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John Di Castri

Award-winning and penultimate west coast designer

The most recent addition to our Architectural Collection is the archives of award winning and penultimate west coast designer John A. Di Castri. John's footprint can be seen all over Victoria, including the University where he was responsible for the design of the original Student's Union Building (1963), the Cornett Building (1966), the recently purchased Quennswood (1967) and the Interfaith Chapel (1984). Victoria born and raised, John spent his career inspiring the city with his exceptional talent for modern design.

While always interested in the arts, John formally began his career as an architect in 1942 when he articted with the Chief Architect with the B.C. Department of Public Works, Henry Whittaker. Then, in the late 1940s, he went on to study under Bruce Goff at the University of Oklahoma, who was himself, the student of Frank Lloyd Write.



John Di Castri

By the time Di Castri returned to Victoria in 1951, he was armed with Modernist idealism and was readily seeking clients. A year later, he formed a partnership with W. Nicholls and began his own practice. His most significant impact on Victoria in the post-war years was his modernist vision. He designed many churches, commercial buildings and residences, each project unique and addressing the function and needs of his clients. His major works include the Canadian Institute of the Blind (1951), Ballantyne's Florists on Douglas Street (1954), the Royal Trust building - now the Mosaic - on Fort Street (1963), the parkade on the north side of Centennial Square, and the Crystal Pool (1971). Each of these projects demonstrated an unusual decorative approach that embraced modernism with more passion than much of the other modernist work of the period.

In 1954, Di Castri made a significant impact on the design of private residences when he introduced Victoria to the crisp lines, glass walls, and flat roofs of his highly creative and innovative Trend House in Saanich. Characterized by a soaring roof and abundant in natural materials, including Western hemlock and cedar, this house was one of 11 trend houses that represented a new era of architectural design for the modern home.

In addition to being a fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, an Honorary Citizen of the City of Victoria, and Honorary Member of the Victoria Real Estate Board, a member of the McPherson Foundation and Past-President of the Royal Conservatory of Music, John was granted an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Victoria in 1997.

John was not only inspired by people he studied under, but he was inspiring to those he mentored. One Student, Richard Poulin, wrote of John: "He often would explain to me the process he went through to arrive at a certain design choice or the reasoning behind a specific building detail. More than anything else it was that attention to detail and the willingness to share the process that I took with me when I moved on...I had a chance to look through his archived plan-sets and unroll some of the plans for buildings he had worked on over the years. It was a real eye opener for someone who had only experienced architectural drawing from a "modern" computer-aided aspect. He was old-school. Looking at some of those drawings brought up images of graphite dust, eraser crumbs, hand-made models cigarette smoke, and all the sights and smells of a 1960s office...Overall I think the experience definitely influenced how I think about my projects today, and made me appreciate the "how and why" aspect of design and construction.

John Di Castri was an essential influence on West Coast architecture in the post-war years and we are honoured to house his collection which includes over 2,800 architectural drawings from 170 projects, nearly 740 photographs from over 50 projects and negatives from over 80 projects.

Paddy, John's first wife, studied architecture with him. Together they had six children and nine grandchildren. Notably, his second born son, Adrian DiCastri, grew up to be an award winning architect in his own right. Working in Toronto, he paid attention to modernist ideas and he was at the forefront of sustainable design. Ten years ago, before LEED existed in Canada; he was part of the team that designed the first green building in Toronto when he and Peter Bushby created the York University Computer Science Building. Sadly, Adrian passed away in 2008.

We are grateful to John's wife, JoAnne, who kindly donated this collection which so richly complements our existing architectural material. And, we are also indebted to both Martin Segger and Chris Gower for the part they played in bringing this collection to us.

[John A. Di Castri Fonds](#)

[Maltwood Museum's Modern Architecture in Victoria, BC](#)

[Cornett Memories, a website celebrating the Cornett Buiding](#)

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