

Architect designed Duncan Elementary at peak of his career

- By Carolyn Prellwitz
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Editor's note: Duncan Elementary School is celebrating its 100th anniversary Saturday, April 5. The iconic building is a stunning monument to the history of the city of Duncan and the Citizen is pleased to present piece about the man who designed the eye-catching building.

A tea and open house on April 5 from 1:30-4:30 p.m. will mark the milestone.

The front page of the Cowichan Leader dated Aug. 28, 1913 reported: "Duncan can now boast a public school building of which any city might well be proud. The first thing that strikes one about it is that the general appearance of the building from the outside is distinctly handsome. In so many school buildings in this province all thoughts of beauty of design has been sacrificed to utility and the result is a collection of extremely plain buildings. The architect is to be congratulated..."

The architect was William Tuff Whiteway. Born in Musgrave Harbour, Newfoundland in 1856, he moved to the West Coast about 1882, first settling in Victoria. He then moved around a bit - Vancouver, 1886, San Diego, 1887, Port Townsend, Washington, 1888, back to the east coast, St. John's, Newfoundland and Halifax, 1892 - before settling permanently in Vancouver in 1900 where he remained until his death in 1940.

Whiteway was a prolific commercial architect with most of his commissions in downtown Vancouver.

His best known work is the Vancouver Sun Tower (1912) which had the distinction for a few short years of being the tallest building in the British Empire.

Whiteway designed a number of school buildings between 1900 and 1908 - the second Vancouver High School, renamed King Edward (1904); Grandview School, Vancouver (1905); Macdonald School, Vancouver (1906); Admiral Seymour School, Vancouver (1907); Kamloops Public School, renamed Stuart Wood School (1907); Lord Roberts School, Vancouver (1908); Lord Selkirk School, Vancouver (1908); and Sir Guy Carleton School (1908).

By 1912 Duncan had achieved incorporation and was a growing residential community of about 1,000 inhabitants with a thriving business centre. A new school was desperately needed as its 1891 two-room wooden schoolhouse was outdated and too small for the number of schoolage children in the area.

Whiteway, meanwhile, was at the peak of his career as an architect, and one with a great deal of experience in school design to his credit. No doubt the fledging Duncan school board were impressed and fortunate to have him accept the commission to design their new school.

Whiteway's school plan was perfectly suited to the majority ex-British population living in Duncan in 1912. The form and decoration of the building were purely Georgian revival - a square, symmetrical shape, central door, and straight lines of windows on the first and second floors. Distinctive features such as the use of grey and red brickwork, a fanlight window over the main door, two round-topped windows on the second floor above a pillared portico, a circular window in the centre of the pediment and a polygonal cupola on the single hipped roof were also included in the plan.

Tenders for the main construction of the building were posted early in 1913 and Whiteway attended the school board meeting of March 12, 1913 to review the tenders. All of the initial bids were much above the money at the disposal of the board.

The school trustees were unwilling to alter the general design of the school and instructed Whiteway to prepare an amended set of tender specifications leaving the second floor of the school completely unfinished. The two lowest bidders were then asked to submit amended tenders based on the revised specifications with the result that the Island Building Company, Ltd., Duncan was granted the contract.

Construction of the school began almost immediately and was completed as per the new specifications, i.e. with an unfinished interior second floor, in time for school opening Tuesday, Sept. 2, 1913. A letter from Whiteway read at the school board meeting of Friday, Sept. 5, 1913 "thanked the Board their courtesy and cooperation in bringing the building to a successful issue".

Duncan Elementary School was the first important public commission in Duncan and the most impressive building in the community at the time. One hundred years later, Whiteway's design is still viewed as a work of considerable architectural merit. In this respect, the City of Duncan must be acknowledged for designating the school as a Heritage Building in 1982, thus preserving the design as one of the finest examples of early school architecture in British Columbia.

Carolyn Prellwitz is the secretary of the Cowichan Valley Schools Heritage Society.