

BRISE SOLEIL



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Cover: Centennial Concert Hall, Associated Architects for the Manitoba Centennial Centre (Green, Blankstein, Russell Associates; Moody, Moore & Partners; Smith, Carter, Searle Associates; 555 Main Street), 1967. This page: University of Winnipeg Manitoba Hall, Green Blankstein Russell and Associates, 1958-59. Photos: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2013.

Brise soleil is a term which refers to architectural components that serve a sun-shielding purpose. While such devices have appeared throughout architecture historically, the embrace of technology which serves this purpose was popularized within modern architecture by Swiss-French architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, also known as Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier pioneered the contemporary use of this type of apparatus in his 1937 work as consultant architect on a new home for the Brazilian Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro. This building, a multi-storey office tower with huge walls of glass, introduced the use of horizontal, gear-operated, adjustable sun-shades in a modern context. Such devices were here necessitated by the particularly hot, sunny climate. However following their appearance in the Ministry of Education and Health building and elsewhere within Le Corbusier's oeuvre, brise soleil took on a widespread popularity in other many other locales. Such popularity was in part the result of the widespread need to modulate the broad expanses of glass which Le Corbusier and others had popularized. While allowing for natural light, such banks of windows had become an issue in regard to over-heating. By incorporating moving louvres, brise soleil permit a degree of flexibility in response to changing weather and light. Permanent, fixed brise soleil also can be seen to respond to the changing seasons as they are often designed to block high-angle summer sun while welcoming in low-angle winter sun. Brise soleil take a number of forms, from the classic moveable metal screens to horizontal wooden buffers to fixed concrete barriers and a great deal in between. Given the presence of an established school of architecture with a profound and intense relationship with modernism it is unsurprising that Winnipeg possesses a number of examples of this typically modernist architectural gesture. This is especially true considering the city's characteristically bright and sunny climate.



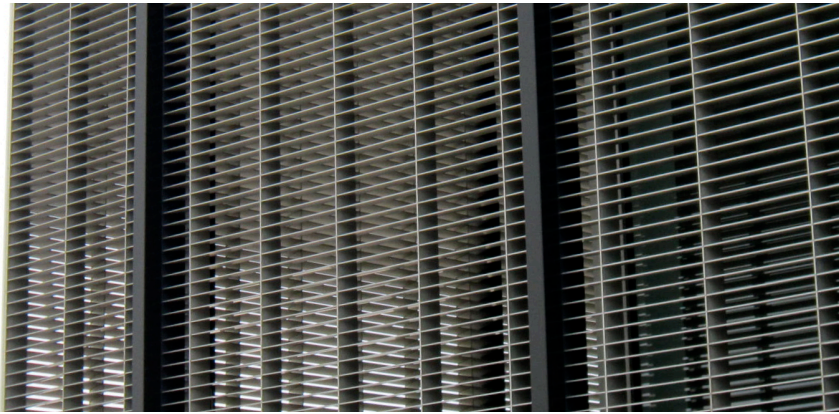
Fort Garry Library, George A. Stewart, 1956, Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2012.

One of the first appearances of brise soleil in Winnipeg is also one of the most classically modernist and similar to Le Corbusier's early experiments with this technology: the 1956 Fort Garry library by George A. Stewart (1360 Pembina Highway).



University of Winnipeg Manitoba Hall, Green Blankstein Russell and Associates, 1958-59. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2013.

A similar use of brise soleil can be found in Green Blankstein Russell and Associates' Ashdown and Manitoba Halls at the University of Winnipeg (1958-59). Here large, concrete multi-storey panels stand at an angle to the main structure while shading the sunny south-west façade.



Manitoba Health Service Building, Libling Michener and Associates, 1959. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2013.

Another important example of brise soleil in Winnipeg is at the 1959 Manitoba Health Service Building (Libling, Michener and Associates). This building – which won a Massey Gold Medal for Architecture in 1962 – was one of the first by Manitoba architect Étienne Gaboury following his return from study in France. Here the form and proportion of the structure recall Mies van der Rohe's 1950 Crown Hall building at the Illinois Institute of Technology, as well as the contemporaneous 1959 School of Architecture building at the University of Manitoba (Smith, Carter and Katelnikoff). However, Gaboury's introduction of sun shades harkens, as well, to Le Corbusier, a figure who would remain a notable influence. As a whole, Gaboury was deeply interested in prairie light; as he later established and developed his own practice, such response to such local climatic conditions would be a continuing focus in his architecture.





St. Boniface Police Station, County Court & Health Unit, Étienne Gaboury, 1964. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2012.

Brise soleil appear, as well, in the guise of heavy-set mullions on the southern façade of Gaboury's St. Boniface Police Station, County Court & Health Unit (227 Provencher Boulevard, 1964).



Winnipeg City Hall, Green Blankstein Russell and Associates, 1964. Photo: Winnipeg Architecture Foundation.

Brise soleil also make an appearance in another 1964 civic building, the Winnipeg City Hall by Green Blankstein Russell and Associates (510 Main Street). Here the brise soleil take the form of six bronze screens, suspended on the matching east and west sides of the building, which have, with age, gained a dark green patina.



Centennial Concert Hall, Associated Architects for the Manitoba Centennial Centre (Green, Blankstein, Russell Associates; Moody, Moore & Partners; Smith, Carter, Searle Associates; 555 Main Street), 1967. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2012.

Sun-screening devices form a sort of sub-theme within Winnipeg's 1960s adjacent Civic and Centennial centres. Directly across Main Street from City Hall, the 1967 Centennial Concert Hall by Associated Architects for the Manitoba Centennial Centre (Green, Blankstein, Russell Associates; Moody, Moore & Partners; Smith, Carter, Searle Associates; 555 Main Street) bears a set of forty-five eyelid-like concrete window covers. These sun-shading awnings, with their origami-like folds, are an example of the modernist exploitation of the plastic possibilities of concrete – here by means of linked sections of pre-cast material.



Public Safety Building, Libling Michener and Associates, 1966. Photo: Winnipeg Architecture Foundation.

This Civic and Centennial Centre motif continues in the 1966 Public Safety Building (151 Princess Street, by Libling Michener and Associates) which faces City Hall across William Street. Here a type of brise soleil takes the form of heavy, angled Tyndall stone mullions which lend a sense of fortification and solidity to this former police station and jail.



Manitoba Teachers Society Headquarters Building , Libling Michener and Associates, 1966. Photos: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2012.

Heavy mullions which assume a brise soleil type function also turn up in another Libling Michener and Associates work of the mid-1960s, the Manitoba Teachers Society Headquarters Building (191 Harcourt Street, 1966). Here the pre-cast concrete segments create a vigorous rhythm as they wrap the building's façades – in particular on the later, curving addition which fronts the south Portage Avenue elevation.



Bloc_10, 5468796 Architecture, 2010. Photo: James Brittain.

More recently, a new variety of brise soleil has appeared in contemporary Winnipeg architectural practice. Immovable and rendered mostly in wood, these sun-screens serve as much for privacy as for shading. Examples include the rhythmic, diaphanous veiling apparent in 5468796 Architecture's Bloc_10 condominium project (2010) and the screens of the Abbi Condominium building by architects h5.

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