

669 MAIN STREET – LIGHTHOUSE MISSION (ZIMMERMAN BLOCK)
Max Blankstein, 1913



The highly ornamental Zimmerman Block stands in sharp contrast to the restrained detailing of its contemporaries on the east side of Main Street between Logan and Henry avenues. The structure marks three generations of commerce by the family of Nathan Zimmerman.

This young Jewish family fled pogroms in Tsarist Russia to arrive penniless in Winnipeg in 1882. The elder Zimmerman, born Nissel Rabinowitsch, worked as a railway labourer and peddler before opening a clothing and dry goods store at 669 Main in 1887. His wife and sons continued the business after his death 10 years later. In 1903, son Benjamin erected his own modern brick building immediately to the north at 671-673 Main. Another son, William, replaced the family's original frame shop with a three-storey, stone-faced block in 1913.

William, along with his eldest son Louis, operated under the name L. and W. Zimmerman Ltd. The business evolved from a general and second-hand clothing store, to a loan office and pawn

shop, then to a jewellery store and diamond brokerage. When William died in 1946, Louis continued as the firm's president while a brother, Edward, became vice-president.

Max Blankstein, architect of the 1913 Zimmerman Block, also was a Russian Jew who came to Winnipeg in 1904 during a second wave of migration from the homeland. His work included the Uptown, Tivoli and Roxy theatres, the Hebrew Free School, Mount Carmel Clinic, and Film Exchange Building.

Blankstein's elaborate façade is reminiscent of European Renaissance design. The upper window bays rest between three fluted pilasters with scrolled Ionic capitals. The second-floor windows are framed by carved garlands with a console bracket as the keystone. Garlands also drape over the third-storey windows with grotesques of two women's heads at the center. Box festoons lie between the pilaster caps. Wall space between the two upper floors contains low-relief carving, topped with two grotesques of lions' heads. The cornice is overscaled, supported by oversized brackets and topped by a solid parapet inscribed with the building's name.

The smooth, white façade was installed in sections. These appear to have been ordered from a catalogue of ornamental stone and shipped in a semi-assembled state according to Blankstein's specifications. The other walls contain plain brick.

The building's original storefront, which has been retained, is a rare architectural legacy in downtown Winnipeg. Blankstein used stock, prefabricated bay windows on the ground floor. These are rounded at the mullions and are enclosed at the top by an overhang roof of bronze scales. Above this is a grid of prism glass.

The upper floors originally were intended as office space, tucked around two light wells cut into the south side of the long, narrow building. However, this space subsequently was converted to residential use with the exception of a period mainly in the 1950s when Norman Zimmerman, brother to Louis and Edward, maintained law offices in the front rooms of the second floor. The two upper storeys were connected by stairs and fire doors to Benjamin Zimmerman's 1903 block. The rental rooms in both buildings were managed as one property for many years.

The Zimmerman firm remained at 669 Main until the early 1970s. During its occupancy, the family witnessed the area's decline from a vibrant, healthy commercial strip to one dominated by pubs, vacant properties, transients, and a local population in socioeconomic distress. Indeed, the Zimmerman Block subsequently has been occupied by the Lighthouse Mission providing various services for the poor in the Main Street area.