



588 MANITOBA AVENUE

EUROPEAN BLOCK (OBEE'S STEAM BATH & APARTMENTS)

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – FEBRUARY 2009



588 MANITOBA AVENUE EUROPEAN BLOCK (OBEE'S STEAM BATH & APARTMENTS)

Date of Construction: 1914

Building Permit: 839/1914 (Plans at City Storage)

Architect: Blankstein, Max Z.

Contractor: Cohen and Meyerowitz (owners)

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

A familiar building type found throughout the city is the mixed use block, normally three storeys in height with retail on the ground floor and residential and/or office space on the upper levels. The European Block, built on a busy corner in the North End, is a good example of this type of structure.

The main façades, north facing Manitoba Avenue and west facing McGregor Street are similarly designed – the common clay brick walls of the ground floor are laid with deep grooves above the raised stone foundation walls. Windows on this level feature stone heads and sills. A modest metal cornice is located at the northwest corner, protecting the entrances originally found at both façades. The upper floors are plain, with many square-headed window openings and the building is finished off by a metal cornice and plain brick parapet.



North and east façades, 2009

The east façade features a large, central section now clad in a composite material while the plain brick walls of the south elevation are interrupted by unadorned window and door openings. Cost of construction of the 10.1 x 29.6-metre structure was \$40,000.¹

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in fair structural condition. Alterations have included the boarding up or filling in of some of the door and window openings, the replacement of many of the original window units and the cladding of much of the east façade.

The architect of this building, M.Z. Blankstein, was born in Odessa, Russia on August 23, 1877² and took his early education and architectural training there, following in the footsteps of his father Meyer Blankstein, a stonemason and contractor by trade.³ He came to Winnipeg in 1904, part of a large contingent of Jewish immigrants who made the city their home. He took up his profession soon after his arrival, making him one of the earliest Jewish architects in Canada.⁴

He was active in his community, supporting many of its charitable organizations. He died at his home at 131 Machray Avenue on December 31, 1931 after an appendicitis operation. He left a wife, two daughters and four sons. Two of the sons, Cecil N. and Morley, and a daughter, Evelyn, would also become architects in the city, Cecil as a founding partner of Green, Blankstein and Russell Associates (became known as GBR Architects Limited), Morley in Blankstein Coop Gillmor Hanna (later Number Ten Architectural Group) and Evelyn, who first worked in her brother Cecil's office and then for Hobbs Glass (later Canadian Pittsburgh Industries).⁵



South and west façades, 1978

A partial list of major Winnipeg buildings designed by M.Z. Blankstein includes Aikins Court Apartments, 167 Aikins Street (1907), Winnipeg Hebrew Free School, 121 Charles Street (1912), Palace Theatre, 501 Selkirk Avenue (1912), Merchant's Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue (1913), Zimmerman Block, 669 Main Street (1913, Grade III), Film Exchange Building, 361 Hargrave Street (1922, Grade III) and Uptown Theatre, 394 Academy Road (1930, Grade III).⁶

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

The original structure included steam baths in the basement and on the first floor, known as Obee's Steam Bath. As one would expect, tenancy in the upper floor suites has included many labourers and employees from nearby factories and industries. The structure was gutted by fire in 1989 and two years later was opened as a 12-unit family housing facility.



Detail of west façade, 2009

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

Under the Historical Buildings By-law, this building meets a number of important criteria:

- its historical importance- a mixed-use structure modestly built and designed and a good example of this type of development found throughout the city and dating to the pre-World War I era;
- its associations- its long-term connections to steam baths;
- its design- N/A;
- its architect- M.Z. Blankstein was a respected and important practitioner;
- its location- defines an important intersection and contributes greatly to the historic streetscape of two major arteries in the North End; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display some of their original elements and design.



North and west façades, 1978

ENDNOTES:

- 1 City of Winnipeg Building Permit, #839/1914.
- 2 Information from Manitoba Vital Statistics database (<http://web2.gov.mb.ca/cca/vital/Query.php>).
- 3 Information courtesy of grandson Arthur Blankstein, December 2002.
- 4 Winnipeg Free Press, July 7, 1989, p. 30; and Jewish Post, Vol. VIII, No. I (January 7, 1932), p. 3; and Western Canada Contractor and Builder, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January 1932), p. 9.
- 5 A. Blankstein interview; and D.M. Lyon, "Recent Past Inventory Project," report produced for the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, September 2000, "List of References Re: Architects," pp. 2-5.
- 6 Compiled from author's files; City of Winnipeg Building Permit Ledger Books, 1900-1926; and Western Canada Contractor and Builder, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January 1932), p. 9.