

THE CITY THAT JOHN BUILT

John Parkinson, Architect. The name is unfamiliar to most Angelenos, but J.P., as he was commonly known, was responsible for many of this city's most enduring landmarks, including City Hall, Union Station, Bullock's Wilshire, the original Pacific Stock Exchange and the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, as well as the original master plan for the University of Southern California. He was our most prolific, and most important, architect, a man who helped turn Los Angeles from a dusty frontier town into a gleaming world metropolis.

This is his story.

John Parkinson was born in 1861 in Scorton, Lancashire. Most of the townsfolk worked at the local cotton mill, where his father, Thomas, was engineer. Growing up in rural Victorian England, still in the throes of industrial revolution, the young Parkinson was prepared for a life of hard work. "My great desire was to be a painter," he later wrote, "but as I must live, to live must work - and for definite wages, so the brushes and paints were laid aside."

At 13, he left school to work as an errand boy in a hardware store. At 15, and rather small for his age, he began a six-year apprenticeship with a builder. His day began at 4:30 a.m. with a six-mile hike to work. A 10-hour workday was followed by two hours of night school three times a week, after which there was the six-mile trek home.

Having finished his apprenticeship, Parkinson and a friend boarded an old cattle boat, the *Prussian*, at Liverpool, and set sail for the New World. They came to Winnipeg, Canada, looking for work and for adventure. Parkinson later wrote, "On the day on which my six years apprenticeship expired I was free - twenty-one years old, was five feet eleven inches tall and weighed only one hundred and twenty-six pounds stripped - therefore, long and slim but healthy, tough and strong. I could do anything in wood-work from rough carpentry to cabinet work, knew the construction of buildings from the foundation to the top of

John Parkinson, 1861-1935.

the highest
finial, was a



draftsman too, and an artist born, with confidence unlimited and trained to endure."

Winnipeg was at that time a frontier town of rough wood shacks and tents at the western end of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and the two young men lived in a log cabin on the banks of the Red River, across from an Indian village of teepees. Building fences 10 hours a day, the friends earned \$2.25 a day, and when the job was finished, they headed for Minneapolis, where Parkinson learned the craft of stair building. He quickly advanced to the position of foreman, and after 18 months had saved enough for his return to England.

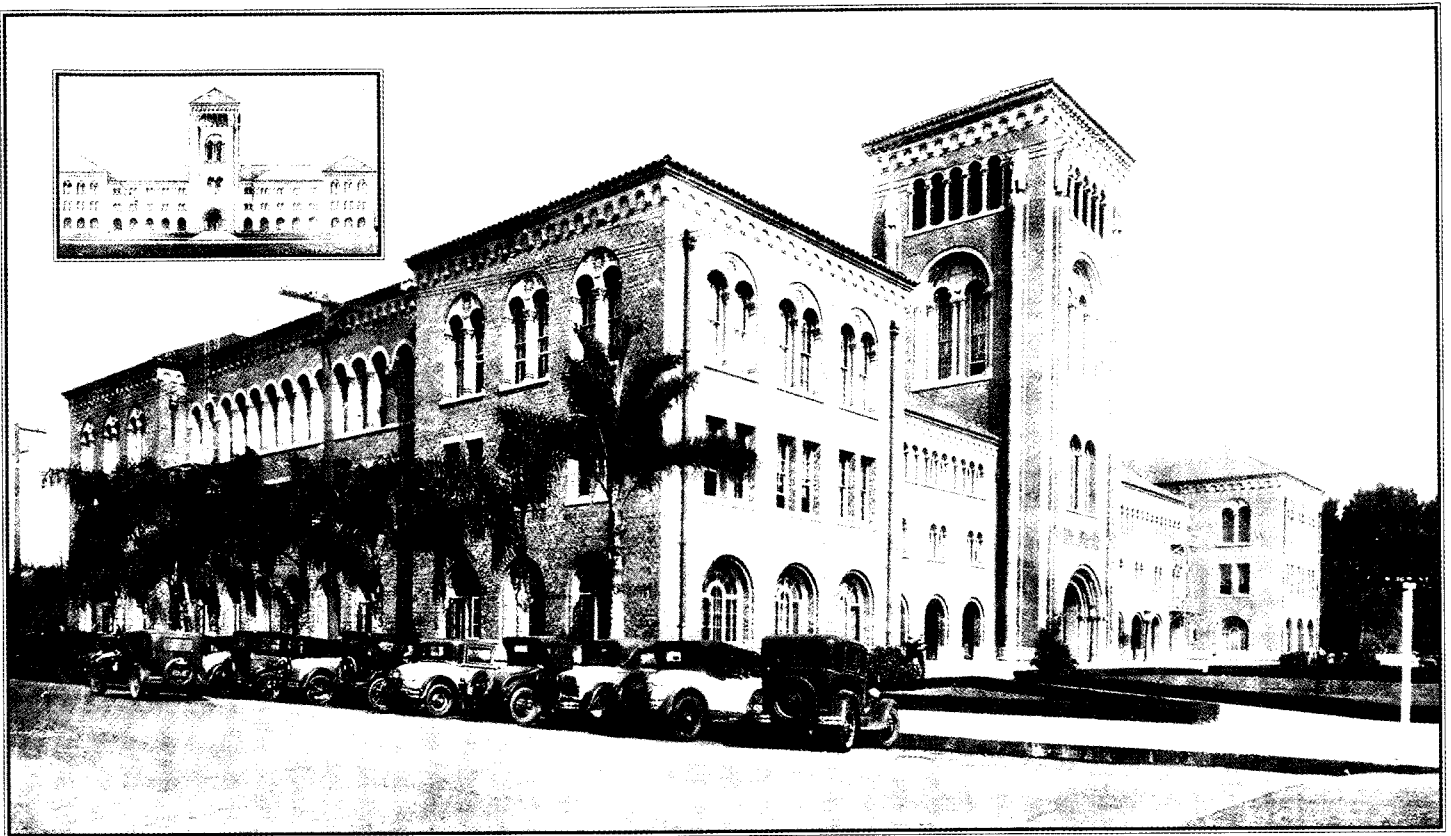
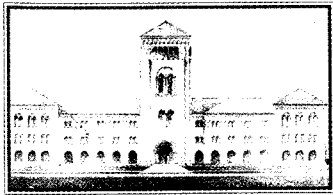
This little monkey gargoyle adorns the Gwynn Wilson Student Union Building at USC.

"I returned with the intention of staying [in England]. I was soon at work as a carpenter, but

discovered that I was not considered a fully competent mechanic, but only an *improver*... unable to command the maximum wage. This was galling to me after my experience as being good enough to be a foreman in the United States."

When a position as stair builder became available, he applied. Deemed presumptuous for having the gall to apply for the position at such a young age, he was rejected. "I was disgusted and immediately decided to leave the country at once. Anywhere where a man now turned twenty-three

BY LINDA ARNTZENIUS



Bovard Administration Building (1919).

would be given a man's chance. Where should I go? Then I recalled seeing a photograph a few days before in the Bolton Art Gallery, and under it was written 'View of the Golden Gate from Telegraph Hill, San Francisco.'" He immediately set off to the ticket office and bought a ticket to San Francisco. "I had a very vague idea where it was," he wrote, "but knew it was in California, which I understood was a hot tropical country where one had to be very civil to avoid being shot or stabbed."

Parkinson ended up in Napa Valley, where he worked for five years as a stair builder. He had not considered working as an architect until he was approached by the president of the Bank of Napa, who had observed his drawing skills, and asked to make the plans for a new bank building. With this start to his career, he set off to try his luck in the Northwest. "A Napa family had moved to Seattle, and they wrote me that the place was booming. It occurred to me that it would be a good place to make the attempt to establish myself as an architect, and on January 1, 1889, I took my box of tools from the mill and with all my possessions boarded the steamer 'Caroline'... I felt very sad as the old side-wheeler paddled its way down the stream... I had been very happy in Napa, had many friends... Why go to the rainy cold north to fight out a path amongst strangers in a profession where my competitors were educated and trained in the profession? How could I match them? But the paddles of the 'Caroline' turned on and I was on the way."

Full of energy, he entered competitions, speculated in real estate and built houses. In 1891, he was appointed school board architect for Seattle, and oversaw the building of 32 schools. When the bottom fell out of the local boom in 1894, however, he headed south.

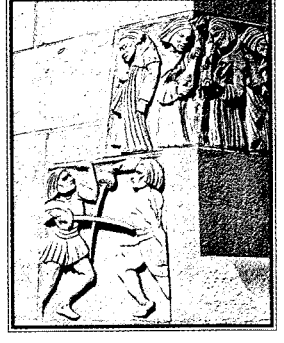
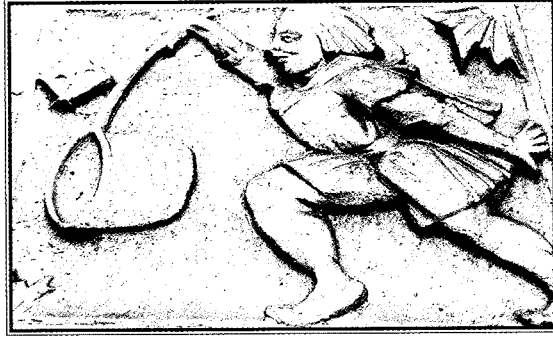
When Parkinson arrived in Los Angeles, only a handful of architects were in business. They met each month in Al Levy's restaurant over mugs of beer. They made so little money that the group's treasurer would announce commissions in cents rather than dollars in order to boost morale. Forty-five dollars sounded a lot more substantial as "4,500 cents."

At the time, Los Angeles had a population of some 60,000. Between the coast and the city (what is now downtown) lay grain fields and dairy farms. Santa Monica was a small beach town a good day's trip by horse and buggy. Hollywood comprised a saloon and a livery stable. Standing on Broadway in 1896, Parkinson wrote, "If a cannon had been fired either to the north or south the chances favored nothing would be hit."

His novice firm struggled for several years to establish itself. His first substantial job was an office block for Homer Laughlin, completed in 1896. Since it was to be the first building in Los Angeles with a modern steel-frame, fireproof construction, a technique with which the young



Student Union courtyard (1927).



Parkinson had no experience, Laughlin insisted that the plans be approved by an engineer in Chicago. Flying somewhat by the seat of his pants, Parkinson successfully completed the design, which established him as the foremost architect in Los Angeles.

In 1904, Parkinson designed the city's first skyscraper - the ornate, 12-story Continental Building, at 408 S. Spring St., in the financial district.

Originally known as the Braly Block, it was the tallest building in town until City Hall went up in 1928. With typical New World savvy, Parkinson produced decorative features that were molded rather than hand-carved, enabling him to achieve the look of antiquity that Los Angeles, a burgeoning young city eager to see itself as grown up, craved.

Designed in classical beaux arts style, with individually controlled steam heat, incandescent lighting, internal vacuum cleaning systems, electricity, piped gas, porcelain lavatories, and telephone, telegraph and messenger wires in every office, the Braly Block was hailed as a technological achievement and engineering triumph. From this one building, Spring Street grew to become the "Wall Street of the West." Other substantial commissions followed, and the Parkinson firm was thriving.

When the University of Southern California sought an architect to undertake its master plan, J.P. was the obvious choice of school president George F. Bovard. The goal was to create a modern campus that had the look of history. The plan was to connect the university and Exposition Park with buildings aligned along University Avenue (now

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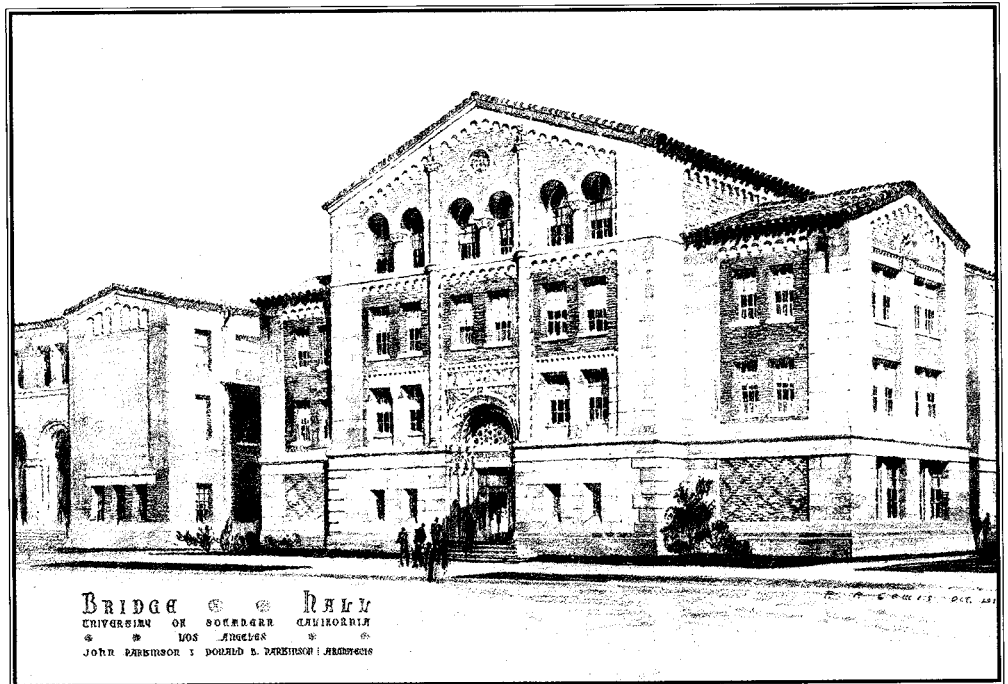
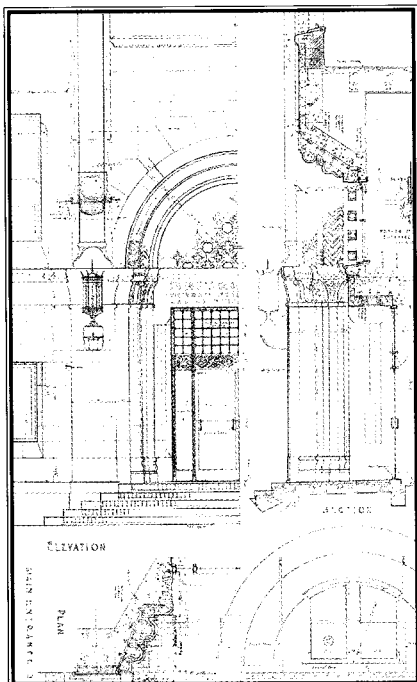
Trousdale Parkway), a principal boulevard open to automobile traffic, with gates at each end. (Parkinson had previously completed a master plan for

Exposition Park, and was also involved in the design of the Rose Garden in 1912.) Of brick and stone in the Lombard

Above: Gargoyles from the Student Union Building.

Right: J.P. at age 16.

Below: Drawings for Bridge Hall (1927).



BRIDGE HALL
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES
JOHN PARKINSON & DONALD B. PARKINSON ARCHITECTS

USC UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

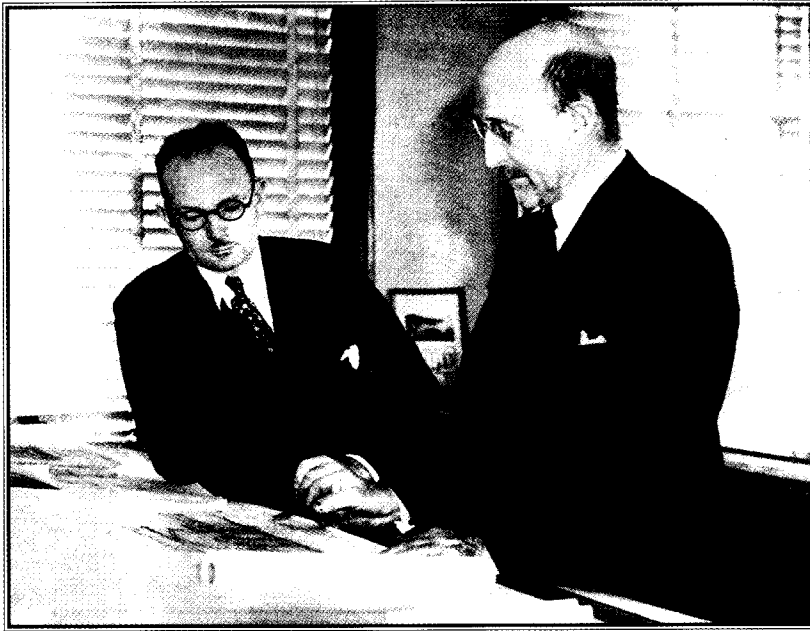
Romanesque style, the buildings were designed to give the campus an established presence in Los Angeles.

The plan was developed during the Bovard administration (1903-21), but most of the buildings were constructed during the term of Rufus B. von KleinSmid (1921-47), the university's great building president. Of the 21 Parkinson-designed buildings in the original master plan, eight are still standing.

Most prominent of these is the Bovard Administration Building, named for the university's fourth president by request of the faculty. The first Parkinson building at USC, Bovard was constructed between 1919 and 1921.

The Student Union Building (later named in honor of Gwynn Wilson, former student body president and a longtime USC trustee) features gargoyles, an ornate portico and reliefs which depict study and leisure with a mixture of classical and a few cheeky touches, such as a little monkey thumbing his nose at the imposing and somewhat autocratic figure of Rufus B. von KleinSmid.

Of the other buildings sub-

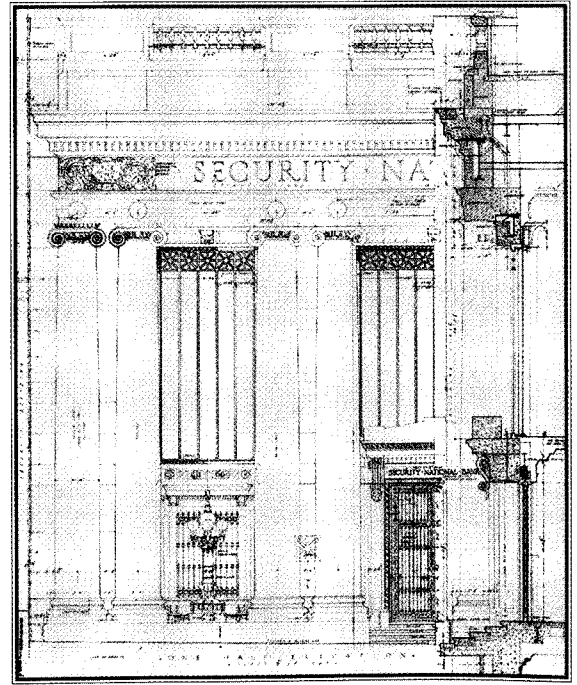
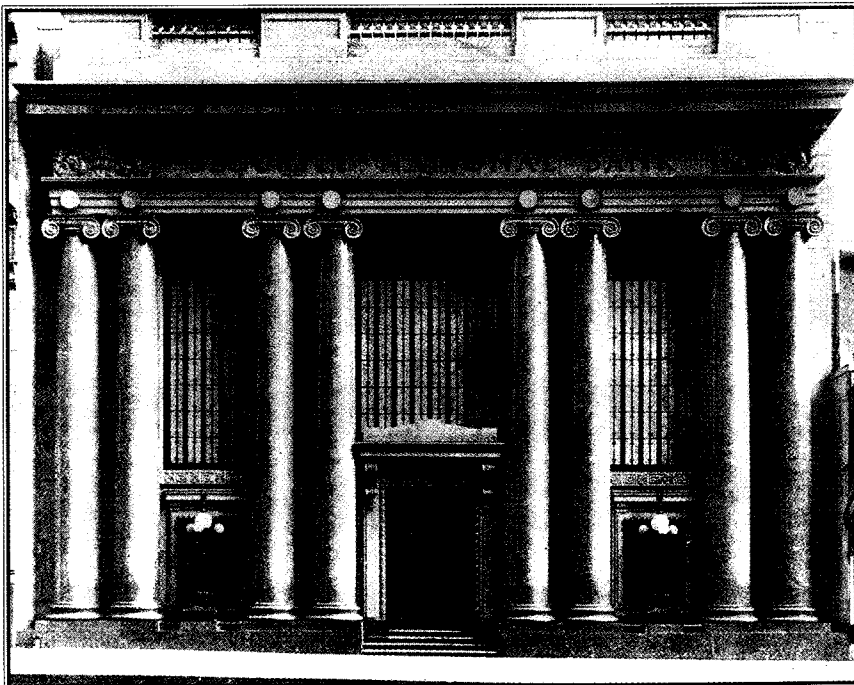


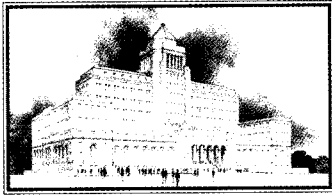
Left: J.P. with his son Donald. **Below:** Security National Bank Building (1916). **Right:** Los Angeles City Hall (1928). To get the city to waive its height limit, J.P. drew the building (inset) as it would look with a 150-foot tower.

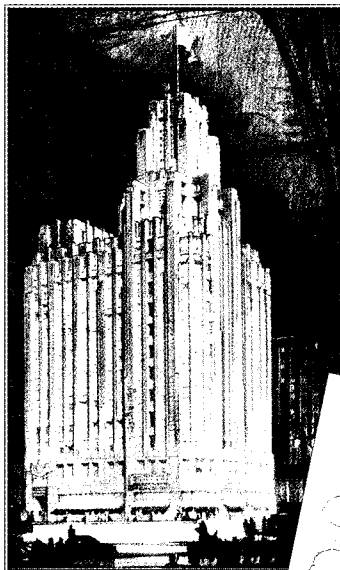
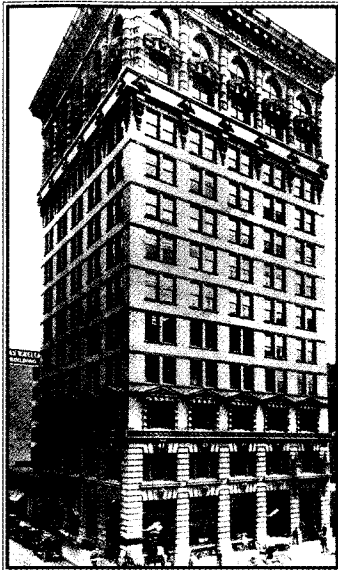
"I COULD DO ANYTHING IN WOOD-WORK FROM
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sequently erected, the Law Building (now the School of Accounting), Commerce Building (now Bridge Hall), Physical Education Building, Science Building, Petroleum Engineering Building (now Biegler Hall) and Women's Building (now Town and Gown) are extant. (All save two were built during John Parkinson's lifetime. The Petroleum Engineering and Women's buildings were built after his death in 1935.)

The '20s and '30s were Parkinson's most productive years, and he left his mark all over the city. He worked in a number of styles, all of them influenced by Europe in the classic grand manner – Romanesque, a mixture of Spanish Colonial Revival, Streamline Moderne and, later, the Classical



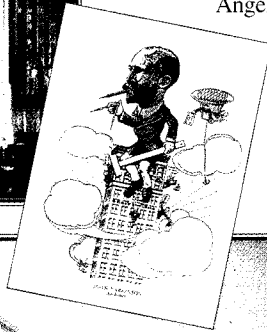




Far left: The Continental Building (Braly Block) (1904).

Left: Drawing for the Guarantee Trust (1930).

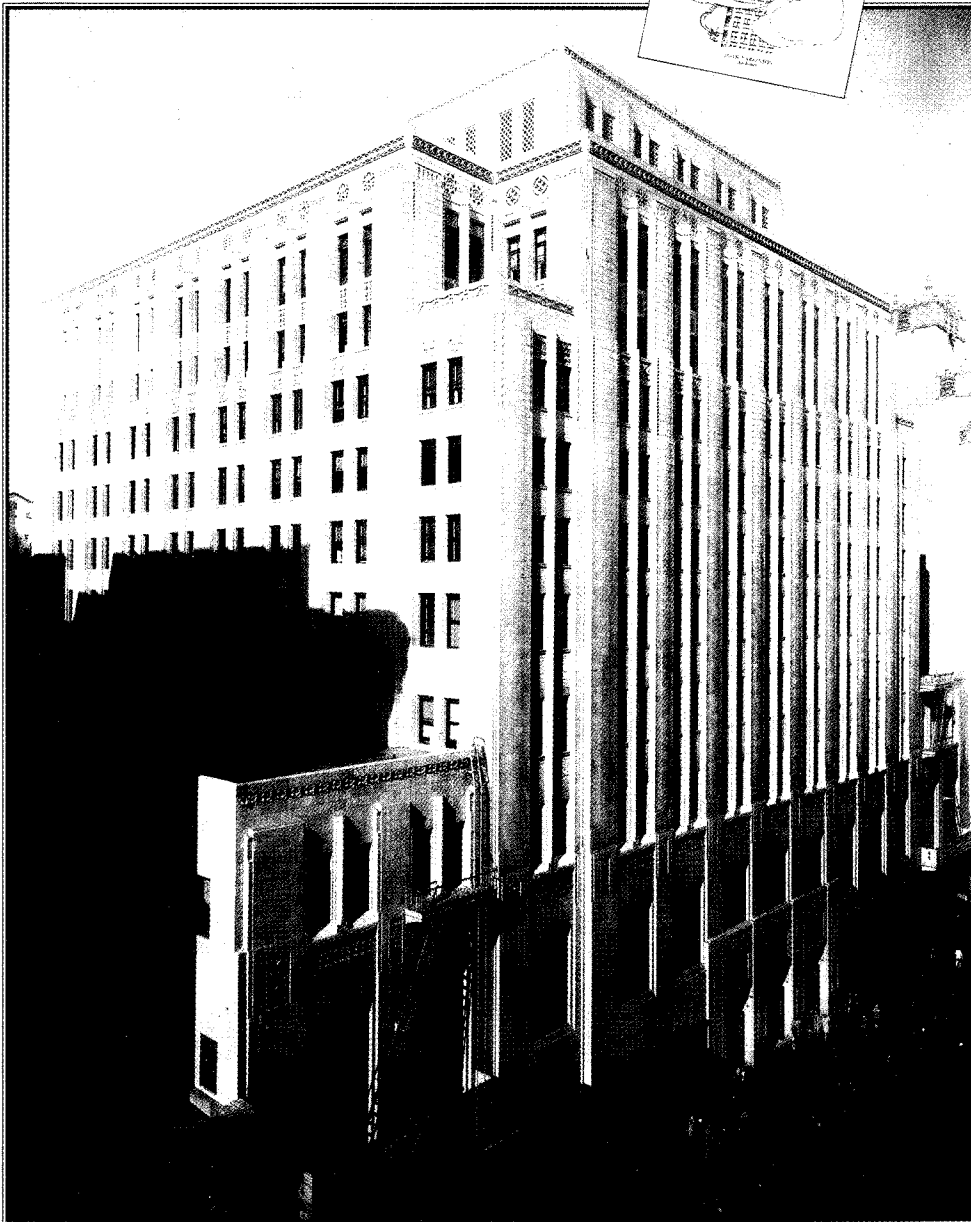
Below: Cartoon of Parkinson atop the Braly Block, and the Title Insurance Building (1928), aptly named "The Queen of Spring Street."



Moderne style. Classical references were stripped down and simplified (and thus more affordable to build), making this a popular style during the Depression years. A Parkinson building is substantial, and what elevated him from being a mere copier was his remarkable ability to adapt a style to a

new function and in so doing create something that was distinctly American.

In 1922, a group of businessmen and civic leaders intent on making Los Angeles a "world-class city" commissioned Parkinson to build the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. (They had hopes of attracting the 1924 Olympic Games to the city, but the international site selection committee opted for Paris instead.) The Coliseum was completed in 1923, with USC pledging to hold its football games at the new facility. The Olympics did finally come to Los Angeles in 1932.



In 1928, the universally-recognized symbol of Los Angeles – City Hall – was built. Three architects collaborated on the project, but Parkinson was responsible for the concept and architectural design. The exterior was inspired by the classical Greek style with a decidedly Moderne spirit. The lower part of the building is California light gray granite, and the upper portion and 450-foot tower are glistening terra cotta, chosen for its ability to harmonize with the granite, and because it was cheap.

An early version of J.P.'s City Hall design shows a short stubby tower, which conformed to the city's 150-foot height limit. According to William Scott Field, owner and curator of the Parkinson Archive, this clearly less impressive design was a ruse by J.P. to persuade the committee to opt for the taller, more majestic version we see today. It worked. The City Council voted to exceed the height limit, declaring that "a municipality is not governed by its own governances." It remained the city's tallest building until the height restriction was lifted in 1957.

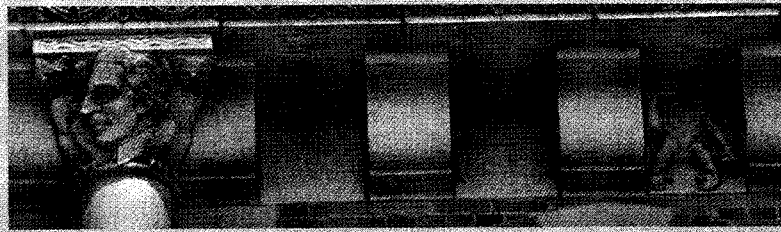
Like the USC Master Plan, the art deco Bullock's Wilshire Department Store, built in 1929, was designed to accommodate the city's favorite mode of transportation - the automobile. In an innovative touch, the main entrance was located not at the front, but at the rear of the building, adjacent to the parking lot. Listed in the prestigious National Register of Historic Places and a Historic-Cultural Monument of the city of Los Angeles, Bullock's Wilshire was Parkinson's finest artistic achievement.

Parkinson's last great project was the design for Union Station. The new Union Passenger Terminal was in the first stages of construction when he died in 1935, just a few days before his 74th birthday. □

Opposite page: Union Station.

THE PARKINSON ARCHIVE

Architect William Scott Field of Parkinson Field Associates wants to dispel the myth that Los Angeles has no heritage. As caretaker of the Parkinson



and collection of architecture and related books. Field intends the 300-volume library to be a resource for architects and others. Far from seeing it simply as a record of the past glories of the architecture firm he now owns,

he envisions the archive as a resource that can generate the restoration projects badly needed to conserve the downtown area of Los Angeles. His dream is to revive the Parkinson legacy and to reverse the deterioration of Spring Street in downtown's financial district. No short-term project, it will require Parkinson-like determination and stamina.

Ironically, Field had never heard of John Parkinson when he was asked by DWL Parkinson Architects – the successor to the firm Parkinson founded in 1894 – to organize the archive. Field, a pioneer of urban renovation, soon recognized the architectural treasure trove he'd uncovered.

Now 85 percent catalogued, the archive contains original documents for 1,500 projects as well as J.P.'s surveying instruments, drafting tools

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Today, more than 50 Parkinson buildings remain standing downtown. On Spring Street alone there are 17 Parkinson-designed buildings. Some have undergone extensive alterations over the years, unfortunately not for the better.

Living with Parkinson's legacy, Field is inspired by the man. He feels that he shares Parkinson's characteristic ambition and drive. "We both believe in inventing our own projects," says Field, "rather than to wait for commissions to come in." □

