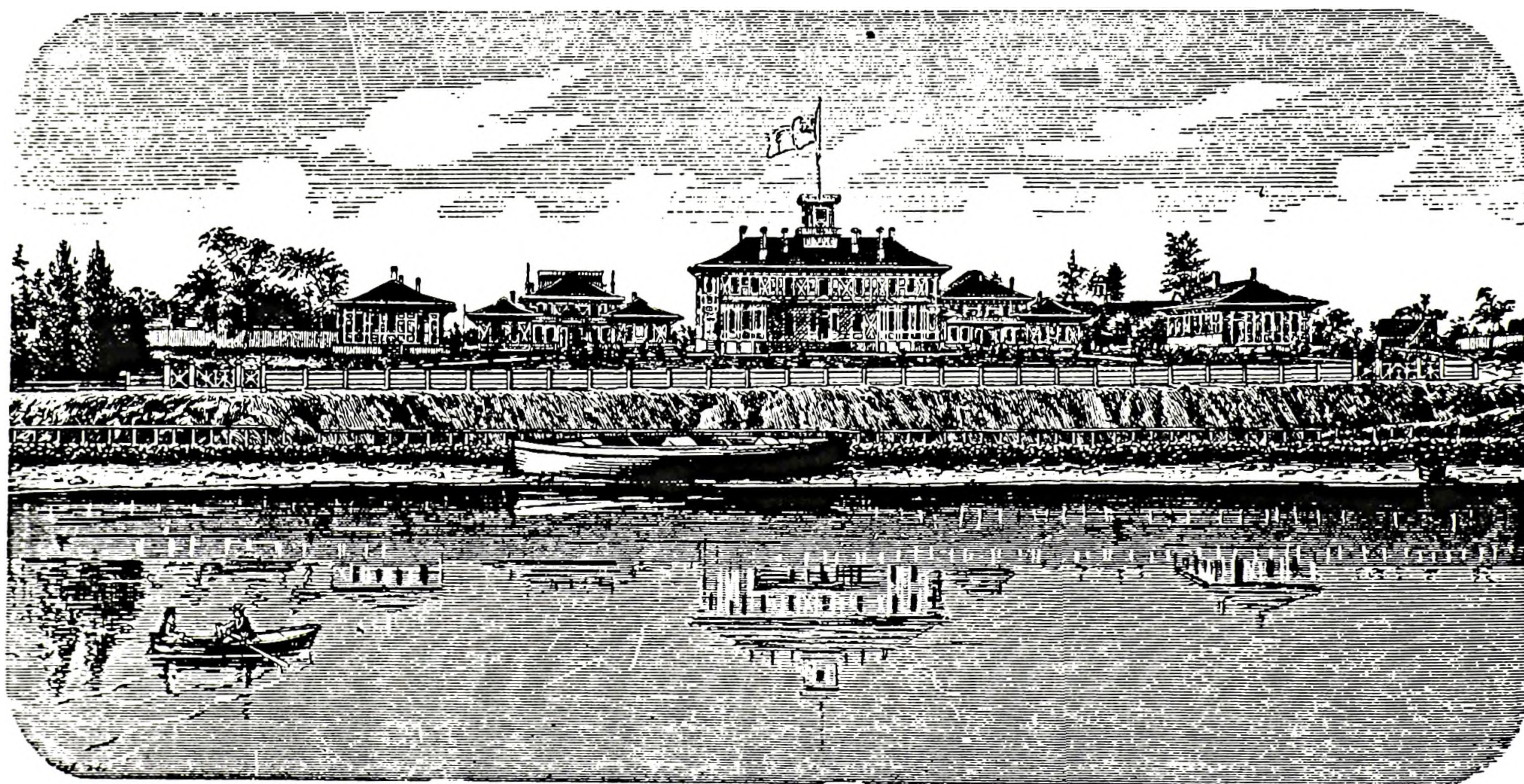


FIGURE 1. First Legislative Buildings (better known as the "Bird Cages"). H. O. Tiedman, 1859. Destroyed.

he brings himself to the attention of Victoria's first capitalist Establishment by designing the Church of Our Lord in "Carpenter Gothic" style for a controversial Reformed Episcopal Church featuring James Douglas as its most prominent member. He then designs four Italianate civic buildings with mansard roofs as an architectural counter-thrust to the first major federal building constructed in Victoria after Confederation. The mansardic Dominion Custom's House⁶ (Fig. 2) materialized three years after Confederation at the same time Teague is working on the Church of Our Lord. In 1875 he designs his first mansardic building, the Public School,⁷ which is followed in 1877 by a mansardic municipal hospital.⁸ Early in 1878 work began on his Masonic Temple for Victoria's Grand Lodge of British Columbia (Fig. 3) located on Douglas Street across from the Anglican Church of St. John the Evangelist where The Bay now stands.⁹

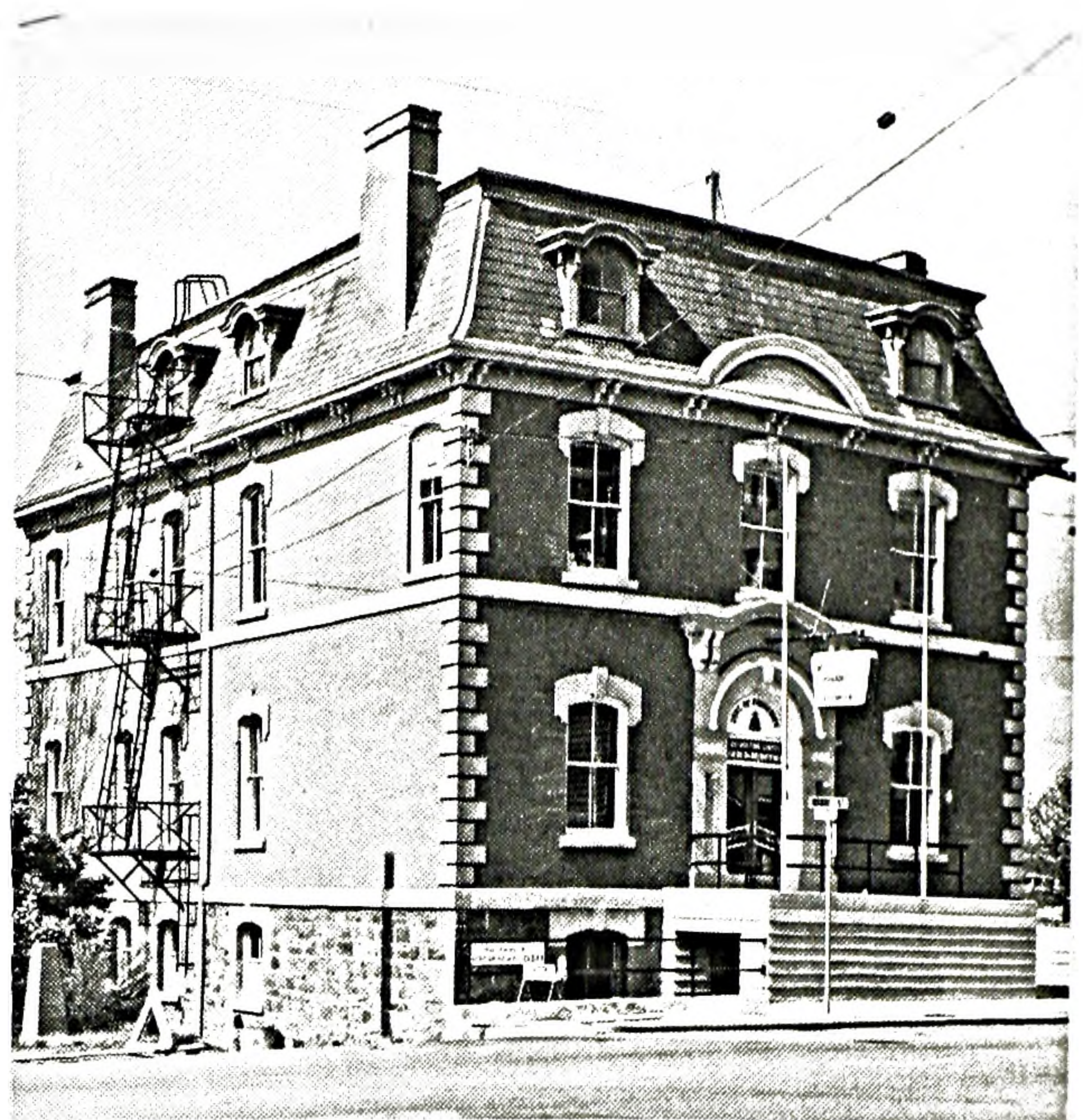


FIGURE 2. Dominion Custom's House. T. S. Scott, 1874. Photo by Douglas Bogdanski.

5. He probably got the commission for the simple reason that he was a member of the congregation. It is characteristic of his career that he is often a member and sometimes a highly ranked official of the institution for which he designs a building. He worked at the Esquimalt naval yard near Victoria prior to constructing its naval hospital in 1874. He was Grand Superintendent of Works for Victoria's Grand Lodge of British Columbia when his design for its Masonic Temple was completed in 1878. His design for the first portion of Victoria's City Hall was completed in 1878 and additions made in 1881 and 1891. He returned to this building in 1894 as mayor.
6. By T. S. Scott, Federal Department of Works Architect in Ottawa.
7. Destroyed in 1952. Architectural historians, by concentrating on originality in North American architecture and ignoring those common buildings which had an important social function, are somewhat responsible for allowing several Victorian building types to pass into oblivion. The Public School/High School/Normal School is one of them. Yet they were places where many generations of youth were given the catechism of egalitarian democracy and free enterprise capitalism. As such, they expressed municipal pride: "The reproach which the capital of the Province has endured for years," writes the Superintendent of Public Schools in his *Report* of 1875, "respecting the scantiness and inconvenience of her public school accomodation, is now entirely removed... [The new Public School] will be far superior to anything of the kind on the Pacific Coast. True, some of the school edifices in San Francisco are more pretentious in appearance; but none of them have such extensive and beautiful grounds, or such magnificent views of city, country, and surrounding waters, as the one which will... crown the charming elevation known as the 'old School Reserve' [at the head of Yates and View Streets]."
8. Later named Jubilee Hospital in honour of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, it was destroyed in 1954. The name survived.
9. The cornerstone was laid April 22nd and "dedicated to the Holy St. John the Evangelist and the Masonic Fraternity of the Province of British Columbia." The axis between Freemasons and Episcopalians or Anglicans during the nineteenth century in North America is a fascinating subject. This topic is currently being studied by Mr. Douglas Bogdanski.

The Public School and the Masonic Temple are visibly related by style. Both are chiefly concerned with education: one educates youths in a series of grades; the other educates adults in a series of degrees. Nor is it accidental that they are stylistically related to John Teague's last mansardic building: City Hall (Fig. 4) on Douglas Street, begun in 1878. For the Public School and Masonic Temple educate individuals in preparation for civic leadership in City Hall.

There is little that is original about any of these four mansardic buildings by John Teague. Actually, they are rather dull. But in the aggregate they constitute an extraordinary cultural document about North American life in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. In Victoria, one man in four years gave a city its architectural expression of municipal authority in government, health care, and the education of adults and youths.

1882-1892

During this ambitious decade, a commercial district in and about the site of Fort Victoria is formed, large churches are designed,¹⁰ and a competition is held for a new Provincial Parliament Building to replace the "Bird Cages." Although

10. 1888: St. Andrew's Presbyterian by L. B. Triman; 1890: Metropolitan Methodist by Thomas Hooper; 1891: Centennial Methodist by Thomas Hooper and Christ Church Anglican Cathedral by J. C. M. Keith; 1892: St. Andrew's Roman Catholic Cathedral by Perrault & Messiard.



FIGURE 3. Masonic Temple. John Teague, 1878. Photo by Douglas Bogdanski.



FIGURE 4. City Hall. John Teague, 1878, 1881, 1891. Photo by Douglas Bogdanski.

John Teague gets no church commissions in this decade and loses the Parliament Building competition, he designs several commercial structures.¹¹

Two of the most important buildings constructed in this decade are the first Bank of British Columbia (Fig. 5) and Craigdarroch Castle (now the Victoria Conservatory of Music). Both are designed by the Portland, Oregon architect, W. H. Williams¹² in 1885 for the powerful Victoria capitalist, Robert Dunsmuir.¹³ And the style selected for both was determined by social function. Craigdarroch was deliberately Scottish in character to express his conviction that Scots, not Englishmen, made Canada prosper. It was deliberately a castle, too. Dunsmuir, a poor man when he arrived in Victoria, promised his wife he would put her in a castle before he died.¹⁴ The castle, located on an elevated site commanding the vista along Fort Street,¹⁵ also expressed a conviction that Dunsmuir was the king of Victoria capitalism.¹⁶ The Bank was Italianate because that was the traditional commercial style of Victoria. It was also made to look like a Renaissance palazzo because it associated this banking house with the merchants and bankers of Renaissance Italy — Western Civilization's first capitalist Establishment. This was no idle or mindless act of Victorian associationism; Dunsmuir and the other directors of the Bank intended this palazzo to be 'read' as the home of a powerful capitalist Establishment¹⁷ whose main



FIGURE 5. Bank of British Columbia. W. H. Williams, 1885. Photo by Douglas Bogdanski.

objective was to resurrect the glories of Renaissance Italy in Victoria.

1892-1902

Alas. This Renaissance didn't materialize; in 1893 the city was hit by North America's worst depression of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Victoria's smallpox epidemic of 1892 and a terrible flooding of the Fraser River in 1894 added to the general gloom. The darkness, however, was beguiled by civic architecture larger and more original than anything ever built in Victoria prior to the depression.¹⁹

The jewel of the lot was the Parliament Building, (Fig. 6) designed by a young Yorkshireman skilled in Beaux-Arts Neo-classicism. From his first major work to his last, Francis Mawson Rattenbury knew better than other Victoria archi-

situation remedied when the Dominion of Canada assumed it as a condition of Confederation agreed to that year. The Bank, of course, was the immediate chief beneficiary of Confederation; the railroad promised came later.

11. Martin SEGGER (*Walking Tour of Old Town Victoria*, published by Heritage Map Tours, 4020 Magdelin Street, Victoria in 1974) lists the Yates Building in 1882, the Driard Hotel (now Eaton's) in 1886, the New England Hotel in 1892, and the Oriental Hotel in 1893.

12. The Bank had a branch in Portland, and Williams was the city's most prominent commercial architect at this time.

13. Like most people who prospered in Victoria before 1892, Dunsmuir was brought here by the Hudson's Bay Company. He eventually owned coal mines, a railroad, *The Daily Colonist*, Albion Iron Works, ships, and a directorship in the Bank of British Columbia.

14. He didn't quite make it. He died in 1889 just prior to its completion.

15. That is, east of the Bank of British Columbia. The two buildings, castle and counting house, are related by their positions in the city plan. The castle also dominated the entire city. To this day it is visible from all major water access routes.

16. "The name of Robert Dunsmuir is most intimately associated with the establishment and prosecution of enterprises of the utmost (we may almost say vital) importance to British Columbia, and especially Vancouver Island... Capitalists felt that wherever he was, there was a soul devoted to the cause, power to defend and maintain it, and willingness to incur all its hazards." *The Resources of British Columbia*, II, iv (June 1, 1884), p. 4.

17. This house drove the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island into union with mainland British Columbia in 1866 when it refused to extend further credit to the Colony. By 1871 British Columbia was over a million dollars in debt, a

18. It ended in 1898. What makes a depression so devastating is its ability to break the ideological cohesiveness of capitalism. Like all other institutions upon which civilized existence depends, capitalism is founded on faith in certain ideas, values, and principles. It is a religion based on belief in the idea of prosperity, the value of achieving paradise on earth, and the principles of credit, contract, paper money, interest, rent, profit, etc.

19. "To put it bluntly, architecture has always been the art of the Establishment. It has been bought and paid for by successful, prosperous, property-owning institutions with a stake in the status quo, and it has generally exhibited its greatest power and originality at times when those institutions have been threatened and in need of support." Norris KELLY SMITH, *On Art & Architecture in the Modern World* (American Life Foundation, 1971), p. 79.

New Parliament Buildings at Victoria B.C.

C

*This is one of the drawings referred to in my Contract Dec 11/92
Chairman with [unclear]
Superintendent with [unclear]
State & Public with Richard Drake
Appointments with [unclear]
Scribble & transfer with [unclear]
Plumbing with [unclear]
Painting with Edmund Gillman*

22417

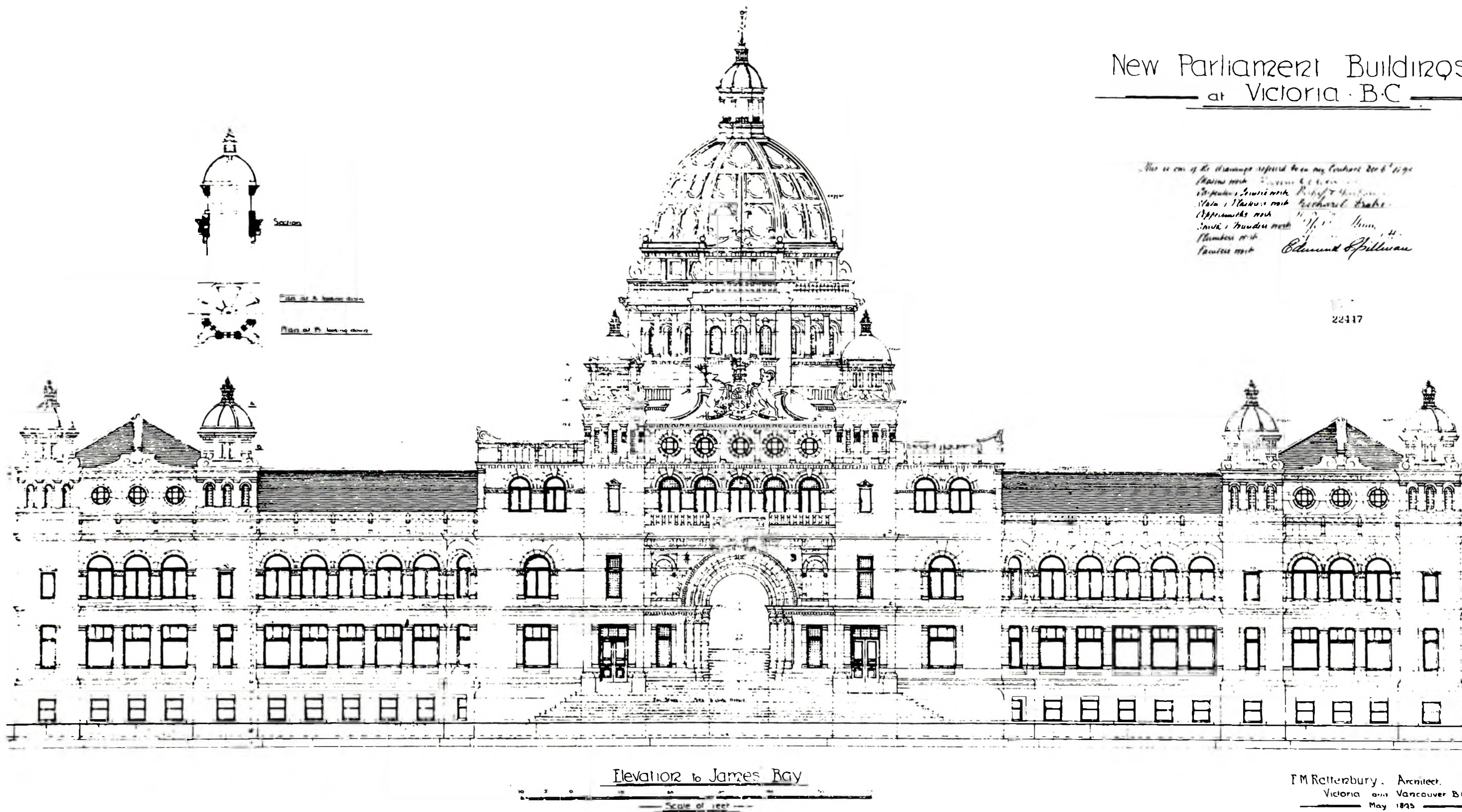


FIGURE 6. Parliament Building. Francis Mawson Rattenbury, 1892. Courtesy Provincial Archives, Victoria, B.C.

fects what any situation required.²⁰ The Parliament Building not only created jobs during the depression and stimulated local industry by using local materials; it also restated the basic convictions of British Columbia society: that it belonged to Western Civilization, was part of North American culture, and was ruled by a centralized democratic authority supported by a capitalist Establishment. This was an elevating procedure. Rattenbury took those two favourite North American commercial styles of the late nineteenth century, the Italianate and Richardsonian Romanesque, and purified and blended them together in a lofty architectural statement about the nature of power and authority in British Columbia. The horizontal registers are essentially Romanesque in derivation and feature round-headed arches, aggressive stone masonry, and a great ceremonial entrance. The central, vertical emphasis is given by an evocation of the greatest Italian Renaissance dome of all — St. Peter's in Rome. It dominates the building in plan as well as elevation. All rooms, areas, departments, and corridors are subordinate to it. As in the Capitol in Washington, D.C., the area underneath the dome is a space in which the people congregate. The dome signals that some kind of sacred activity takes place in this building. *This is where law is made; here the holy spirit of the will of the people is transubstantiated into legislation.* It is an architectural image of conviction about the New Jerusalem which will be achieved here and now in British Columbia by its citizens pursuing their self-justifying right to make their own laws.

The implication that this is supported by the new capitalist Establishment taking control of British Columbia in this decade is made more explicit in four commissions executed by Rattenbury. All are in the "Chateau Style."²¹ Two of them are for national capitalist enterprises chartered by Scots in French Canada; the other two are for the British Columbia government. The Bank of Montreal and the Empress Hotel not only share the same architect, the same style, and the same background; they also share the same enterprise: the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. For the only bank in the world with enough courage to financially back that

20. This man didn't miss a trick. Newly arrived in British Columbia, he jumped on the band-wagon of regional pride when he selected "B.C.'s Own" for a code-name in the Parliament Building competition.

21. Harold KALMAN has shown how this functioned as an architectural image of Canadian Nationalism in *The Railway Hotels and the Development of the Chateau Style in Canada* (University of Victoria, 1968). Modelled after sixteenth-century chateaux in the Loire Valley, it recalled the old alliance between the monarchies of Scotland and France.

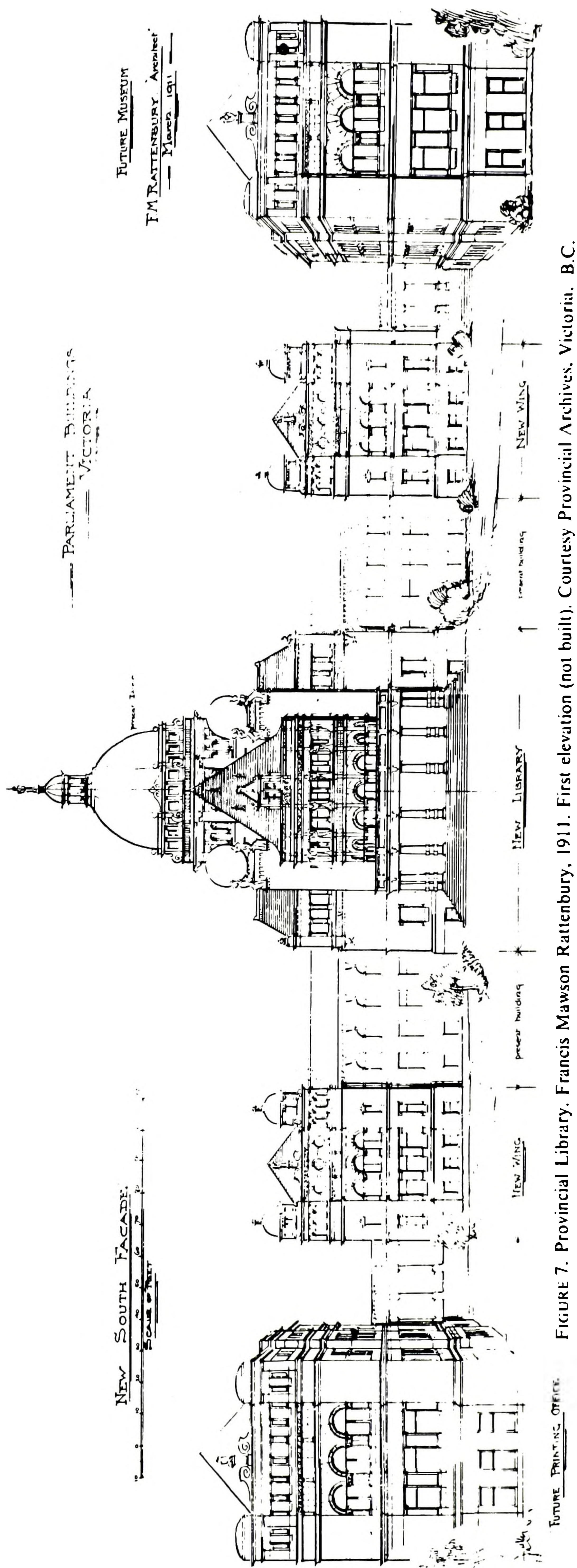


FIGURE 7. Provincial Library, Francis Mawson Rattenbury, 1911. First elevation (not built). Courtesy Provincial Archives, Victoria, B.C.

mad scheme to sock rials across the Rockies was the Bank of Montreal.²²

Rattenbury's bastion for the new capitalist Establishment was conceived as a deliberate riposte to Williams' Bank of British Columbia. (Fig. 5) Its Chateau Style puts it rather bluntly: The Bank of Montreal (Fig. 8) is a Canadian bank.²³ Moreover, it is the "First Canadian Bank," a distinction proclaimed by its charter date of 1817 carved in stone above the original corner entrance. What effect Rattenbury's building had on the Bank of British Columbia is difficult to determine. But in 1901 it was 'Canadianized' by amalgamation with the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce.

The Empress Hotel likewise gave riposte to those Italianate and Richardsonian Romanesque hotels designed by John Teague. But Rattenbury's Empress Hotel was more than a statement about the C.P.R.'s support for Canadian Nationalism. By reviving the twin-tower, Westwerk, city-gate symbolism of Romanesque monastery churches and Gothic cathedrals, he charges with religious meaning the activity of transients passing in and out of a temporary home. His original presentation drawing (Fig. 9) conveys more of this intent than the

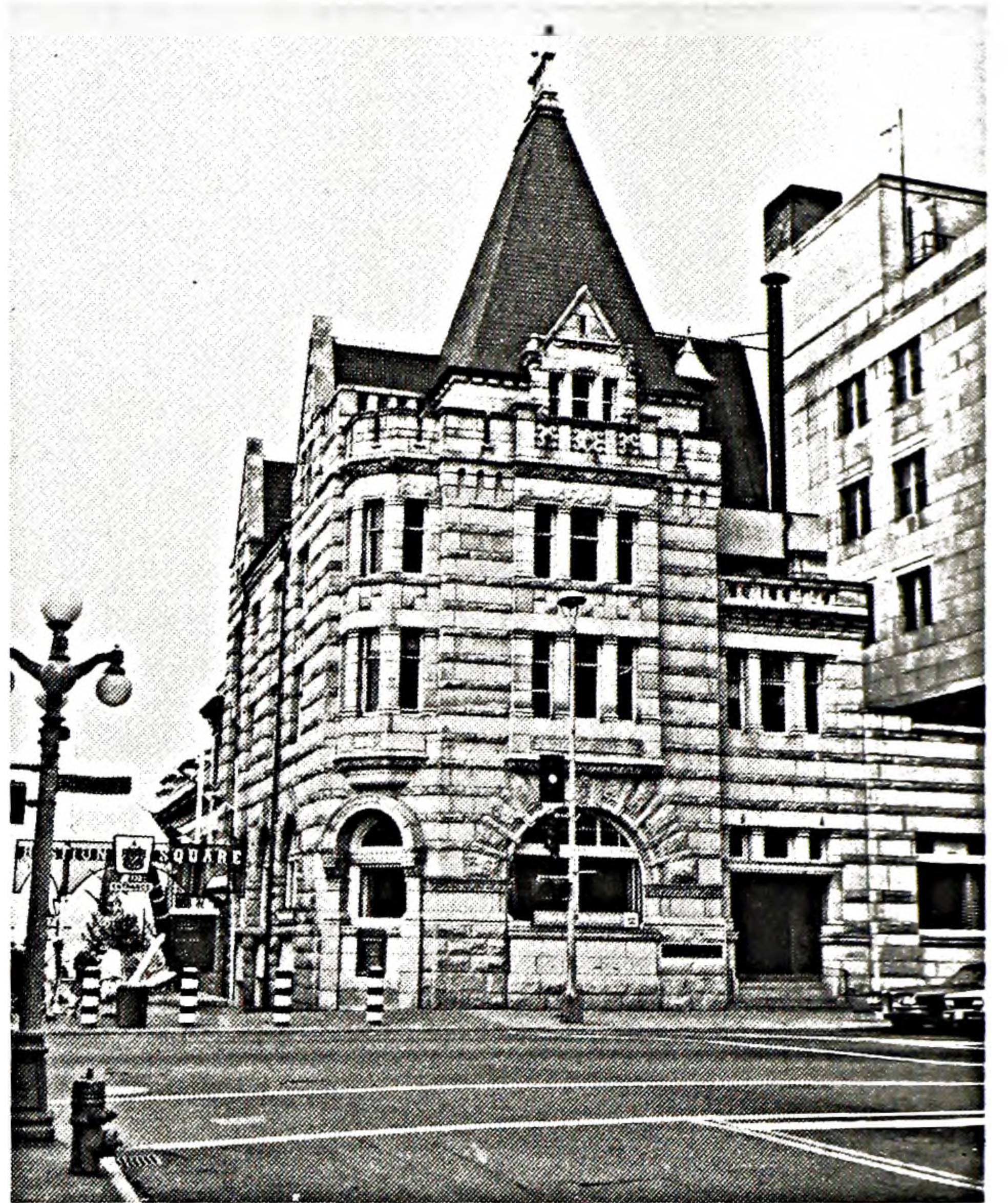


FIGURE 8. Bank of Montreal. Francis Mawson Rattenbury, 1896. Photo by Douglas Bogdanski.

22. And to this day they still are bankers to the C.P.R.

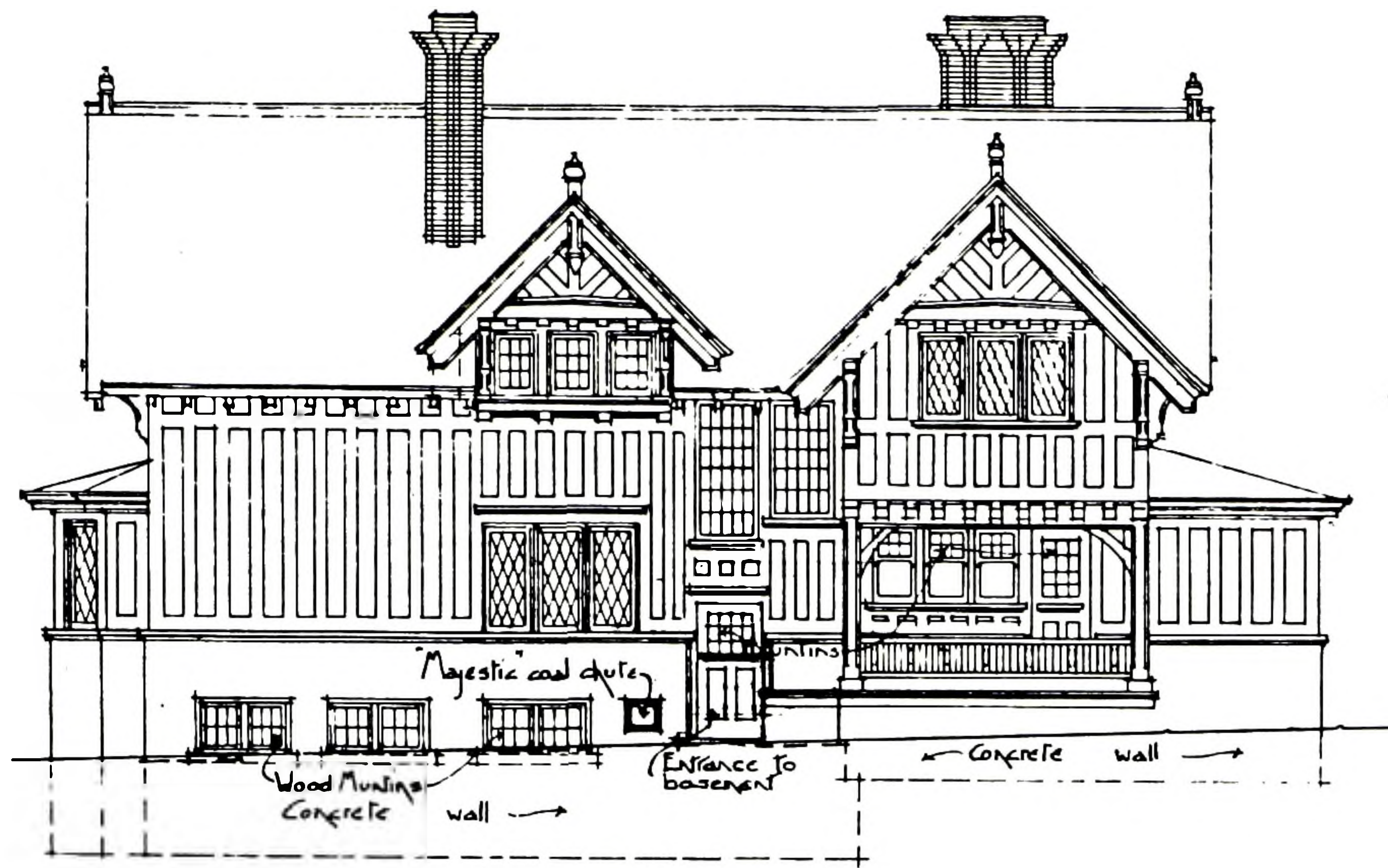
23. The Bank of British Columbia had a reputation for being un-Canadian. Its head office was in London, England. It refused to obey Canadian banking laws and functioned as a backdoor for the entry of British and American capital into British Columbia and Canada. The selection of an out-of-town architect for the Bank's Victoria branch confirmed this.

end result.²⁴ Since the sixteenth century, Europeans have imagined North America to be a New Eden for the New Adam; and since the seventeenth

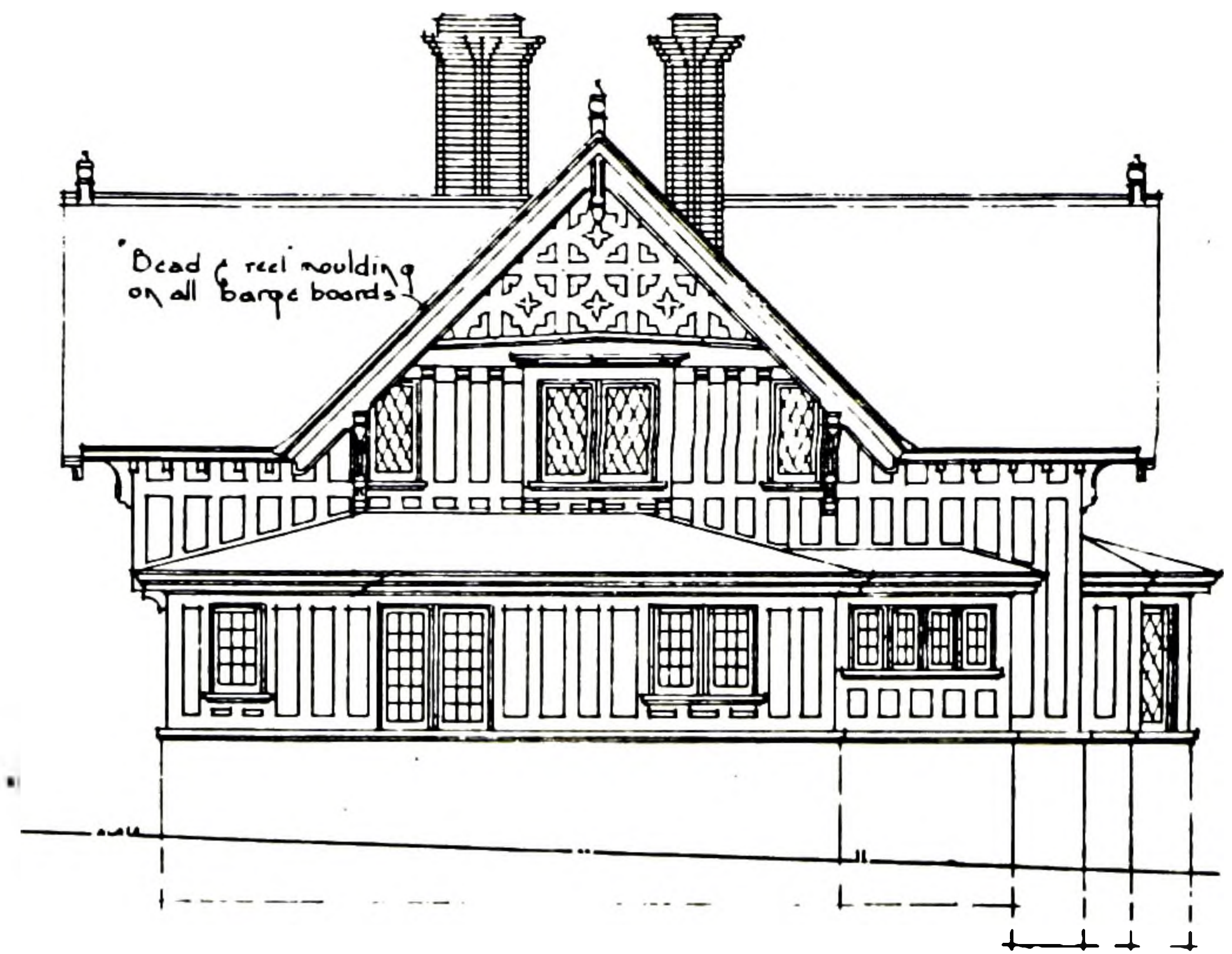
24. Fatter proportions, absence of the twin apsidal projections, and later additions detract from the gateway symbolism of today's Empress Hotel.



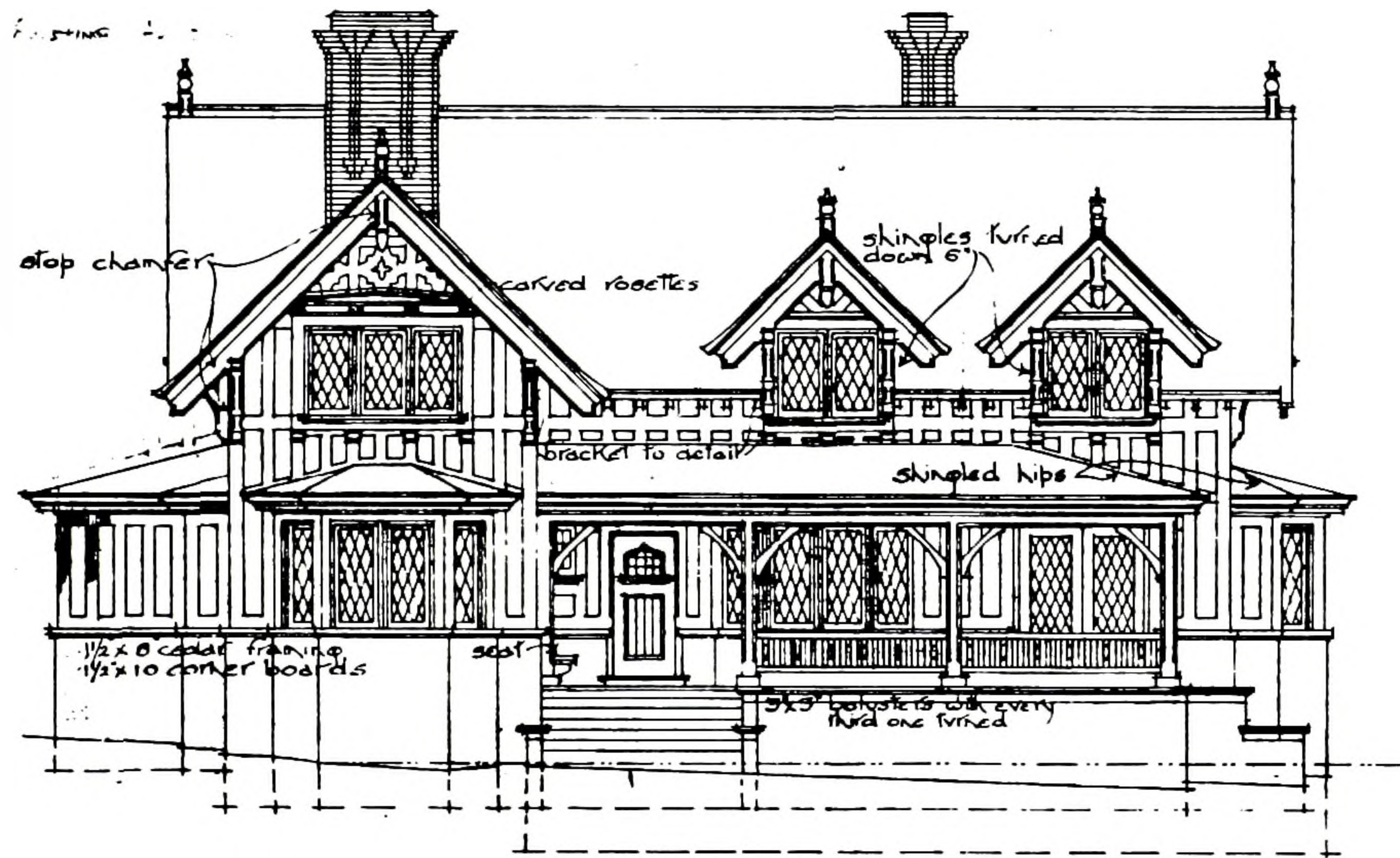
FIGURE 9. Empress Hotel. Francis Mawson Rattenbury. Appearing in the May 23, 1903 issue of the Daily Colonist, this was the first published view of Rattenbury's original presentation drawing for the Empress Hotel and Causeway. To the left of the Hotel he gratuitously tossed in his elevation for the Carnegie Library (never built). Courtesy Greater Victoria Public Library.



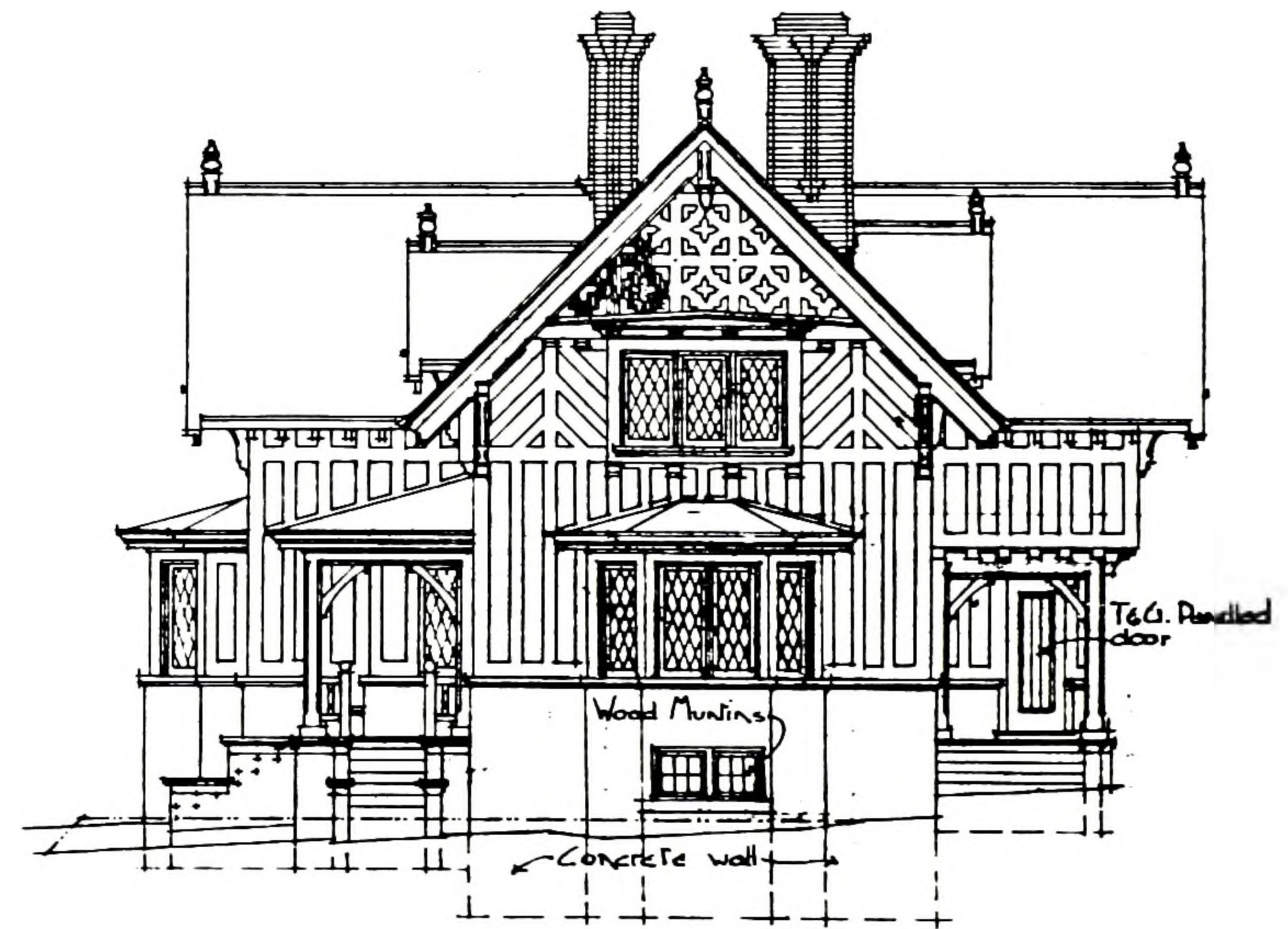
WEST ELEVATION



SOUTH ELEVATION



FRONT ELEVATION



NORTH ELEVATION

FIGURE 10. J. D. Pemberton House. Samuel Maclure, 1911. Courtesy Maclure Archives, University of Victoria Maltwood Memorial Museum of Historic Art.

century, they have been dreaming about the marvels of distant Cathay. So: the architectural conviction that the Empress Hotel is a gateway to the paradise of Canada or the wonders of Cathay is both intentional and justifiable.

Two other Chateau Style buildings designed by Rattenbury transport this new capitalist style into the realm of government. One is his Provincial Court House of 1895 in Nanaimo, north of Victoria. Perched on an elevation overlooking Nanaimo Harbour, its twin-tower 'Eastwerk' facing into the morning sun still makes quite an impression. The other is the recently discovered first elevation for the British Columbia Provincial Library of 1911 (Fig. 7) located to the south of and attached to the Parliament Building. Its function is to provide a temple to secular knowledge containing the wisdom which will guide the legislators in their transubstantiation of the will of the people into legislation. If this had been built with a Chateau Style roof, it would have clinched Rattenbury's architectural image of Confederation. For him, the Chateau Style expressed the reciprocity between one provincial government and two national capitalist enterprises.

1902-1912

By 1902 a new capitalist Establishment consolidating old Hudson's Bay Company families and new Bank of Montreal and C.P.R. families settles down to live in magnificent half-timbered Tudor Revival houses designed by Samuel Maclure, an

architect born in British Columbia.²⁵ The J. D. Pemberton House (Fig. 10) of 1911 is a good example. The Pembertons were a Hudson's Bay Company family who established themselves in real estate. The firm of Pemberton-Holmes is still the largest locally owned real estate business in Victoria.

During this decade, various civic landscaping projects, e.g. Beacon Hill Park of 1907, make Victoria "The Garden City."

Since 1912, little of any great architectural conviction has appeared in Victoria. Several explanations are possible: the results of two World Wars, the ascendancy of Vancouver, isolation on an island, loss of industry, and dependence on tourism. But perhaps the simple truth is that Victorians want it that way. Little has been done since 1912 because little needs doing beyond sprucing up the old buildings and landscapes from time to time. When a city has satisfied itself, what more needs to be done?

John Crosby FREEMAN
University of Victoria
Victoria

25. Martin Segger and Leonard Eaton are two authorities on Maclure. The latter's *Architecture of Samuel Maclure* is a useful exhibition catalogue published by The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1971. Mr. Segger has done considerable work on the Maclure Architectural Drawings Collection at the University of Victoria's Maltwood Memorial Museum of Historic Art as well as the Victoria Historic Buildings Survey (founded by Alan Gowans in 1967) also located at the Maltwood Museum.