



270 MORLEY AVENUE

RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings & Resources Committee
Researcher: M. Peterson
December 2017

This building embodies the following heritage values as described in the *Historical Resources By-law, 55/2014* (consolidated update July 13, 2016):

- (a) It was built in 1914 at the end of Winnipeg's decade long growth phase that saw the development of new neighbourhoods and the evolution of its older districts with the construction of mixed-use buildings such as the Rubin Block/Morley Apartments;
- (b) It is associated with the growth and evolution of this area of Fort Rouge/Riverview;
- (c) It is a good example of a Two-Part Commercial style building of the pre-World War I era and was designed by M.Z. Blankstein, one of the earliest Jewish architects practicing in Canada;
- (d) Built of face brick with stone accenting, the block is an excellent example of the type of mixed use structure developed and built during this period;
- (e) It is a highly conspicuous building within its neighbourhood; and
- (f) Areas of the building's exterior are still in their original state.

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

One of the unique features of Winnipeg's urban landscape is the apartment block. It was during the city's most dramatic growth period between 1900 and World War I that this residential building type came to prominence. Nowhere in Canada, and only in a handful of centres across the continent, were apartment block so numerous and popular.¹

A number of reasons were put forth by contemporary journals and newspaper articles: the weather, the sound investment, and the availability of a pool of renters. No solitary factor can be singled out as primary; rather, it was a number of developments working in tandem that provided the necessary environment.

Important was the fact that Winnipeg's economy produced a number of small- to medium-sized businesses whose owners had excess capital to invest. Apartment blocks were seen, and described throughout the media as a safe and profitable opportunity.

Another factor was the city's large number of travelling salesmen and new arrivals. Apartment living made economic sense to both groups, reducing the work associated with detached homes for the salesmen and allowing new citizens a moderate degree of comfort without causing a financial strain.

The type of apartments being built in the city was also a factor. In other North American centres, tenement houses, poorly designed and unsafe blocks were located in impoverished areas, giving apartment blocks in general a bad reputation. In Winnipeg, however, City Council moved quickly to ensure this type of apartment was not built. A by-law was enacted in November 1909 prohibiting the construction of wood frame residential blocks and directing any block over three storeys in height to be built more expensively to increase its fire protection. While the by-law was passed as a

¹ See M. Peterson, "The Rise of Apartments and Apartment Dwellers in Winnipeg (1900-14) and a Comparative Study with Toronto," in Prairie Forum, Volume 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 155-164.

means of protecting tenants from unsafe living conditions, it also discouraged tenement slums and promoted the construction of safer blocks. The three-storey brick apartment block that today can still be found in every neighbourhood was a direct result of this by-law.

Many of Winnipeg's apartment blocks catered to middle- and upper- income tenants, partially because the above mentioned by-law virtually prohibited the construction of cheap premises. But this development was also an expression of supply and demand, a continuous supply of financially comfortable businessmen and couples demanding apartments with a high degree of luxury. Maid's quarters, formal dining rooms, and large, multi-bedroom suites were not uncommon throughout the city. An example of a Winnipeg luxury block is the Roslyn Apartments, 40 Osborne Street, built in 1909 (Plate 1). Costing \$205,000 or an average of \$5,600 per suite, The Roslyn ranks as one of the most expensively built apartment blocks of the pre-1914 era.

The middle-income block, more numerous than the luxury accommodations, also featured a number of amenities to make apartment living more comfortable. Location, often on a major transportation artery, was another attraction and owners were quick to build their blocks adjacent to streetcar lines or other major roads.

In 1914, the Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, another large retail/apartment block was completed in the city, on the main thoroughfare, Osborne Street (known as Pembina Street at the time of construction), of one of Winnipeg's earliest subdivisions, Fort Rouge and the residential neighbourhood of Riverview (Plate 2).

STYLE

The Rubin Block/Morley Apartments is an excellent example of the Two-Part Commercial style with classical detailing, a popular urban design that visually divided the ground and upper floors to reflect the varied use of the two areas: retail on the main floor and residential or office space above. The use of classical elements such as pediments, columns and entablatures gave the

blocks a “traditional” appearance recognizable and appealing to potential tenants and retail and banking customers.

CONSTRUCTION

The structure cost \$60,000 to complete in 1914 and originally was laid out with two small retail shops, a bank and 21 residential suites.² The building measures approximately 35.2 x 17.0 metres. The banking space, with “Guard Room” and vault at the rear, measured 4.9 x 12.7 metres³ and this area and the other two retail spaces boasted 4.6-metre ceilings.⁴ All residential suites feature maple floors and ceilings on the upper two floors are 3.1 metres. Wall thicknesses are 55.9 centimeters in the basement (stone) and 43.2, 33.0 and 33.0 centimetres (brick) on the main, second and third storeys respectively (see Appendix I for additional construction information).⁵

Structural issues appear to have been an ongoing problem with this block, City records include 1940 and 1944 Building Permits for piling, tie rods were added to reduce upper wall bulging in 1956 and underpinning of the north side occurred in 1964.⁶

A complete fire upgrade was completed in 1977. By 1979, the original open wood balconies on the rear (east) and south façades had been removed.⁷

The building has suffered two major fires- 2007 and 2014 (Plate 3). Damage from the earlier, more severe fire included major structural damage to main floor framing members and steel support

² City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #351/1914.

³ Loc. cit.

⁴ City of Winnipeg Assessment Record, Roll No. 122400-12-1, PC 20. Below as AR.

⁵ Loc. cit.

⁶ BP #562/1940, #534/1944 (14 piles to north side), #3925/1956 and 2675/1964.

⁷ AR.

columns and smoke and water damage throughout. Repairs also included replacing the stairwell to the basement.⁸

Most of the damage from the 2014 fire was limited to the northeast portion of the third floor.⁹

DESIGN

The original plans for this block describe a mixed use retail/residential block with a number of features and elements common for this period.¹⁰

Because of its corner location, it features two main façades, west facing Osborne Street and north facing Morley Avenue. The main floor of the Osborne Street side was designed with stone cladding and four separate entrances: the northern-most used by the bank; the middle retail shops featuring recessed doors, large plate glass display windows and prism lights; and the southern entrance giving access to the stairs to the upper floor residential suites (Plate 2). The north and south entrances were set in ornamental stone frames.

A metal cornice divided the ground floor from the brick-clad second and third floors, with pilasters and windows in rectilinear openings. The flat roof was embellished with a metal cornice and brick and stone parapet with centrally placed stone panel with the carved words “RUBIN BLOCK”.

The north elevation was designed as a continuation of the basic materials and design of the front façade, with recessed entrance/balcony area approximately half way along the elevation (Plate 4).

⁸ City of Winnipeg Records, Roll No. 12012240000; and BP #111661/2007.

⁹ City of Winnipeg Records, Roll No. 12012240000; and BP #115189/2016.

¹⁰ Architect’s plans, No. 351/1914, City of Winnipeg.

The rear elevation featured open balconies centrally-located on the façade (Plate 5). The south façade included a recessed area with balconies, mid-building and two other sets of balconies.

The building was not built exactly as shown on these plans. The stone cladding was replaced by brick on the ground floor of the west façade (Plate 6), above the north door is a carved panel with the words, “MERCHANTS BANK OF CANADA” an original tenant, above the south doorway, “ENTRANCE TO APARTMENTS” (Plate 7).

The north side, facing Morley Avenue, appears to have been built as drawn although the recessed entrance area lacks the balconies on the upper floors (Plates 8 and 9). The metal sign at the roof says “MORLEY APTS.”.

The balconies of the south and east façades were built but have been removed and some of the windows on both elevations have been bricked in (Plates 10 and 11). The retail area of the west façade has seen a number of alterations over the years, although much of it was still intact in the early 1980s (Plate 12)

INTERIOR

The original plans for this block detail an interior with space for a bank and two retail shops on the ground floor and large, comfortable suites on all floors.¹¹ All 21 suites featured kitchens, bathrooms and living rooms, with either 1 or 2 bedrooms.¹² Besides laundry, boiler room, storage space and bank and retail space, the basement held 2 residential suites (1 @ 1 bedroom and 1 @ bedroom – Plate 13). On the ground floor, the bank occupied the northwest corner of the building, with a vault and guard room to the rear (east) – Plate 14. The four residential suites in the east end of the building are organized into two at two bedrooms.

¹¹ “Architect’s Plans,” #351/1914. Below as Plans.

¹² Loc. cit. One suite on the ground floor was located at the rear of the southern-most retail shop and did not include a bedroom.

The second and third floors are identically laid out, with two suites that include formal dining rooms, living rooms, kitchens and bathrooms and either one or two bedrooms, 3 suites with 1 bedroom and no dining room and 2 suites with 2 bedrooms and no dining room (Plate 15).

To increase the natural light and ventilation, four light shafts, run from the basement (northwest and southwest – 2.1 x 3.1 metres) and second floor (northeast and southeast – 1.5 x 2.3 metres).¹³

Today, (Plates 16-18).

INTEGRITY

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. Changes to the exterior have mainly concentrated on the ground floor retail space, with renovations and alterations carried out over the years. Much of the upper storeys are still original.

The building has suffered from lack of maintenance for an extended period of time, a 1960 City review of the property observed that the east parapet (Osborne Street) was “bad” with “mortar generally poor” and that 2 of the 3 stores “look o.k.” but the 3rd was in “rough shape”.¹⁴

According to City records, after the 2007 fire which appears to have been repaired, the building stood vacant and unmaintained. It was then placed on the City’s Vacant Building Registry (2012) and boarded up only to have a second fire occur in 2014.

STREETSCAPE

When completed, the block was located in a growing neighbourhood at the corner of Morley Avenue, across Osborne Street from Winnipeg Electric Rail Company’s large property that included a car barn and repair facility (Plate 19).

¹³ AR.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Today, the vacant building stands in centre of a mature neighbourhood.

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS

Local practitioner Max Z. Blankstein (1877-1931) was the architect who designed the Rubin Block. Blankstein came to Winnipeg in 1904 from his native Russia and designed a wide variety of buildings throughout the city. He has been given 10 points by the Historical Buildings and Resources Committee.

R. Cohen is listed as the owner and contractor on the original City of Winnipeg Building Permit.¹⁵

PERSON/INSTITUTION

Owners of this large block have been varied, the original owner, R. Cohen, turning the completed building over to Timco Investments Company in 1915. Other listed owners include: J.A. Forlong, manager (1925-1931), Lonsdale Investment Limited (1933-1943), H. Sokolov and M. Wolinsky, barristers (1944) and Samuel Werier, merchant (1947-1948).¹⁶ The Werier family continues to own the building.

In 1920, the Merchants Bank (which merged and became the Bank of Montreal in 1921), occupied space on the ground floor - #556 Osborne Street along with the Rose Barber Shop, #558 (William Davis, proprietor) and James G. Scott, tailor, #560. The Rose Barber Shop, under different owners/operators, remained in this space into the 1970s.

¹⁵ BP #351/1914.

¹⁶ City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 12012240000, 1920-1950.

EVENT

There is no known important historical event connected with this building.

CONTEXT

Built just before the beginning of World War I, the Rubin Block/Morley Apartments is another good example of the type of mixed use development found throughout Winnipeg's established and new neighbourhoods during this period. It provided modern retail space to meet the demand for a wide variety of services and also provided safe and comfortable living space for the City's growing population. Found on most major thoroughfares, this type of block was also popular as an investment for the many successful businessmen and professionals with extra capital.

LANDMARK

This building is found on a busy intersection and its scale and materials increase its conspicuousness in the area.



APPENDIX I

CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report

Building Address: 270 Morley Avenue
(556, 558 & 560 Osborne St.)

Building Name: Rubin Block/Morley Apartments

Original Use: mixed (retail/residential)

Current Use: vacant

Roll No. (Old): 12012240000 (2475)

RSN: 139666

Municipality: 12

Ward: 1

Property or Occupancy Code: 20

Legal Description: 25 St. Boniface, Plan 249, Block 11, Lots 1/2

Location: southeast corner Osborne Street

Date of Construction: 1914

Storeys: 3

Heritage Status: NONE

Construction Type: brick and stone foundation

Building Permits (Plans available: [CS] City Storage; [M] Microfilm):

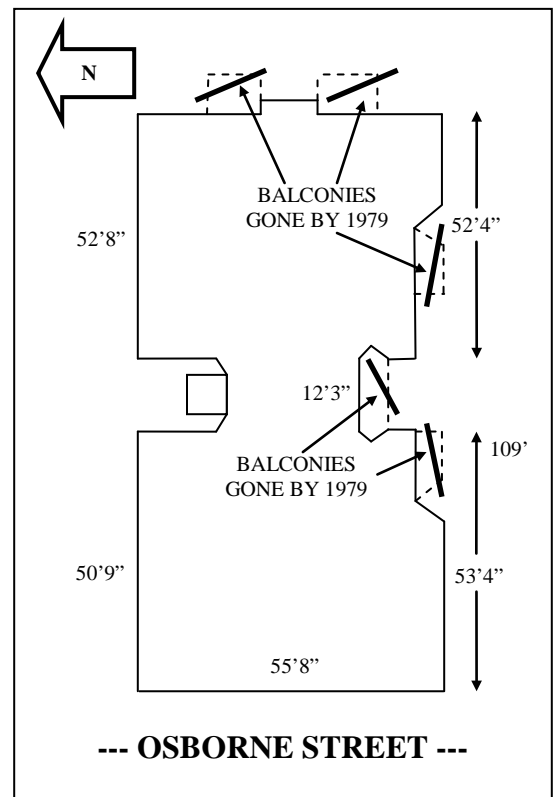
- 351/1914 \$60,000 [CS] (original); 562/1940 \$500 (piles); 534/1944 \$100 (piles & repairs); 1270/1947 \$4,000 (alterations to bank); 3718/1956 \$1,000 (repairs); 3925/1956 (tie rods); 2675/1964 \$3,550 (underpinning north side); 8615/1977 \$7,000 (interior alterations); 111661/2007 \$25,000 [CS] (fire repairs); 115189/2016 \$6,000 (fire repairs)

Information:

- 56 x 51 x 40 + = 235,490 cu. ft.
- 1944- north side of building 14 piles
- 1947 bank alteration- stairs to basement moved to back, wall moved, employees' room in basement, washrooms moved to basement, new lighting on main floor
- Permit 3925/1958- north wall bulging, 12 tie rods added
- ca.1975- balconies removed, doors bricked in
- Permit 8615/1977- fire upgrades throughout

ARCHITECT – BLANKSTEIN, M.Z.

CONTRACTOR – COHEN, R. (OWNER)



APPENDIX II

Max Zev Blankstein

M. Z. Blankstein was born in Odessa, Russia on August 23, 1877¹ and took his early education and architectural training there, following in the footsteps of his father Meyer Blankstein, a stonemason and contractor by trade.² 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.³

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 (known today as GBR Architects Ltd.), Morley in Blankstein Coop Gillmor Hanna (now Number Ten Architectural Group) and Evelyn, who first worked in her brother Cecil's office and then for Hobbs Glass (later Canadian Pittsburgh Industries).⁴

A partial list of major Winnipeg buildings designed by M.Z. Blankstein includes:⁵

Aikins Court Apartments, 167 Aikins Street (1907)
Minuk Block, 254-60 Dufferin Avenue (1909) – demolished
Glesby Stables, 468 Aberdeen Avenue (1910)
Chechik, Gold and Kernham Cold Storage Warehouse, 422 Jarvis Avenue (1910)
Northern Block Apartments, 94 McGregor Street (1910) – demolished
Winnipeg Hebrew Free School, 121 Charles Street (1912)
Palace Theatre, 501 Selkirk Avenue (1912)

¹ Information from Manitoba Vital Statistics database (<http://web2.gov.mb.ca/cca/vital/Query.php>).

² Information courtesy of grandson Arthur Blankstein, December 2002.

³ 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.

⁴ A. Blankstein; 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.

⁵ Compiled from author's files; City of Winnipeg Building Permits, 1900-1926; and Western Canada Contractor and Builder, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January 1932), p. 9.

M.Z. Blankstein designs continued:

Merchant's Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue (1913) – List of Historical Resources
Brandon Court Apartments, 377 Brandon Avenue (1913)
Zimmerman Block, 669 Main Street (1913) – Grade III
Jessie Block Apartments, 626 Jessie Avenue (1914)
North Panama Apartments, 229 Machray Avenue (1914)
European Block, 588 Manitoba Avenue (1914)
Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue (1914)
Globe Bedding Co. Warehouse, 274 Jarvis Avenue (1918)
Film Exchange Building, 361 Hargrave Street (1922) – Grade III
Tory's Academy Auto Service Garage, 155 Fort Street (1928)
Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway (1929)
Tivoli Theatre, 115 Maryland Avenue (1927) – converted into grocery store (1959)
Uptown Theatre, 394 Academy Road (1930) – Grade III
Theatres in Regina and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

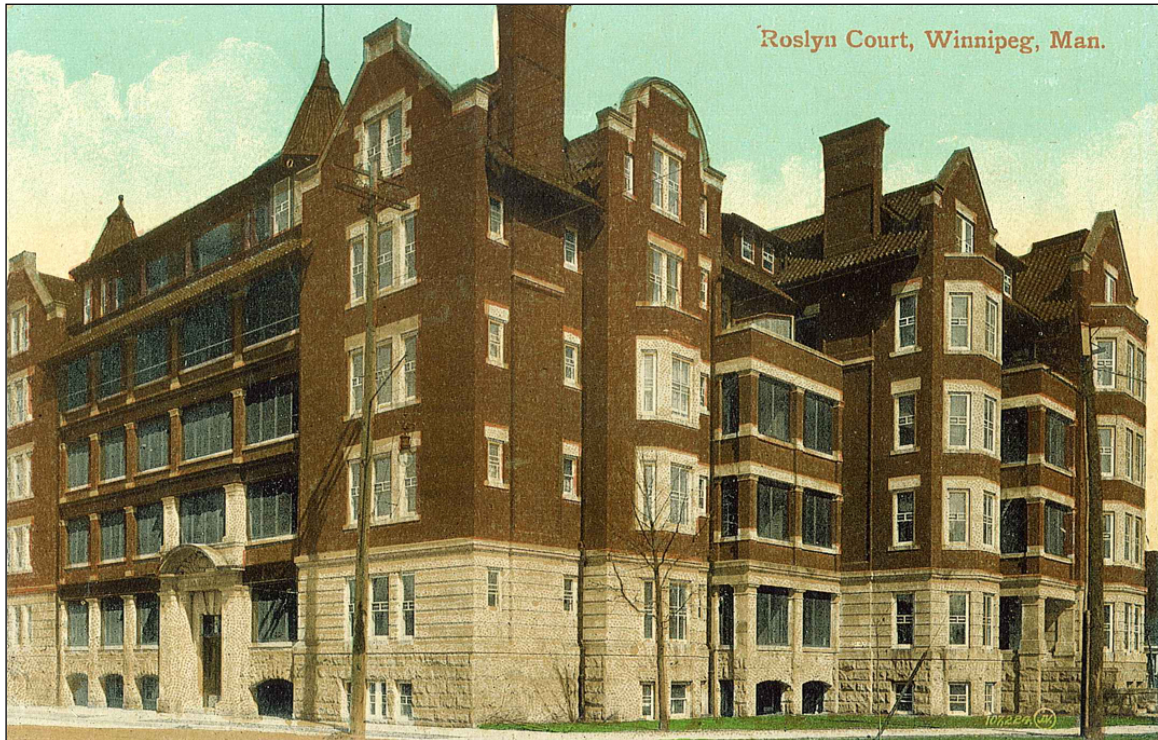


Plate 1 – Roslyn Apartments, 40 Osborne Street, no date. (M. Peterson Collection.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS



Plate 3 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, third floor fire, 2014.
(Reproduced from The Metro News, May 2014.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

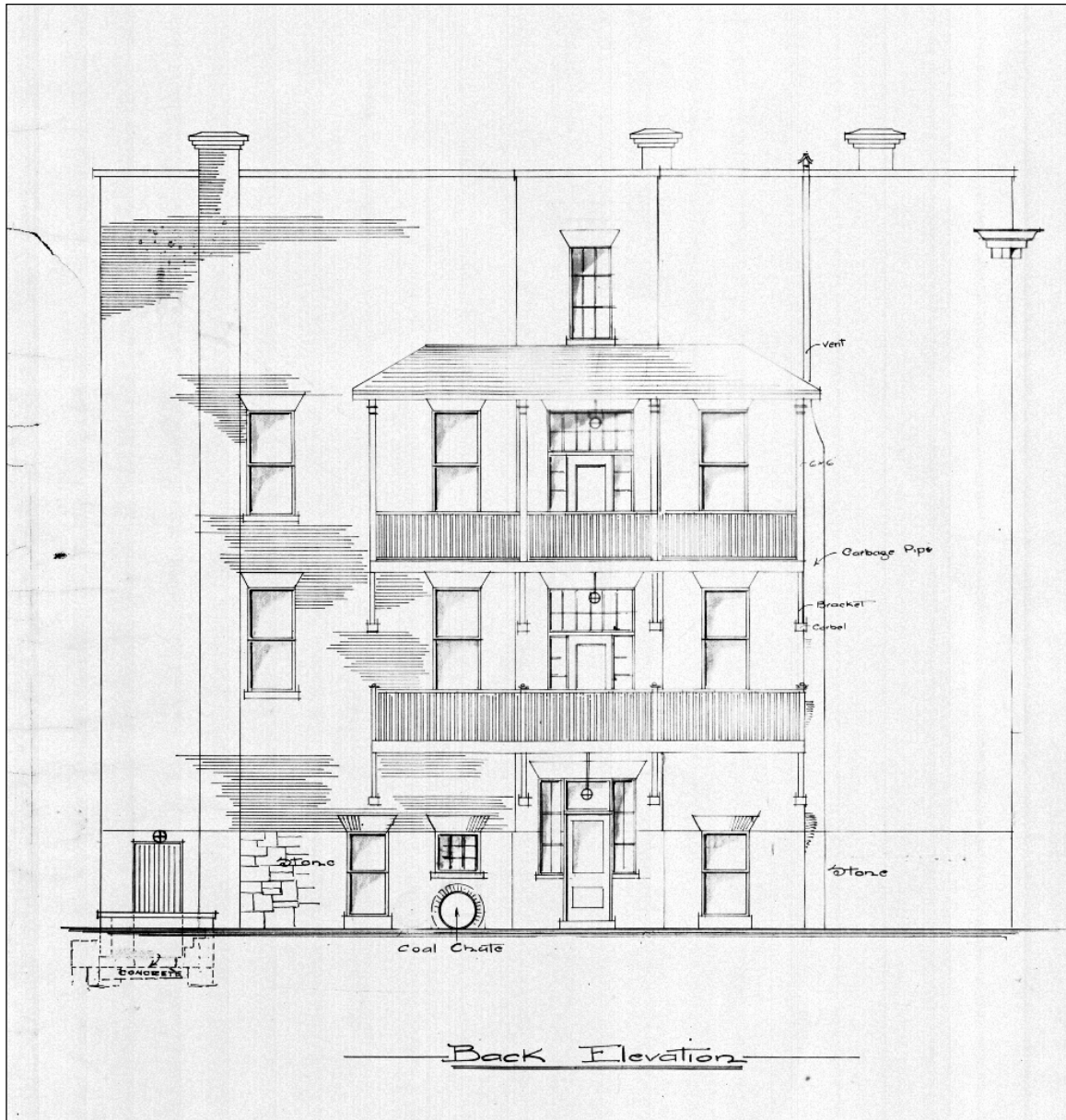


Plate 5 – “Back Elevation,” Architects Plans #531/1914, 1914. (City of Winnipeg, Central Files.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS



Plate 6 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, 2017. (M. Peterson, 2017.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS



Plate 7 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, details of north (top) and south (bottom) entrances, west façade, 2017. (M. Peterson, 2017.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS



Plate 8 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, north and west façades, 2017.
(M. Peterson, 2017.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS



Plate 9 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, detail of north entrance, 2017.
(M. Peterson, 2017.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS



Plate 10 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, east and north façades, 2017.
(M. Peterson, 2017.)



Plate 11 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, east and south façades, 2017.
(M. Peterson, 2017.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS



Plate 12 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, west façade with original recessed entrances and prism lights, ca.1980. (M. Peterson, 2017.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

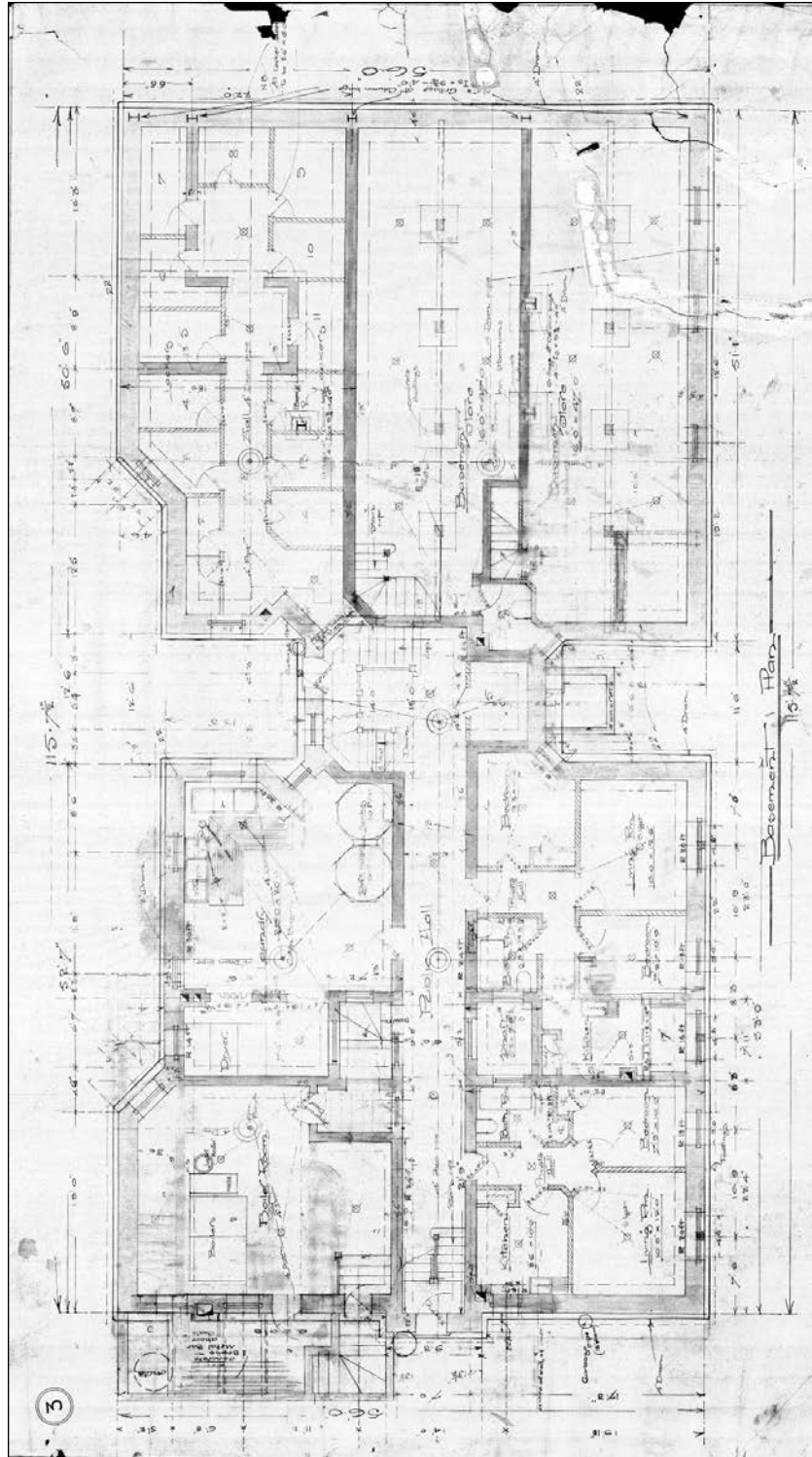


Plate 13 – “Basement Plan,” Architects Plans #531/1914, 1914. (City of Winnipeg, Central Files.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

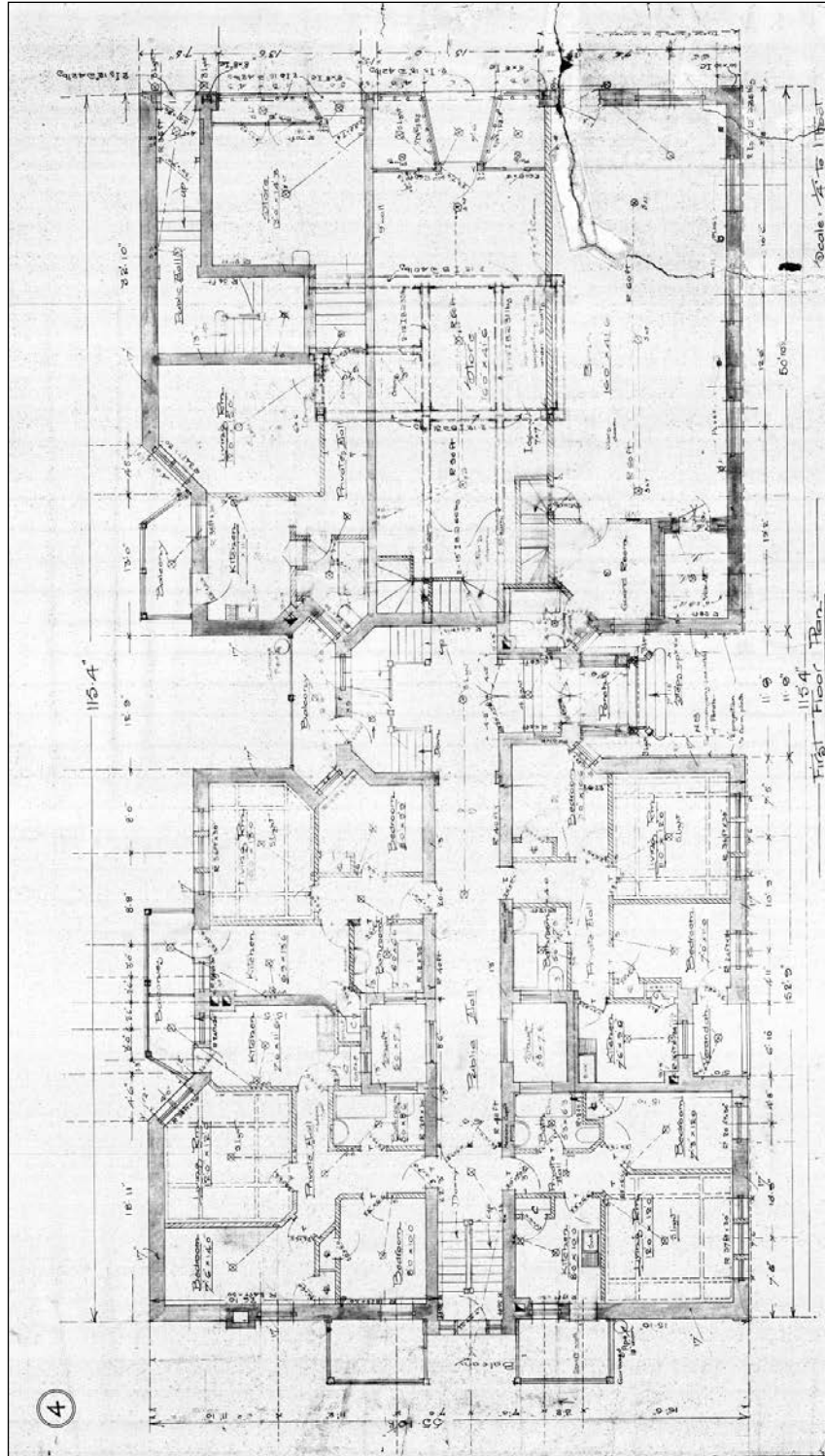


Plate 14 – “First Floor Plan,” Architects Plans #531/1914, 1914. (City of Winnipeg, Central Files.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

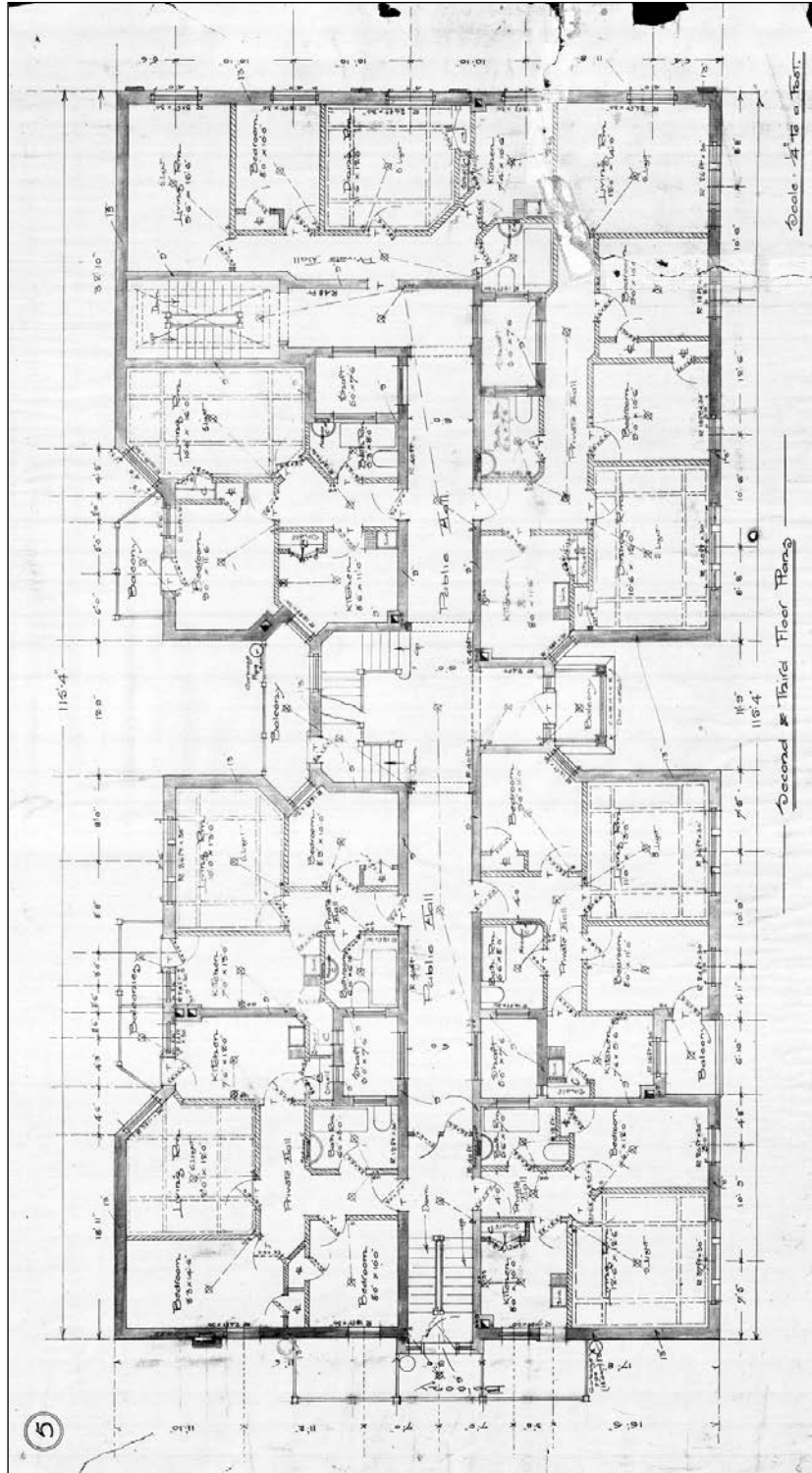


Plate 15 – “Second & Third Floor Plans,” Architects Plans #531/1914, 1914. (City of Winnipeg, Central Files.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

Plate 16 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, interior, 2017. (M. Peterson, 2017.)

Plate 17 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, interior, 2017. (M. Peterson, 2017.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

Plate 18 – Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue, interior, 2017. (M. Peterson, 2017.)

270 MORLEY AVENUE – RUBIN BLOCK/MORLEY APARTMENTS

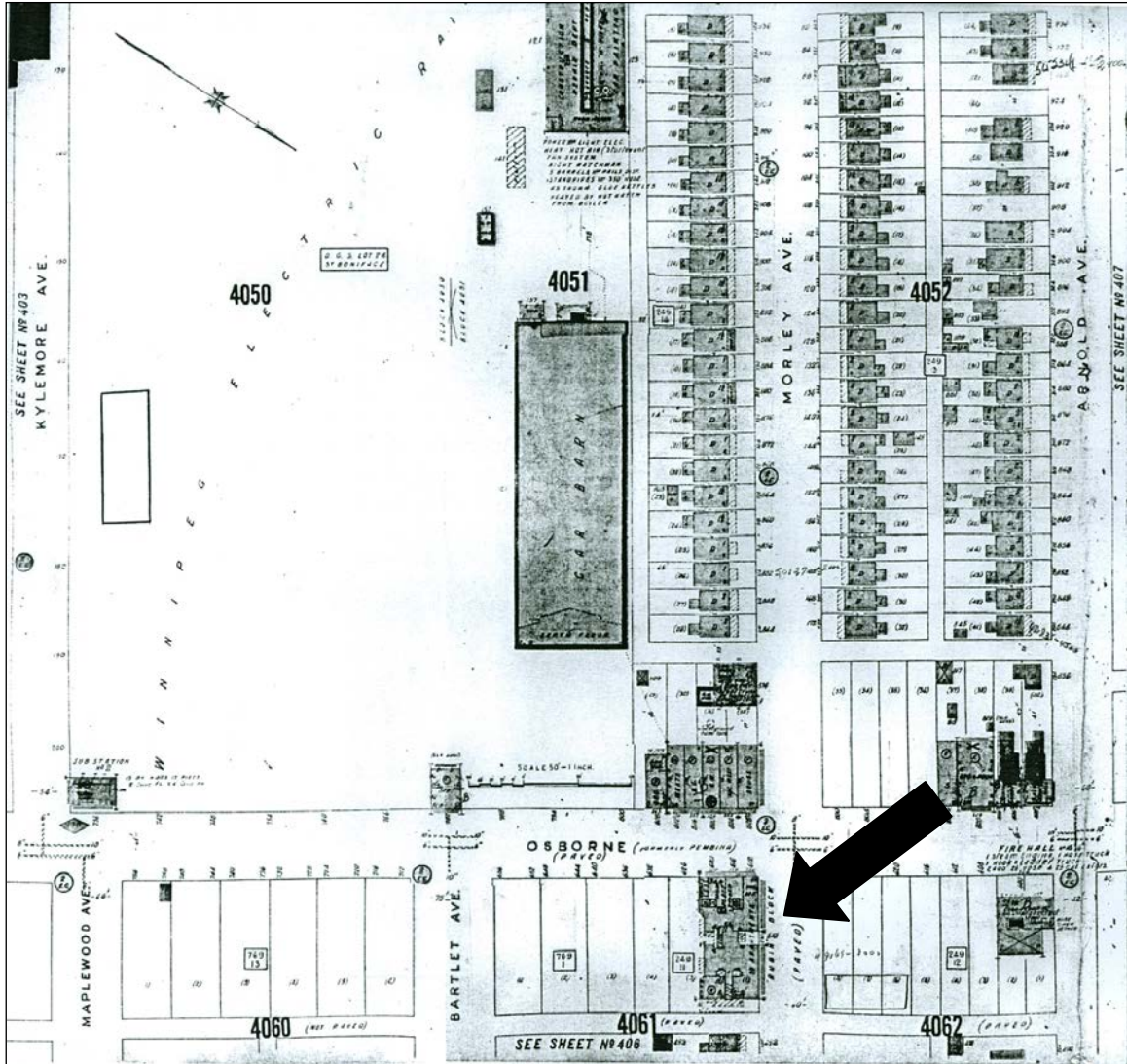


Plate 19 – Ruben Block/Morley Apartments (arrow), with Winnipeg Electric Company facility nearby, 1917. (City of Winnipeg Fire Atlas, Vol IV, Sheet 405, May 1917.)