

“The Glass School,” Hibbing



IT IS NOT OFTEN that an elementary school on Minnesota’s Iron Range is promoted as a tourist attraction for Canadians, but that’s exactly what happened in the summer of 1937 when *The Winnipeg Tribune* advised readers that any journey south to the “thriving” metropolis of Hibbing should include a visit to the “Glass School.” The building, officially the Park School, opened its doors in 1935 to 120 kindergarten to sixth-grade students.

Unquestionably, the ultra-modern building was architecturally unique for its time and place and stood in bold stylistic contrast to other local schools, notably Hibbing High School, an opulent Jacobean-revival edifice completed in 1922. But what made the Park School worthy of a pilgrimage was its technological innovation, particularly with regard to the type—and amount—of glass architect J. C. Taylor employed in its construction. Taylor shunned con-

ventional window glass in favor of generous expanses (roughly twice the square-footage required by code) of glass vacuum blocks, which wrapped the corners of the building and allowed light to flood into its four classrooms.

The most extraordinary aspect of the school’s windows was that not a single one of them opened. To compensate for this, air conditioning provided ventilation and regulated humidity. A futuristic system of light-sensitive “electric eyes,” reputedly the only ones in use in northern Minnesota, switched on interior fixtures when illumination was needed and activated venetian blinds when sun control was required. In a reference to which only Minnesotans or Canadians were likely to relate, the *Tribune* compared the nighttime effect of the school’s luminescent surfaces to a “shimmering ice palace.”

As the prevalence of hermetically sealed, glass-encased buildings began to rise, the novelty of the “Glass

School” waned. In 1962 children stopped attending classes there when it became a vocational school. In 1967 it ceased to be a school altogether. Although the building still stands, the glass block is gone and with it, the shimmer and glow.

—Jane King Hession

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Park School was the real name of Hibbing’s architecturally bold “Glass School,” (1937 view). (MNHS COLLECTIONS)





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