

**361 HARGRAVE STREET  
FILM EXCHANGE BUILDING  
(NEW HARGRAVE BUILDING)  
*M.Z. Blankstein, 1922***



The emergence of motion pictures as a medium of popular entertainment gave rise in the early 1900s to two new types of urban buildings – the movie house and the film exchange.

Movie houses were the industry’s glitzy public showplaces. Film exchanges, in contrast, were part of its support system, utilitarian storage, distribution and repair centres from which exhibitors could obtain the latest studio releases, posters and other promotional materials. Some exchanges were producer-owned; others were independent. Their numbers mushroomed in Canada and the United States from the 1910s onward as movie-going gained in social acceptance, audiences increasingly demanded fresh product, and the industry greatly expanded its output from short, silent films to full-length features, ‘talkies’ and newsreels.

By c.1913, four companies were operating exchanges in Winnipeg. That number grew over the next few years, including several firms that located in the Phoenix Block, 388 Donald Street.

The trend toward centralized film storage led to public concern about fire safety because the early movies were recorded on film that contained a highly flammable cellulose nitrate base. A slower-burning material, cellulose acetate, was introduced in 1923, but nitrate film continued in use for a transitional period. Winnipeg City Council responded to this issue by passing by-laws in 1920 and 1922 to regulate local film exchanges. The by-laws covered topics such as the licensing and inspection of exchanges, waste disposal, building height restrictions, construction specifications, and requirements for sprinkler systems and fire extinguishers.

It was in this context that work began in mid-1922 on a new, five-storey exchange building to serve an expanding number of theatres within and outside Winnipeg. Located on the east side of Hargrave Street between Ellice and Cumberland avenues, the ‘fireproof’ structure rose from a reinforced concrete foundation to a skeletal concrete frame, concrete floors and roof, and exterior walls of hollow tile faced by brick. Roofing materials and interior components also were fire-resistant.

The building’s front (west) façade displayed elements of the Chicago School style of architecture, which was developed in the late 1800s by American architects to complement the advent of multi-storey commercial ‘skyscrapers’. In Winnipeg, this style was exemplified by office towers such as the Union Trust, Confederation Life and Union (Royal) Bank buildings on Main Street, Paris Building on Portage Avenue, and Electric Railway Chambers on Notre Dame Avenue.

Of note in the case of the Film Exchange Building were its symmetrical design; the vertical division of its front elevation into three parts, including a prominent stone base; and its ‘Chicago windows’ (units with large fixed panes flanked by narrow movable side sashes).

The first two floors of the exchange's three-bay front façade were clothed in cut stone. The main entrance at the north end was set in a stone frame topped by a bracketed and shaped hood. Dark Fort William brick was used on the upper floors, along with stone accents (lug sills, pilaster bases and caps, decorative squares and diamonds). Additional stone details, including a belt course and coping, highlighted the parapet. Side and rear elevations were plainly treated. The building's concrete skeleton was left exposed and numerous warehouse windows with concrete sills were installed.

An unusual feature of the design was an enclosed concrete and brick ramp that extended along the building's south wall to provide direct vehicle access to the basement and to storage/distribution areas on the first and second floors. A small, one-storey section was added to the exchange in 1922 to provide a front entrance to the ramp. This addition initially had a brick façade, but was later re-clad in stone.

The interiors of the exchange's first two floors had few partitions since the space was devoted mainly to film storage and vehicle loading. However, the upper three storeys were divided into offices, numerous poster, shipping and other workrooms, and a third-floor projection room. Early occupants included film companies such as Fox, United Artists, Famous Players-Lasky, Regal, Canadian Universal, and Canadian National, as well as advertising agencies and a Film Booking Office.

Film distributors continued to occupy parts of the building into the 1970s. However, as early as the mid-1930s, the tenant mix began to diversify, eventually encompassing architects, accountants, importers, American Optical, P.M. Scientific Fur Cleaners, Dominion Bridge Co., the Canadian Jewish Congress, and the Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada, among others. The building was renamed in the 1940s.

After the premises were vacated in the latter 1990s, surviving interior partitions were removed. Other alterations over the years included replacement of most windows on the side and rear elevations, and remodelling of the entrance vestibule and public corridors.

The Film Exchange Building was planned by Max Zoel Blankstein (1877-1931), one of Canada's early Jewish architects, and built for \$135,000 by the Carter-Halls-Aldinger Co. of Winnipeg.

Blankstein was born and educated in Odessa, Russia, and came to Winnipeg in 1904. His local projects included many residential, commercial and industrial structures in the North End, as well as institutional buildings such as the Winnipeg Hebrew Institute (Talmud Torah), Winnipeg Hebrew Free School and Mount Carmel Clinic. Other examples of his work appeared in the downtown, West End, Fort Rouge, and suburban communities. Blankstein also was responsible for several early movie houses, including the Palace, Rose, Tivoli, Uptown, and Roxy theatres. The Uptown on Academy Road, Winnipeg's only 'atmospheric' movie house, opened shortly before the architect's death in December 1931.