

669 MAIN STREET
ZIMMERMAN BLOCK

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

10 March 1986

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1913 ZIMMERMAN BLOCK

Flanked by two structures of the same scale but of restrained detailing, this highly ornamental three-storey building is a handsome example of Winnipeg's turn of the century architectural heritage. While borrowing from the vocabulary of Baroque classicism, the style also uses a variety of orders and eras to achieve a distinctive whole. It comes as no surprise that the architect of this building, Max Blankstein, made his mark in the city by designing a series of movie picture palaces where the very structure was contrived to be an exotic setting for the screen events of the interior. While the Zimmerman Block of 1913 was not a movie theatre, it was certainly exotic and entertaining in its own right.

Nathan Zimmerman, born Nissel Rabinowitsch, brought his young family from the oppression of Tsarist Russia to Winnipeg in 1882. It was a difficult time and the immigrants arrived penniless. Labouring first on the railway, then as a pedlar, the elder Zimmerman was able to establish a small general store on the site of this building in 1887. With the help of his wife, Hodel (or Hudel) and several children, the old Jewish merchant sold clothing and dry goods from a small shop. When Nathan died in 1897,¹ his wife and sons continued the family business. In 1903, son Benjamin Zimmerman erected his own modern brick building next door to the family business. Located at 671-673 Main Street, the building housed Ben's pawn shop and jewellery store which later evolved into a liquor wholesale business. The upper two floors were initially offices but within a few years, these commercial spaces were replaced by 'bachelors' suites', a euphemism for a boarding house.²

A younger son by the name of William Zimmerman continued the family business at the original location and replaced the worn frame building with this white stone-faced block in 1913. His brother's brick building of 1903 on the north side, and the Alloway and Champion Bank of 1905 to the south, precluded any enlargement of the original lot. Consequently, this building is very narrow and long.

William Zimmerman was born in Russia in 1871, fleeing the persecution of the pogroms with his family for a new life in Canada. His marriage of 1892 eventually produced four sons and a

daughter. His eldest son, Louis, was brought into partnership with his father's business under the name L. & W. Zimmerman Ltd. This name lasted until well after the death of father William in 1946.³

William changed his family's business from a general store and second hand clothing store into a loan office, the ground floor occupant of the new 1913 structure. It operated as a pawn shop so the storefront windows were advantageous for displaying the merchandise for sale. The Zimmermans also seemed to have stocked jewellery for sale from quite an early date, and this finally became the primary function of the business by the 1940s. For several years, the pawn shop aspect of the company co-existed symbiotically with the sale of jewellery, especially in the depression decade of the 1930s.

When William Zimmerman died at the age of 75 years in 1946, he passed on the business to the third generation of the family operating on the same site. Louis had been president of the company for several years before his father passed away and brother Edward became the vice-president. From the sale of jewellery, the firm of L. & W. Zimmerman Ltd. advanced to encompass a diamond brokerage as well. The company remained in business on its Main Street site until early in the 1970s. Continuous occupation on the same location in a commercial capacity for nearly 90 years must be somewhat of a record in this young city, but this occupation by three generations of the same family can surely not be matched. From the humble general store established far out on North Main Street in 1887, to the loan office that raised the capital for a new building, to successful jewellery business, the Zimmerman family business evolved with the needs of the society around it.

The upper two floors were initially planned as office space. Six or seven tiny offices per floor were laid out next to the front and rear windows and tucked around two lightwells cut into the south side of the building.⁴ City inspectors deemed the plan inadequate and the upper floors were subsequently converted into "bachelors' quarters".⁵ By and large, the upper two floors have served in this residential capacity but for 15 years, starting in the late 1940s, Norman Zimmerman, a brother to Louis and Edward, maintained his law office in the front rooms of the second floor.

These upper floors are connected by stairs and fire doors to the older Zimmerman block on the north side. Despite the fact that the floor levels of the two buildings do not match, the entrance to the rental rooms of this building is through a side door at 671 Main Street in the old Zimmerman block. A second staircase at the rear of the building leads onto the fire escape and to the rear exit. For many years, the rental rooms of both buildings were managed as a single whole. This unique arrangement was facilitated by cordial relations between the brothers, who clearly viewed the two buildings and businesses as part of a greater enterprise. Their history ties the two structures together just as surely as do the fused link doors on the upper levels.

A mere 19 feet wide and 84 feet long, this Zimmerman Block makes a definitive statement on the streetscapes. Through its colour, materials and most obviously, its ornamentation, the building draws pronounced attention to itself, oblivious as it were to the confines of the site. From the name inscription on the parapet, down past swags, lions' heads and oversized brackets, the structure was designed to inform Winnipeg that the Zimmerman family was alive and well and ready to continue business on their old site.

Architect Blankstein chose stock pre-fabricated storefront windows for the ground floor, saving his creative talents for the upper two storeys. Around a central entrance are two bay windows, rounded slightly around the mullions and topped by an overhang roof of bronze scales. Above this is a grid of prism glass. Attractive and appealing to passers-by, the bay windows acted as a frame to display merchandise. They were particularly appropriate for the jewellery trade because each side formed a clear box while the bronze work above suggested a jewel's setting. The identical windows can be found in a 1921 photograph of the Child's (McArthur) Building, included at the end of this report, and undoubtedly there were others, yet these beautiful windows may be the only ones remaining of that style in the city. They are unchanged from the building's construction in 1913.

Similarly, the elaborate façade is also virtually intact. The two bays rest between three pilasters with scrolled Ionic capitals. The shaft is fluted, to contribute to the vertical effect. The cornice is

overscaled, supported by oversized brackets and topped by a solid carved pediment. The lower windows are framed by carved garlands with a console bracket as the keystone. Garlands drape over the third floor windows, with a grotesque of a woman's head at the centre. Boxed festoons lie between the pilaster caps and complement the garlands beneath. The wall space between the two storeys is filled with a low-relief carving that anticipates art deco styling, topped with two more grotesques of lions' heads that support the sills of the windows above. The combination of sculptural ornamentation of the Baroque forms, the classicism of the pilasters and the vaguely geometric forms of the wall carving give the façade a great vitality.

Rendered in a smooth stone, the façade was installed in sections, tied to the wall behind. The joints between the sections are readily discernible. The architect likely assembled his design from a catalogue of ornamental stone, which was then assembled for his specifications and shipped in small sections. That the plain brick side walls could be seen behind the parapet along the sides worried no one. From the front, it was a building of European Renaissance design.

Dramatic and ornamental, the façade was a frank departure from the established "Anglo-Saxon" architecture of the banks, churches and commercial structures of the dominant culture. Here in the heart of the Jewish commercial district, something else seemed to be called for to set the block apart. The architect, Max Blankstein, was a Russian Jew who had joined the Winnipeg community in 1904 during the second wave of migration from the homeland.⁶ Besides this Zimmerman Block of 1913, Blankstein is known for several movie theatres including the Uptown Theatre on Academy Road, the former Tivoli Theatre on Maryland at Westminster and the Roxy Theatre on Henderson Highway. He also designed the Hebrew Free School, Mount Caramel Clinic and the Film Exchange Building. Although the theatres demonstrated Blankstein's exotic skills as an architect, the Zimmerman Block is a more serious building quite distinct from the fantasy styles of the picture palaces. Blankstein died in Winnipeg in 1932.⁷

Following the evacuation of the Zimmerman Block by its original owners in the mid 1970s, it became the Lighthouse Mission, a street institution geared for the special needs of the poor along

Main Street. The ground floor interior of display cases and a storage area was removed but it is not known whether the bedrooms of the upper two floors are still intact.

An original link with Winnipeg's earliest Jewish Community, the Zimmerman Block has played a prominent role on Main Street both culturally and architecturally.

FOOTNOTES

1. Arthur Chiel. Jewish Experiences in Early Manitoba, Manitoba Jewish Publications (Winnipeg 1955), p. 1, 3 and 11.
2. Sheila Grover. "671-673 Main Street, 1903 Zimmerman Block" Historical Buildings Committee Report, 5 February 1986.
3. "William Zimmerman, Local Pioneer Merchant, Is Dead", 3 January 1946, Winnipeg Free Press and Tribune. This was a brief union of the two daily papers during a printers' strike.
4. City of Winnipeg Building Permits No. 2401, 11 July 1913 and Plan 2401 - 13.
5. Permits, op.cit., No. 8, 14 January 1919.
6. Harry Gutkin. Journey Into Our Heritage, Lester, Orpen & Dennys Ltd. (Toronto) 1980, p. 53.
7. "M. Blankstein Dies; Short Illness", Western Canada Contractor, January 1932, p. 9.

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Plate 1 – 667-73 Main Street, 1969. The Zimmerman Block of 1913 (middle) is flanked by the 1903 Zimmerman Block on the left and the Alloway and Champion Bank on the right. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 2 - The same buildings, 1918. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 3 – Exterior window detailing, 1986. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 4 – Ground floor detailing, 1986. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)



Plate 5 – The McArthur Building, corner Portage and Main, 1921. The ground level windows of this building are identical to the ones in the Zimmerman Block. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection #1354.)

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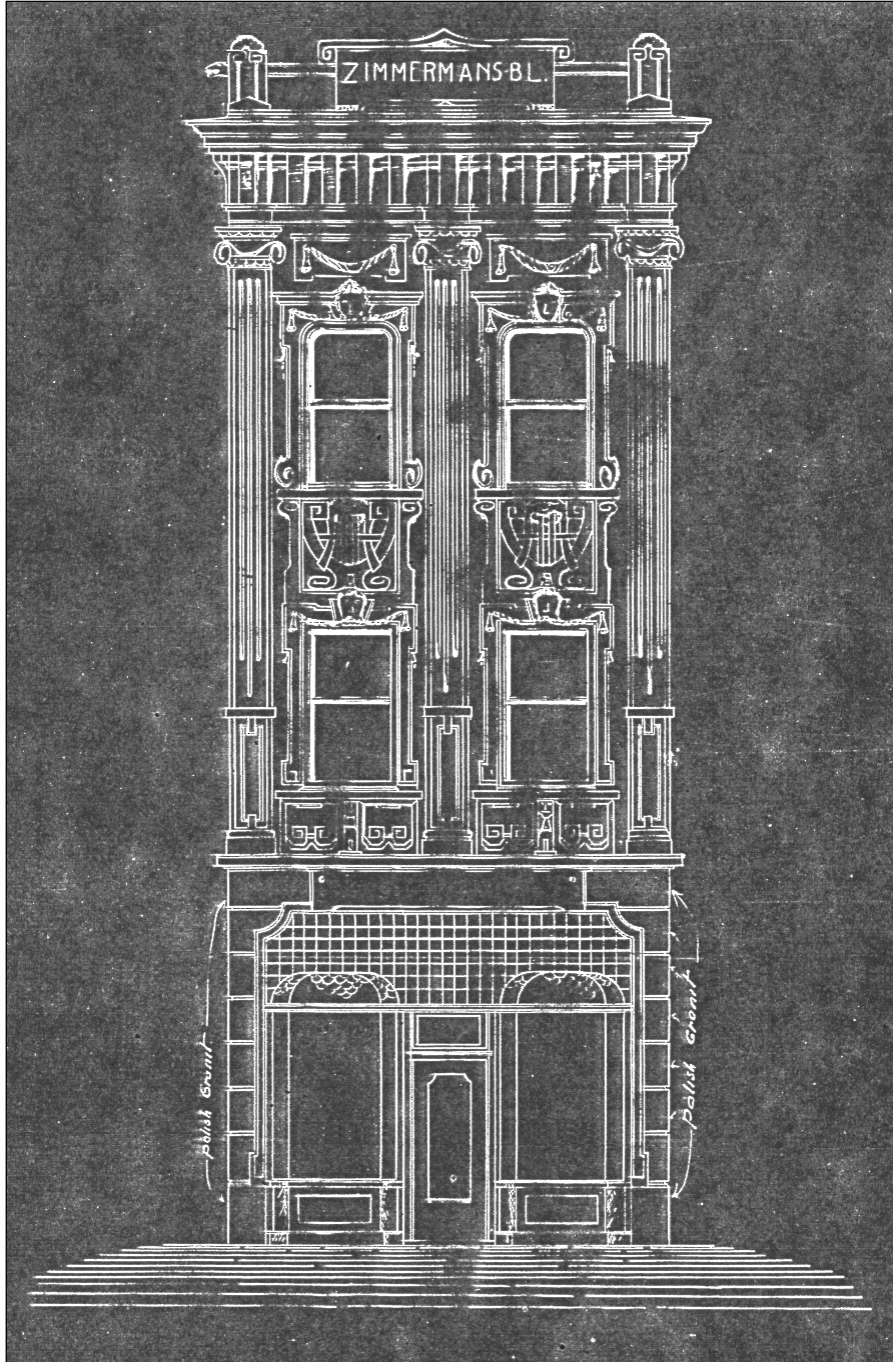


Plate 6 – Architects Plans, “Front Elevation.” (Courtesy of the City Archives, Plan #2401/1913.)