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Two Recently Discovered Drawings by F.M. Rattenbury

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When the architect Francis Mawson Rattenbury returned in the autumn of 1910 from one of his trips to England, he discovered that Victoria, British Columbia, had suffered from a disastrous fire which had destroyed the so-called Five Sisters Block at 28 Fort Street, where his own office was located. Characteristically, Rattenbury did not allow the catastrophe to depress him for long, and in a letter written to his mother on 1 November he commented:

Fortunately all my deeds and valuable papers were safely stored, so I have lost only the sentimental goods and chattels, all my drawings that I have ever made ... and whilst of course I regret the things burned, still there is rather a sense of relief in being rid of the huge mass of stuff that I had accumulated.

Although Rattenbury (1867-1935) became reconciled to the loss of inconsequential or trivial items, their destruction nonetheless robbed the historian of a valuable resource. Until now, it was assumed that his casual sketches and personal correspondence were all destroyed in the fire of 1910, even if the more formal plans and working drawings for a number of his larger schemes have been assembled by the Provincial Archives in Victoria. However, a large collection of letters that Rattenbury wrote to his English relatives came to light in London in 1977. They have been placed at the authors' disposal by the family and will form the basis of a new study of his career that we are at present completing. Among them, two sketches are deserving of special mention by the light which they shed on the architect's career and personality.

The first of these appears in the margin of a letter written from Rattenbury to his mother on 21 February 1906 (Fig. 1). While having no great aesthetic importance it is historically significant in representing his earliest known drawing for the

Vancouver Court House. This rendering in 'Classic Style' has the main constituents of the design built between 1907 and 1911, an engraving of which appeared in the *Vancouver Province* on 30 August 1906 after the open competition held earlier that same month.¹ In the letter in which the sketch appears, Rattenbury remarked that he had 'almost finished my competition plans for the Court House. I am rather set up with them – it looks quite swagger – but I dare say there will be a swaggerer.' He was perhaps being unnecessarily modest, since his neatly composed and chastely ornamented structure set a new pattern for court houses in the classic style throughout the province, being rapidly imitated in the two smaller courts for Revelstoke and Vernon, designed respectively by G.D. Curtis and J.J. Honeyman in 1911, and in the addition which Thomas Hooper erected on the southwest side of the Vancouver Court House only a year after its completion.² Rattenbury's design also heralded a series of beaux-arts commercial and institutional buildings in British Columbia,³ and in a wider

¹ For the history of the competition, see Edward Mills, 'The Early Court Houses of British Columbia,' Parks Canada, Manuscript Report No. 288, 1 (Ottawa, 1977), 25-36, 91-110, passim. A copy of the specifications for the building remains in the Vancouver City Archives (Add. ms. 83), while the Provincial Archives has an almost complete set of working drawings.

² The previous type had been established by Rattenbury in his Richardsonian-Romanesque-cum-Château-styled Nanaimo Court House (1895-96). This was copied quite closely by Honeyman at Rossland (1898-1901). To that stylistic synthesis Rattenbury added Scottish Baronial elements in his 1903 scheme for the Nelson Court House, not actually constructed until 1906 because of adverse economic conditions.

³ The most notable in Vancouver are the branches of the Canadian Bank of Commerce at Hastings and Granville (Darling and Pearson, 1906-08) and on Main Street (V.D. Horsburgh, 1915). See Harold Kalman, *Exploring Vancouver* 2 (Vancouver, 1978), 86 and 57 respectively; see p. 104 for the court house.

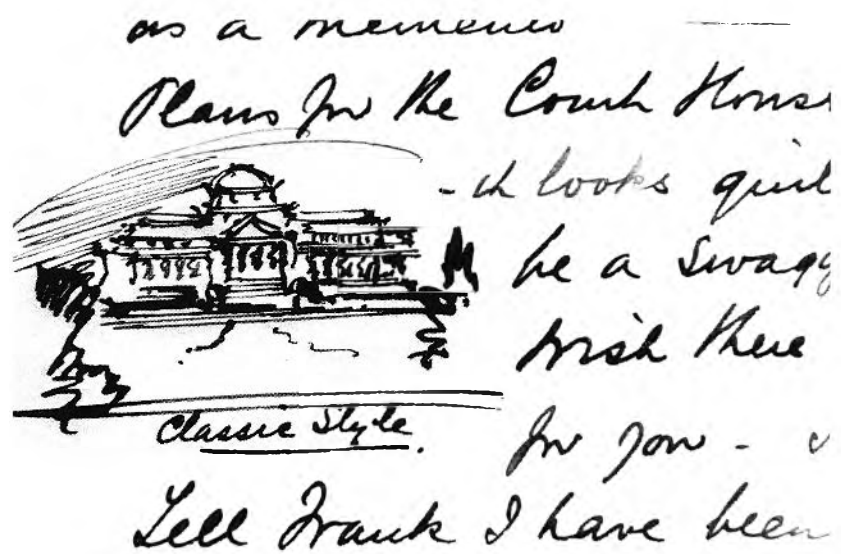


FIGURE 1. F.M. Rattenbury. Sketch for the Vancouver Court House, 1906. Private collection.

context it anticipated the triumph of this mode in the competitions for the three Prairie legislative buildings.⁴ The architect was subsequently to reuse the motif of the raised and attached colonnade of Ionic columns in his Merchants' Bank at Douglas and Yates Streets, Victoria (1907), after having lost that year's competition for the Legislative Building in Regina, Saskatchewan, to W.S. Maxwell by entering an aggrandised version of the Vancouver Court House. The colonnade motif also was repeated in an unexecuted design for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway Station at Prince Rupert, British Columbia (1913), and in the second Canadian Pacific Railway Steamship Terminal in Victoria, designed with P.L. James in 1925.⁵ The 1906 sketch therefore stands at the base of an extensive and varied architectural practice.

⁴ Diana Bodnar, 'The Prairie Legislative Buildings' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1979).

⁵ See Martin Segger, *Victoria: A Primer for Regional History in Architecture* (Watkins Glen, New York, 1979), 83 and 161, for the Merchants' Bank and C.P.R. Terminal. Segger also gave a perspective of Rattenbury's scheme for the G.T.P. in Prince Rupert drawn by D.J. Myers in 1913, in 'The Architecture of Samuel Maclure and Francis Mawson Rattenbury: In Search of Appropriate Form,' *Canadian Collector*, 11:3 (May-June 1976), 51-55.

The other drawing (Fig. 2) is a sketch for a house which, while less important historically, is valuable for the insight that it gives as to Rattenbury's style and tastes at an early stage of his career. Drawn on a scrap of paper and dated May 1897, it is the only sketch that has so far come to light from that early period. Before comment is made on the design of the house, some account should be taken of the context of this scene with respect to Rattenbury's private life. In June 1898 he married Florence Nunn, the daughter of an officer in the British Army of India. After a belated honeymoon travelling to the Klondike in the first weeks of August, he built for her a fine house, called Iechinihl, on Oak Bay. The sketch may illustrate Rattenbury's romantic initial conception of their future home, drawn during their courtship; the figure on the verandah is surely Florence waving to Francis in the sailboat (sailing was his favourite form of relaxation). While the building itself does not resemble Iechinihl, nor any other contemporary house in Victoria for that matter, the mountainous setting calls to mind, albeit on an exaggerated scale, the escarpments of the Olympic mountains on the far side of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Rattenbury had described the beautiful scenery and his love of boating in the earliest letter (25 August 1894)



FIGURE 2. F.M. Rattenbury, Sketch for a house, 1897. Private collection.

from the recently discovered collection.⁶ The motif of the sailboat is also seen on the elevation he had submitted successfully in the 1893 competition for the Parliament Buildings in Victoria.

As for the design of the house in the sketch illustrated here, it reflects Rattenbury's attempt to adapt his British training to the North American vernacular. The irregular and picturesque composition, the tower, and the gabled projection with bay windows all recall the work of Norman Shaw and the interpretations of his so-called Queen Anne style on the eastern seaboard of the United States.⁷ The broad twin arches beneath the terrace and their relationship to the tower and projection suggest a knowledge of Peabody and Stearns's Kraggsyde, built at Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts, ca. 1882 and illustrated in the *American Architect* for 1885.⁸ Rattenbury's familiarity with the work of H.H. Richardson, who greatly contributed to the development of late-nineteenth-century American domestic design, is known from the Romanesque detailing of the Parliament Buildings in Victoria and features of his court house at Nanaimo (1895-96). He may have derived the device of the châteauesque tower – similar to the one he placed on the Bank of Montreal, Government Street, Victoria (1896-97) – from the work of Bruce Price,

architect to the C.P.R. In both the house and the bank, the tower plays a dominant role in the design, even if it is given a more Italianate appearance in the sketch – perhaps looking back to the style of much of the work of Lockwood and Mawson (the architects with whom he had been apprenticed), particularly at Saltaire, Yorkshire.

However, for Iechinihl and for those homes he was to design in British Columbia prior to 1914, Rattenbury evolved an increasingly regular Neo-Tudor dialect from the Shavian and shingle styles. The amorous anecdote present in the 1897 sketch gains a certain ironic poignancy when it is remembered that the souring of the relationship between the Rattenburys, and their divorce in 1925, caused much ill-feeling against the architect in Victoria and in large part contributed to his decision to quit British Columbia forever in 1929.

6 Rattenbury to Richard Mawson, his uncle and one of the partners of the architectural firm of Lockwood and Mawson (later Mawson and Hudson), with whom he had served his apprenticeship.

7 For these, see Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light: The Queen Anne Movement, 1860-1900* (Oxford, 1977) and Vincent Scully, *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style: Architectural Theory and Design from Richardson to the Origins of Wright* (rev. ed., New Haven, 1971).

8 Scully, pls. 61-63.