

W.B. Ittner – The Architect of Tomlinson Adult Learning Center



The name is Ittner.

There is no doubt whatsoever it deserves veneration.

William Butts Inner was born in St. Louis in 1865, and reared here. He studied at the old Manual Training School, a preparatory school and a division of Washington University. He graduated from Cornell University in 1887.

Ittner's early educational experiences were regarded by him as distinctly unpleasant. The headline of his obituary in the Post-Dispatch reads, "W. B. Ittner, Noted Architect and Designer of Schools, Dies," while the subhead declared "As Boy He Resented Prisonlike Buildings, as Man He Changed the Style Throughout the Country."

And so he did.

Some of these penitentiary-like schools can still be found in old neighborhoods. In a nutshell, they're squarish boxes, four rooms to a floor, forbidding on the outside and just as gloomy within.

Architect returns

Ittner returned to St. Louis after college and set about establishing himself as an architect. He spent about a decade in private practice. Then in 1897, he made a career turn that can be described as advantageous for everyone. He took the position of building commissioner of the School Board of St. Louis. Back then, the title described a position with responsibilities that exceeded those of the typical administrator: The commissioner actually designed school buildings.

The school board had been reorganized in the late 19th century. The city was growing. The great moment, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, was soon to come. All sorts of new buildings were on the civic agenda, schools among them. As commissioner of school buildings, this was the moment for WB. Ittner to sublimate energy generated by the disagreeable student experiences of childhood for the benefit of St. Louis -- and for education all over the country.

At this point, it seems necessary to pause and to consider with nostalgia if not sorrow, and with frank frustration, the erosion of the St. Louis Public Schools since the turn of the last century. As the conduct of the educational and administrative processes of the district

have deteriorated, so have those solid, elite standards that simultaneously informed the teaching of students and the creation of buildings to foster and to further their education.

One hundred years ago educational bars were high. Ittner's intelligence, sophistication, intuition, training and civitas translated high standards into a physical form of grace and rationality.

He deconstructed the prison-box schoolhouse of his youth. The buildings' forms became horizontal rather than vertical, an adaptation to the Midwestern landscape rather than an imitation of traditional public school building design found in the Eastern United States.

The scale of school buildings was adjusted to accommodate consumers. For example, the design of kindergarten rooms in schools (in the city where the notion of kindergarten was introduced to America) was rethought. It should be a place not simply to contain the youngest students but to ease each one of them, gently, into the role of the pupil and to begin their journey toward the fulfillment of the goals of learning.

Ittner often situated kindergarten rooms at what can be considered the bosom of the school, a place of warmth and protection. That placement was no accident. As the children grew in size and learning, spaces that welcomed them changed as well. And the impact of the visual was never forgotten. Hallways became galleries of art. Form and function intertwined with uncommon dynamism.

Ittner considered light a building material, not an afterthought. He regarded ventilation as part of the infrastructure of learning. School grounds were carefully, artfully landscaped; buildings became the central features of parks for learning.

Space for adults

As important as it was to provide emotionally nourishing and visually stimulating places for children, Inner believed that the public school must also be an intellectual and physical refuge for adults. It should serve to make intellectual growth a vital part of life 'from early childhood into old age. "Complete living," he called it.

"Education today is a continuous process, with the public school serving all ages," Inner wrote in *Architectural Forum* in August, 1922.

"A school plant developed in harmony with this enriched and expanded curriculum, with the change of emphasis and the increasing demands by grownups will rapidly become a vital and effective agency for human advancement. Its inviting exterior will represent the best, most thoroughly planned structure in the community, and its interior the best of all places for work,, recreation or study."

Ittner regarded his buildings as greenhouses for the intellectual and physical well-being of their constituents. He declared: "the complete school environment should be a model for health. To accomplish this desired goal, sanitation, cleanliness, perfect lighting, airiness and cheerfulness must, of necessity, constitute the eternal, unwritten laws of successful school planning."

Ittner storehouse

The St. Louis Public Schools' inventory is rich in Ittner buildings. When he died in January, 1936, there were 45 city elementary school buildings by him and five high schools.

Developers now gaze on some of these remarkable buildings with various intentions, including the desire to knock them down.

The Theresa School, south of the St. Louis University Medical School, is one of the Ittner buildings that stands in harm's way. Recently, the School Board agreed to sell the building and a house facing Grand Boulevard for \$1.3 million to Koman Properties Inc., which wanted to tear down the buildings for a shopping development. However, School Board members said they were unaware the 98-year-old school they were about to sell was an Ittner building. In fact, they were told by a staff member it was not an Ittner school. After learning the truth, the board revoked the offer to sell.

The building in question presented a special opportunity for Ittner - to design a public school college. Dating from 1905, the building originally housed the William Torrey Harris Teachers' College, which was operated and maintained by the St. Louis Public Schools. The college came under control of the state in 1979 and is now Harris-Stowe State College. Its home these days is at 3026 Laclede Avenue, just east of the St. Louis University campus.

The school system, according to one of its old promotional brochures, appreciated that "schools are no better than teachers." At Harris, the brochure said, "the perplexing problem of supplying qualified teachers for its great school System is solved."

The building was not remote from the college's mission. Harris had the "distinction of being the only teachers' college in the United States with a public school in connection with it. This school, the Wyman, serves as a model school, where the apprentice teachers are given daily instructions, under the supervision of qualified teachers."

Wyman School, 1547 Theresa Avenue, was built in 1901. It is next door to the Harris Teachers' College -- Theresa School building, and remains in use as a public school. Like the Theresa building, Wyman was designed by William B. Ittner. Together, perched on a gentle slope, they form a handsome architectural marriage, in spite of the current deteriorated and fire-damaged condition of the Theresa School.

Wyman and Theresa, in turn, are members of a greater architectural ensemble. Lynn Josse, a longtime member of the staff of the Landmarks Association and now a preservation consultant and owner of People's Coffee in Grand Center, notes that the Ittner buildings and three others form a rare and interesting public-education buildings ensemble. Just west of the Ittner buildings is 1520 South Grand Boulevard, originally a house. Part of the Koman deal, it is a handsome shingle-style building - a rare example of that style in these parts. Now vacant and for sale, it was the school system's Recruitment and Counseling Center.

South of this is a low, not particularly distinguished modern building, the William Kottmeyer Early Childhood Center, at 1530 South Grand. That building's neighbor to the south is the handsome Gallaudet School for hearing impaired students.

The value of buildings

It may take time and a miracle or several for the luster of St. Louis Public Schools to be restored to its early 20th-century brilliance. But efforts are being made in that direction. Obstacles exist and they are daunting. Yet an inestimable part of the district's legacy endures in its stock of fine, historically and aesthetically valuable buildings by William B. Ittner and other good architects - buildings such as the Theresa School.

These buildings belong, as Ittner clearly understood, to St. Louis as well as to the public school system.

In this region, for at least a generation, expediency has ruled in matters of design. Good buildings fall, to be replaced by surface parking lots or parking structures or retrogressive follies or the thin architectural gruel of contemporary commercial building design by the most powerful firms in town.

All too often politicians and planning agencies cave in to the demands of developers for the simple reason that they fear, if they say "no" to this plan or that one, the people with the money will take it and go to the great competitive Elsewhere.

Often those fears are not unfounded. Yet in spite of that reality, some day not too far off, the community must insist that the officials call developers' bluffs and tell them to hit the road. In a region enriched by all sorts of buildings that qualify as civic monuments and examples of good design, Inner schools among them, there exists an obligation to summon the courage to say, "No building falls unless something better is in the works to replace it."

Should this willingness to settle for second and third-rate commercialism in design, for fashion rather than substance and for economic expediency continue to hold sway, little new will be built and little existing will remain to distinguish us as a community.

William B. Ittner was of a generation and a class that understood the buildings in which we live, study, work, worship and play affect all of us, for good or for ill. Ittner buildings stand for the good, for the delight of the eyes, the enrichment of the spirit, the nourishment of the intellect.

The St. Louis Public Schools, facing a huge deficit and a surfeit of buildings, may not be able to provide the protection these buildings need.

The rest of us, however, can.

Ittner's legacy lives on

In addition to his work for the St. Louis Public Schools, William B. Ittner designed educational buildings for clients all over the country.

Schools designed by him were built in Clayton, University City, Webster Groves, Kirkwood, Maplewood, Normandy and Overland, and outside the St. Louis region as well. There were about 500 of them when he died in 1936. His work extended beyond the schoolyard. He designed such buildings as the recently restored Continental Building, 3615 Olive Street in Grand Center; the Scottish Rite Cathedral, which is around the corner on Lindell Boulevard between Spring and Grand; the Central Institute for the Deaf Building facing Euclid Avenue and the old Shriners Hospital building across Clayton Avenue from it; and the Missouri Athletic Club at Fourth and Washington downtown.

He was a prolific, dedicated architect, artist and citizen. His progeny have distinguished themselves as well.

His son, the late William B. Ittner Jr., was assistant chief architect of the Pentagon and had a successful practice here. His grandson, the late H. Curtis Ittner, worked for the family firm and won the St. Louis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects' Gold Honor Award for lifetime achievement. His great-grandson, Reed Ittner Voorhees, is an architect and works for Jacobs in St. Louis.

Although no Ittners belong to it these days, the William B. Ittner firm is still very much in business, with offices downtown and school buildings a specialty. Carolyn Green-Lippert of that firm provided valuable information for this article, as did Michelle Swatek of the St. Louis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

Robert W. Duffy

Notes on Ittner's Architectural Style

A key innovation of Ittner's designs was a corridor with classrooms confined to one side, a practice he first observed on a research trip in western Germany. Utilizing a facade with perpendicular wings in a U, H, or E configuration suitable to the site, Ittner sought to maximize exterior walls and thus the available light and air in each classroom. Harris and McClain quickly determined that Ittner was the architect to execute their dream for Greenfield—a school whose environment would be a “character-building force.”⁸

As educators began working in partnership with architects, they soon developed a specialization in school architecture. At Harvard, Frank Harris had been introduced to the “open plan” school being advocated by William B. Ittner, a St. Louis architect who was becoming recognized as one of the most innovative of educational architects. A St. Louis native, Ittner had graduated from that city's Manual Training School at Washington University and then from the Cornell University School of Architecture in 1887. He

returned to practice in St. Louis, and in 1897 was appointed its Commissioner of School Buildings. Before his death in 1936 he designed some 430 schools in twenty-eight states and was eulogized as “the most influential man in school architecture in the United States.”⁷ It was a Greenfield, Ohio, philanthropist and high school principal who gave him the commission for the building that would establish his reputation firmly on the national stage.

The U-shape of the McClain High School building incorporates Ittner’s trademark courtyard between wings, which in this instance contained an auditorium on one side and gymnasium on the other. Because Edward and Lulu McClain and Frank Harris envisioned the school serving the entire community—adults as well as youth—the auditorium was built with a separate entrance to extend its use beyond school hours. Besides accommodating school programs, it also served the town as theater and concert hall with opera-style seating for one thousand persons, ceiling lights with Tiffany globes, a pipe organ installed by the Ernest M. Skinner Company of Boston, and equipment for projecting motion pictures or carrying radio broadcasts—the newest technology of the day.²⁰

Individual and community esteem. Although Ittner’s buildings were not the most expensive construction of their day, spaces—whether library, laboratory, or gymnasium—were specifically designed to enhance learning not only with quality equipment, but by creating an aesthetically pleasing environment. Unfortunately, many schools a fraction of Greenfield’s age provide dark, barren classrooms that devalue the teachers and students who use them. Much psychological research has explored the reaction of people to their environments, and in “the educational field this speaks clearly of everything from the development of self-worth to a reduction in vandalism and disciplinary problems.

William B. Ittner, Inc.

**611 N 10th St Ste 200
Saint Louis, MO , 63101-1254**

Phone: 314-421-3542

Website: www.ittnerarchitects.com

