

The Pagoda
170 Red River Road



Year Built: 1909

Architect: H.R. Halton

Style: “An eclectic blend of decorative elements drawn from several architectural vocabularies”

Notable Features: Umbrella-shaped roof and bell-shaped cupola

Bas-relief sculpture of a beaver and maple leaves, set above the entranceway

Legal Description: Town Plot Pt Government Reserve A RP 55R8105 Part 5 & 6

Current Owner: City of Thunder Bay

Description:

The Port Arthur information bureau, or ‘Pagoda,’ stands as a true tribute to the turn of the century ‘boosterism’ paradigm which fueled the city’s architectural development. At a public meeting held in 1909, individuals, organizations and business groups discussed ways of promoting Port Arthur to the national community. It was decided upon that a ‘publicity pagoda’ would be an ideal means of “attracting to the city the attention of tourists and the general public.”

A few reasons have been suggested as to why the City of Port Arthur made the construction of an information bureau a priority. Firstly, the construction of the Prince Arthur Hotel was in the works. The Hotel, completed circa 1910, was expected to attract many tourists via rail to the Lakehead. Situated picturesquely on a piece of property not far from the waterfront, rail track and CN Station, the Hotel had an ideal location. By erecting an information bureau between the train station and the Prince Arthur Hotel,

residents of Port Arthur felt ensured that visitors would be adequately informed about many wonders their city had to offer.

The second reason offered as to why a tourist information bureau was so important to Port Arthur can be explained by another popular paradigm of the city. Not only was the turn of the century a time of boosterism, it was also an era of rivalry. Port Arthur and Fort William maintained healthy competition and one potential reason why the City of Port Arthur was so eager to establish an information bureau was to gain the upper hand in Lakehead tourism.

A \$25 prize was offered by the City of Port Arthur to the citizen who submitted the “best sketch of a bungalow for the boss booster.” Appropriate designs for the building were to be small (no larger than twenty feet by twenty feet) and would allow for one authorized person to “speak for the city, distribute descriptive literature, talk up Port Arthur, extend the freedom of the city to visitors and make a stranger feel that his presence is welcome,” all from within the building. In short, designs for the pagoda were expected to “breathe publicity, radiate hope and shriek P-O-R-T A-R-T-H-U-R!”¹

One architect was apparently able to do all this with his unusual design of an East-meets-West pagoda. The umbrella-shaped roof is typical of Islamic architecture in India, while the peristyle, formed by the columns surrounding the outside of the building which support the roof, is of Greek origin and is characteristic of basic elements of western architecture. The combination of both eastern and western styles was perfect for the Publicity Pagoda, as the “general opinion” of local architects was that the building “should have a striking, if not an odd appearance.”

The man responsible for creating the design for the Port Arthur information bureau was a local architect by the name of H. Russel Halton. Halton apparently served the twin cities as an architect between the years of 1905 and 1931, before which he lived and worked in Sault Ste. Marie. He established a brief partnership with Thomas Hanley, who designed the Court Street Fire Station (now the Thunder Bay multicultural centre) and the Whalen House (now the site of H.M.C.S. *Griffon*) before his death in 1907. Halton is the architect responsible for such notable structures as Leece block, the Lyceum building, and the Ogden Hotel, but his best known work is the information bureau.

People heralded Halton’s pagoda design as “most handsome,” believing it would “without a doubt fulfill its’ mission of attracting attention to the City of Port Arthur.” The structure was able to be built on a miniscule budget of \$2,500 because many members of the community volunteered their time to aid in the construction. The entire project was well-received and supported by both citizens and council members of the city; one reporter observed that “the mayor and aldermen were practically a unit in giving the idea their support.” That the community erected the Publicity Pagoda with such enthusiasm was viewed as “the best sign of the times.”

An important feature of the Pagoda is the beaver bas-relief sculpture which adorns the entranceway. The stone panel depicts two iconic Canadian symbols, the beaver and a maple branch. It was thought to be “the finest piece of stone carving ever seen in the city” when it was inlaid in the information bureau in 1909. The sculptor was Mr. B. Jones, who was employed by Stanworth-Martin Co. The stone used for the piece is from Bedford, Indiana.

¹ News Chronicle. Port Arthur Publicity Pagoda; \$25 Offered as a Prize for the Best Sketch of a Bungalow for the Boss Booster. Wednesday, April 21st, 1909

The Pagoda received another artistic touch in 1961 when a clandestine group of people from the local Jaycees organization met in the dark of early morning to paint polka-dots upon the roof of the information bureau. The reaction of local politicians and citizens ranged from admiration to appall, but most skeptics were won over when they discovered inquires at the tourist information bureau rose 63% over the year. In fact, when the Pagoda was repainted in the mid-1970s, there was such a public outcry that the Jaycees were invited back to the building to once again stencil in the polka dots. This ornamentation earned the building the apt moniker of “Polka-Dot Pagoda.”

In the early 1970’s, the Pagoda was blamed for making the corner of Red River and Water Street one of the most dangerous in town. Seen as a traffic hazard, the information bureau was moved a few yards back to alleviate the traffic view obstruction. Although the Pagoda has been moved slightly from its original location, it has maintained its’ function as an information bureau for nearly a century. This makes it the “oldest municipally owned structure in Canada, set up specifically for the purpose of public relations.” That the Pagoda still stands to claim this respectable title is a testament to a few forward-thinking council members and the Thunder Bay Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee, who fought for the survival of the information bureau in turbulent times.

In 1979, the building was formally designated as a Heritage Site, but even despite this recognition the Pagoda still met with the very real possibility of demolition. For nearly twenty years debates raged about the cost and usefulness of restoring the Pagoda to its’ original splendor; by the late 1980’s it was estimated that the structure was in need of \$300,000 worth of work. Some council members argued fervently for saving the small information bureau while others vehemently debated the pointlessness of spending such a grand sum of money. However, in December of 1988 the project received \$105,000 in Heritage Grant funding (councilwoman Dusty Miller exclaimed it was “the best Christmas present ever,”) and restoration work began. More funding was needed from the municipality but eventually the Pagoda was restored, complete with a green and noticeably polka dot free roof.

Today the Pagoda stands in front of the Prince Arthur Hotel parking lot, with the large and aesthetically offensive pedestrian walk-way at its side; a far cry from the pomp and circumstance allocated to the building during the Royal Visit in 1939. Queen Elizabeth and King George VI voyaged to the twin cities upon the CPR train, and upon arrival in Port Arthur the royal couple walked past the Pagoda, which was bedazzled with party and parade ornamentation.



Architecture:

(From: Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada; Thunder Bay Tourist Pagoda.
By: Julie Harris, Architectural History Division)

The information bureau is an octagonal brick structure with limestone trim set upon an octagonal foundation about 40 feet in diameter. The building is surmounted by an umbrella shaped roof, similar to a Hindu chatri roof, and a bell-shaped cupola, both covered with diamond-shaped metal shingles. Cast iron cresting originally crowned the top of the cupola until about 1915. The roof, constructed of an “elaborate truss system of two-by-fours” and supported by a peristyle veranda with wooden Tuscan columns, extends about six feet beyond the walls of the building. Each side of the building is punctuated by a window with framed paneling between the bottom lintels and the foundation. The other three windows are rectangular in shape.

Most of the information bureau’s ornamentation is concentrated near the entrance. Located on the side facing the railway station and the docks, the entrance is framed by a portico formed by a gable end extending from the roof. It’s grayish green limestone trim provides a striking contrast to the vivid red brick used on the rest of the building. The doorway is approached by broad steps and is surrounded by fluted Ionic limestone pilasters which support an entablature of Indiana limestone. Featuring a beaver and maple leaves, it was carved in relief by B. Jones, a local contractor. A small dragon’s head, said to be a Scandinavian symbol of good luck and possibly obtained through a metal roofing company catalogue, is located above the peak of the portico. When the bureau was first built, French doors were used in the entrance but these have been replaced by a single glass and aluminum door. According to the original floor plan, the interior of the building was divided into a large public space, three small offices and an open fireplace but the interior has been significantly altered with the removal of the original finishings and fittings and the construction of new partitions and ceilings.

Over the years, several changes have been made to the building for maintenance purposes. According to an architectural study prepared in 1981, the brickwork has been painted several times, cracks in the walls and foundations have been repaired with varying levels of success, the wooden columns have been patched, and the roof has been repainted several times, covering the original red oxide colour. In 1961, 1973, and 1985, the roof was painted with different polka-dots as a prank, thereby earning the building the name “Polka Dot Pagoda.” While the polka dots detract from the original design of the building, they have given it a more prominent place among local landmarks. Contraversial attempts to paint over the polka dots have failed each time, with some Thunder Bay residents arguing that the polka dots add an indigenous architectural flavour to the building.

The information bureau is essentially an ornamental structure with an eclectic blend of decorative elements drawn from several architectural vocabularies as often seen in international architectural catalogues and pattern books of the period.

The term ‘Pagoda’ was applied to the Port Arthur information bureau from the outset. Although it does not immediately evoke the image of the information bureau, ‘pagoda’ was certainly applicable in 1909 when the term was sometimes used to describe a “small ornamental building.” Structures like garden follies and the gatehouses were still in fashion or fondly remembered. The term ‘pagoda’ was also suited to a building like the Port Arthur information bureau which featured Asian architectural details. In 1878, a book about international architecture described the “wonderfully fantastic effect” achieved in the design of Indian pagodas by the blending of ‘peculiar’ architectural features. The basic elements of an Indian pagoda were seen to be a pyramidal shape, vertical stages, curved roofs, cupolas and “fantastic” embellishments such as pilasters, carvings, pillars, and niches. The tiered roof, octagonal form, carvings, and peristyle veranda of the Port Arthur information bureau created this kind of pagoda image.



