

**394 ACADEMY ROAD - UPTOWN THEATRE
(UPTOWN BOWLING LANES)
*M.Z. Blankstein 1930-31***



Despite the prevailing economic deterioration of the early 1930s, Allied Amusements built a \$300,000 movie palace on the corner of Academy Road and Ash Street confident that River Heights, a fashionable residential district, could support a diversion from the troubled times. On opening night, 24 December 1931, chauffeurs parked patrons' cars as klieg lights lit up the theatre and sky. Officially opened by Mayor Ralph H. Webb, the local newspapers praised the theatre as "modern" and "in the front ranks of beautiful theatres in Canada."

Allied Amusements Limited was a local enterprise that owned and operated numerous movie houses throughout the city. Its president, Jack Miles, was an ambitious entrepreneur. He was born in Russia, came to Canada in 1905 and soon opened a bicycle shop that grew into a motorcycle business. He then built the Palace movie house, the cornerstone for what was to become a remarkable family business in theatre operation. Allied Amusements eventually became Western Theatres Limited, owning eighteen movie houses. In 1949, the company also introduced Winnipeg to its first drive-in theatre.

Max Blankstein, a local architect, designed the Uptown Theatre, having previously provided plans for Mils' Rose and Roxy Theatres. Born in Odessa, Russia, Blankstein received architectural training there before coming to Winnipeg in 1904. It is believed that in 1910 he was the first registered Jewish architect in Western Canada. His work in Winnipeg includes the Tivoli Theatre, the Zimmerman block, the Hebrew Free School, Mount Carmel Clinic and the Film Exchange Building.

The Uptown Theatre was unique in Winnipeg because it was the city's only "atmospheric" movie palace that also created an illusion of fantasy on the exterior of the building. While Hollywood produced sensational and spectacular films featuring glamorous actors and set in exotic locales, the theatres themselves were also a set for this fantasy world. Movie houses became exotic replicas of mosques, temples and palaces, while their interiors were recreations of village scenes, heavily decorated and elaborately lit to achieve a particular atmosphere. In the case of the Uptown Theatre, the architecture recalled a Moorish palace of Spain.

Blankstein's plan for the 1,700-seat theatre was based on two "atmospheric" movie palaces in Chicago: the Avalon designed by John Eberson and the Uptown designed by C.W. and George Rapp. Although the Winnipeg theatre was called the Uptown, Blankstein's original drawings name the structure the Avalon. The Avalon Theatre in Chicago is considered John Eberson's finest achievement. As the originator of the "atmospheric" theatre, Eberson attempted to give the illusion that the film was being viewed under a night sky in a romantic setting. An exotic and enchanted world was achieved through the blending of lighting, colour and architecture. The effects were not costly to produce. It required only a painted blue ceiling on which images of clouds, moons, stars and passing airplanes were projected using a machine called the Brenograph Junior.

The exterior ornamentation of the two storey Uptown Theatre on Academy Road was described by the Local newspapers as "modernized Spanish." Built of steel, concrete and brick, the buff and cream coloured exterior features twin towers, a variety of windows, niches, urns, balconies and a large, brilliantly lit marquee. At either corner on the ground floor are two small shops, each with large plate glass windows and transomed doors.

When patrons entered the decorative foyer, they were greeted by a large fountain complete with running water and goldfish. The main auditorium was laid out as a street scene with gabled palace facades and turrets, all with lighted windows. With its twinkling stars, the total effect provided a brief escape from reality.

By the 1950s there was a decrease in attendance at movie houses because of the mass appeal of television. Many local neighborhood theatres were forced to close. In 1960 the Uptown Theatre became a bowling alley, its exotic interior was gutted and thirty bowling lanes were installed, divided between two floors.