



394 ACADEMY ROAD

**UPTOWN BOWLING ALLEYS
(FORMERLY: UPTOWN THEATRE)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

30 September 1985

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As the silver screen became the most popular form of entertainment in North America, movie theatres truly became "picture palaces" in the decades of the 1920s and 30s. The Uptown Theatre, a reincarnation of a Moorish town, represents one of the best movie houses in Winnipeg from that golden era.

In the 1920s movies became big business for the first time. As Hollywood studios churned out sensational and spectacular films with glamorous actors set in exotic locales, the architects of the movie houses responded in kind. The theatres themselves became a kind of set in a fantasy world. Beginning in the United States in the early 1920s, theatre architects experimented with design elements running the gamut of historic styles. From reasonably pure elements of classical Greek and Roman architecture, theatre design moved quickly to the more exotic forms of ancient China, Europe, India, Persia and Egypt. Theatres became attractions in their own right, heightening the sensationalism of the architecture as architects combined design elements with abandon to create the right fantasy.

While the exterior of these moving picture theatres became exotic replicas of mosques, temples, and palaces, the interiors became recreations of whole villages and vistas, heavily decorated and cleverly lit to achieve a particular atmosphere. Dripping with ornamentation rendered in painted plaster, the side walls might depict a mystic Egyptian templeyard, canopied in soft moonlight, or the rich golds and brilliant colours of a Persian court. The search for exotic styles came to encompass Mayan designs, Hindu temples, street scenes in ancient Naples, the imperial Chinese court or heraldic times in ancient England.¹

While critics decried the degradation of art and architecture depicted by these picture palaces, theatre owners saw their creations in a different light. For the low price of admission, patrons of all classes could enjoy the glories of these fine historical recreations. This populist base, which actually did exist, made the theatres shrines to egalitarian democracy.² The critics reviled the fantasy theatres, the public happily descended upon them in droves.

Launched from a firm base of live theatre and vaudeville, moving pictures quickly gained acceptance in Winnipeg. For several years, the movies had no sound, making them dependent upon the orchestras that accompanied the live stage performers. As well, the large organs, the mighty Wurlitzers, were integral to the silent pictures. Theatres were usually built with orchestra pits at the foot of the stage, a special area off to one side for the organ and screens on either side of the room, concealing the organ pipes. But by the time "talking pictures" were introduced in Winnipeg in c. 1927, movies had all but killed vaudeville, and serious live theatre was fighting for survival.

Following the rage of fantasy movie theatres built across the United States in the 1920s, several exotic theatres were opened in Winnipeg. Compared with the scale and lavishness of design of some of the leading American theatres, local movie houses were substantially more modest. Winnipeg had about half a dozen genuine picture palaces, including the Capitol, the Metropolitan, the wonderland, the Roxy and the Uptown Theatre.³ Only the Metropolitan survives intact.

The Uptown Theatre on Academy Road at Ash Street was constructed in 1930-31, when picture palace architecture had matured to a prescribed set of clichés. The facade of the Uptown, designed by Winnipeg architect Max Blankstein, imitated a Moorish palace or castle. In combining the Romanesque-inspired Spanish elements with geometric clutter of Islam, and throwing in some Art-Deco as a sign of the times, the architect dished up a delightful potpourri to attract and entertain patrons. Twin towers capped in red scale tiles rise three storeys, while the mass of the structure is two storeys high. Various windows, niches, corbelling and other wall treatments add visual interest but the facade is symmetrical and the centre entrance is clearly defined. Now obscured somewhat by a horizontal marquee, the rather boxy front doors are surmounted by a large arched window elaborately framed with pillars, niches and pinnacles. Set into the base of the towers, which flank the front entrance, are framed areas for the showbills advertising the feature film and upcoming attractions. On either corner on the ground floor are two small shops, each with large plate glass windows and compact transomed doors. The corner pilasters, and those running down the Ash Street elevation, show Art Deco lines in the plastic detailing. Small red-tiled Spanish roofs project beneath the parapet on the corner bays, while the central parapet consists of grilles separated by stylized floral buds.

The side elevation is delineated into eight bays. Small domes cap each pilaster. Red tiles thrust above the first two bays back from the street, while the rest continue the grillwork and floral forms of the front parapet. Low-relief designs are set into the walls in a repetitive pattern. An exit in the second side bay from the theatre has been completely removed.

The entire facade and the east elevation are covered in a stucco tinted in soft golden yellows with hints of pinks, greens and ambers. The side and rear walls are covered in brick and the floors are slab concrete. Construction was slow in the summer months of 1930, partly because a zoning problem that the owner resolved well after construction was underway.⁴ When activity resumed in the spring of 1931, further excavation was required because an additional 33 feet had been added to the length of the building. To give the interior a clear span, a steel truss roof was used with a steel beam over the proscenium. The theatre measures 146 feet by 90 feet.

The ground floor consisted mainly of an auditorium containing 1,200 seats. A gallery on the second floor held an additional 427 seats for a total of just over 1,600 seats. Patrons entered the doors to find themselves in a small vestibule with a box office. A second set of doors led into a long and rather narrow lobby. Large staircases ran up to the balcony on either end of the lobby, while a gentlemen's smoking room and a ladies' rest room were located on either side of the vestibule. The four aisles were behind four sets of double doors leading from the lobby to the auditorium. It was here that the real fantasy began.

Beneath a ceiling of cobalt blue with bright twinkling stars lay a Moorish village. Up the sides of the theatre unravelled a series of buildings set in high relief plaster. Naturally, the scene on either side was different while the motifs established on the facade were repeated in concert. The arcading, the sculpted windows, the columns, niches, urns, balconies, red tiled roofs and carved arches were all there. The orchestra pit had been eliminated completely while two large windows acted as screens over the speakers and the various duct work. On either side of the proscenium, the red-domed towers of the exterior reappeared in a smaller scale, while the proscenium itself was outlined in layers of plaster decoration. The stage, containing only a screen and curtains, was very shallow.

As the evening sky wrapped around the side walls, the side "buildings" were carefully lit from behind. While the illusion fooled no one, the effect was all quite spectacular. A special effects machine, controlled by the projector room in the balcony, could cause the stars to twinkle, fluffy clouds to scuttle across the ceiling and a bright silver moon to appear in its appropriate quarter. All the lights, including sixteen floodlights triggered on the stage, were controlled by rheostats, seemingly a new device at the time. The patrons were enthralled.

Few had any idea how beautiful the interior would look with its open sky ceiling, Spanish mosque towers and domicile around its sides with no two buildings alike, its warm carpet, its cosy chairs, splendid lobbies, dainty usherettes in choicely selected uniforms and an air of comfort.⁵

The theatre opened on Christmas Eve 1931 to a large crowd led by the mayor. The carpets and draperies, which several newspapers commented on, were of good quality supplied by Eatons. The hardware suppliers were Ashdown's and Tadman's of Winnipeg. Safety Electric Company installed the wiring, while the ornamental plaster work on the exterior was supplied by Thomas Nelson, a local concrete ornament specialist. The marquee was by Claude Neon and the paints and varnishes supplied by International Laboratories Ltd. in St. Boniface. J.M. Rice and Co., motion picture supplies in Winnipeg, supplied the projection machines and the seats.⁶ The magnoscope screen, supplied by Northern Electric, used a new "Orthokrome" finish that was said to absorb red light rays that were stressful to the eye.⁷ A special attempt was made to use all local products, given the difficult economic circumstances of the early 1930s. The total cost of construction and furnishing the new Uptown Theatre was \$300,000.

The curtain was burnt orange in colour, trimmed with royal blue. The seats, several of which survive in the balcony, were originally finished with an Art Deco pattern in orange and amber tones. The chairs were made of steel, with mohair stuffed backs and leather seats.

For the comfort of patrons, the Uptown had a sophisticated air conditioning system that circulated clean air through a large system powered in the basement. In the 1930s, the Uptown advertised as

"Winnipeg's Refrigerated Theatre" in the summer months, reinforcing the message with a picture of a polar bear parked on an iceberg.

On opening night, chauffeurs parked patrons' cars and klieg lights lit the theatre and the sky. Speeches that night called the Uptown the finest theatre in Western Canada.⁸ The feature film that night was called "The Brat", starring Sally O'Neil.

The owner of the new theatre was Jacob "Jack" Miles, who owned Allied Amusement Limited. Jack Miles was born in Russia in 1887, coming to Canada as a young man in 1905. He worked his way up to owning a bicycle shop and became the local dealer for Harley Davidson motorcycles. In 1912, he built the Palace Theatre, the corner stone for what was to become a remarkable family business in theatre operation. By employing his sons, daughters, nieces and nephews, Jack Miles was later able to build the Plaza Theatre, the Rose Theatre (now the Festival Theatre on Sargent and Arlington Streets), and the Roxy Theatre (later the Roxy Bowling Alleys) on Henderson Highway.

The Roxy Theatre, built by the same architect, Max Blankstein, opened shortly before the Uptown and seems to have employed a similar but less elaborate design than the Uptown. Blankstein had also designed the Rose Theatre for Allied Amusements. Born in Odessa, Russia, Max Blankstein received his architectural training in his homeland before coming to Winnipeg in 1904. He also designed the Tivoli Theatre, the Hebrew Free School, Mount Carmel Clinic and the Film Exchange Building. Seven days after the Uptown Theatre opened, Blankstein died, following an operation.⁹

At the time of its opening in 1931, the Uptown Theatre was by far the largest building on Academy Road and continues to define and dominate the streetscape. The commercial pattern of small local shops was already well established, with the Piggly Wiggly grocery store, a bank, drugstore, tailor shop, meat market and beauty parlour. The shops within the theatre building itself were also compatible with the established commercial pattern. 390 Academy, on the east side of the theatre, became the Uptown Confectionery with a continual and captive market in the theatre audiences. The shop at 396 Academy on the west front became the Academy Florists, which was to stay in this location for many years after. More recently, the small shops have contained a needlepoint craft

supply house and a Scottish import shop.

Depression prices for the movies assured that most people could always find the price of entertainment. Tickets for adults were 35¢, or 50¢ for the sofa seats in the loges, and 15¢ for children. Prices were lower still for matinee shows. The movie pictures names, lurid and sensational, were infinitely more modest than their titles indicated: "Forbidden Adventure", "First to Fight", "Hush Money", "Bad Girl", "The Star Witness" and "Annabelle's Affairs" were the big attractions in January 1932. And there were many small and large theatres chasing the consuming public's dollar. Virtually every neighbourhood had its own small theatre, within walking distance, for the kids. The Uptown's specialty was its "Sneak Previews" every Thursday night, but kids everywhere packed the movie houses for their Saturday dose of adventure films. News reels were also an important part of the movies, and in fact, most adults' visual impressions of World War II came from the news reels at the local theatre.

Allied Amusements, under the control of Jack Miles and his three sons, became Western Theatres Ltd., owning and operating an impressive string of eighteen Winnipeg movie theatres. In 1936 the Company became associated with Famous Players Corporation. In 1949 Jack Miles constructed the first drive-in theatre in the midwest on Pembina Highway, and the second in East Kildonan in 1950.¹⁰

If drive-ins were a craze, it was nothing compared to a technological threat that was here to stay: television. With free entertainment in their homes, the public cut back their movie attendance greatly and dozens of the local theatres closed down in the 1950s. In 1960 both the Roxy and the Uptown Theatres (both owned by Miles and designed by Blankstein) became bowling alleys.

The Uptown Bowling Alleys opened in September 1960.¹¹ As the photograph at the rear of this report shows, the interior of the exotic theatre was gutted completely. Thirty bowling alleys were installed, fifteen on the ground floor and fifteen on a full second floor that was run across from the former balcony. The conversion of the theatre's interior was complete. The only hints of its earlier function is the shell of the original projection room and a few rows of theatre seats on the second

floor. The exterior escaped more or less intact.

Jack Miles died in 1951, but Western Theatres Ltd. remained in family hands for another two decades. The Miles family continues to own the Uptown Bowling Alleys building.

Some of the small local theatres were demolished but most have been recycled as grocery stores, dance halls, racquetball courts and night clubs. The austerity of the mid-1930s and the war years guaranteed that the fantasy theatres, such as the Uptown, remained period pieces from the decade of 1925 to 1935. By the time prosperity returned in the 1950s, every city in North America had a glut of theatres losing money. Some of the luckier theatres were renovated. In 1977 Vancouver's Orpheum was renovated by the City Arts Council and is used as a symphony theatre.¹² Most of the old theatres have been altered beyond recognition. The Uptown Theatre falls between these categories. While its interior is totally altered, its facade retains its fantasy appearance and remains a landmark in the River Heights community.

FOOTNOTES

1. David Naylor American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy Van Nostad and Reinhold Company U.S.A. 1981 p. 83-107.
2. Op. cit., p. 31.
3. "'Picture palaces' live on in memory, book" Winnipeg Tribune 24 July 1975.
4. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 1558 22 May 1930. Building Inspector's report attached to permit for August 1930.
5. "Uptown Theatre Opened by Mayor" Winnipeg Free Press 25 December 1931 p. 2.
6. "Uptown Theatre Film" Winnipeg Free Press 19 December 1931 p. 24.
7. "Winnipeg's New Uptown Theatre Will Open This Evening" Winnipeg Free Press 24 December 1931 p. 16.
8. Winnipeg Free Press, op. cit., 25 December 1931.
9. "M. Blankstein Dies; Short Illness" Western Canada Contractor January 1932 p. 9.
10. "Prominent City Theatre Owner Dies at 64" Winnipeg Free Press 19 September 1951 p. 32.
11. Permits, op. cit., No. 850 1960.
12. "Awards" Heritage Canada October 1978 p. 13-14.

**390-396 ACADEMY ROAD – UPTOWN BOWLING LANES
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Plate 1 – Uptown Bowling Lanes, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 2 – Uptown Bowling Lanes, east side, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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Plate 3 – Interior of Uptown Theatre shortly before conversion to bowling alley, May 1960. (Courtesy of Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Free Press Collection.)

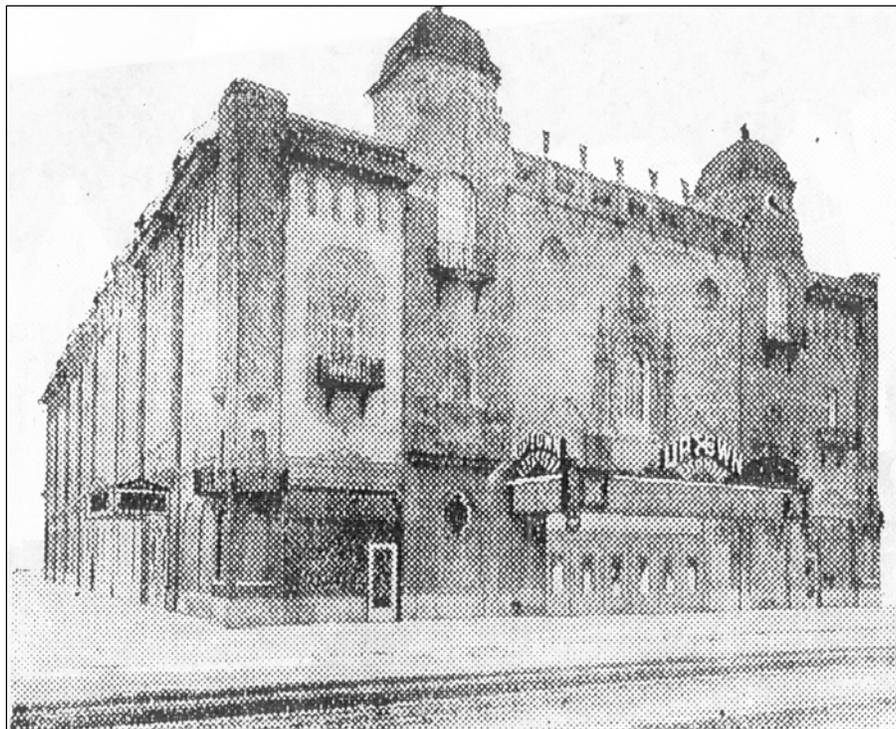


Plate 4 – Uptown Theatre, shortly after opening, 1931. (Courtesy of Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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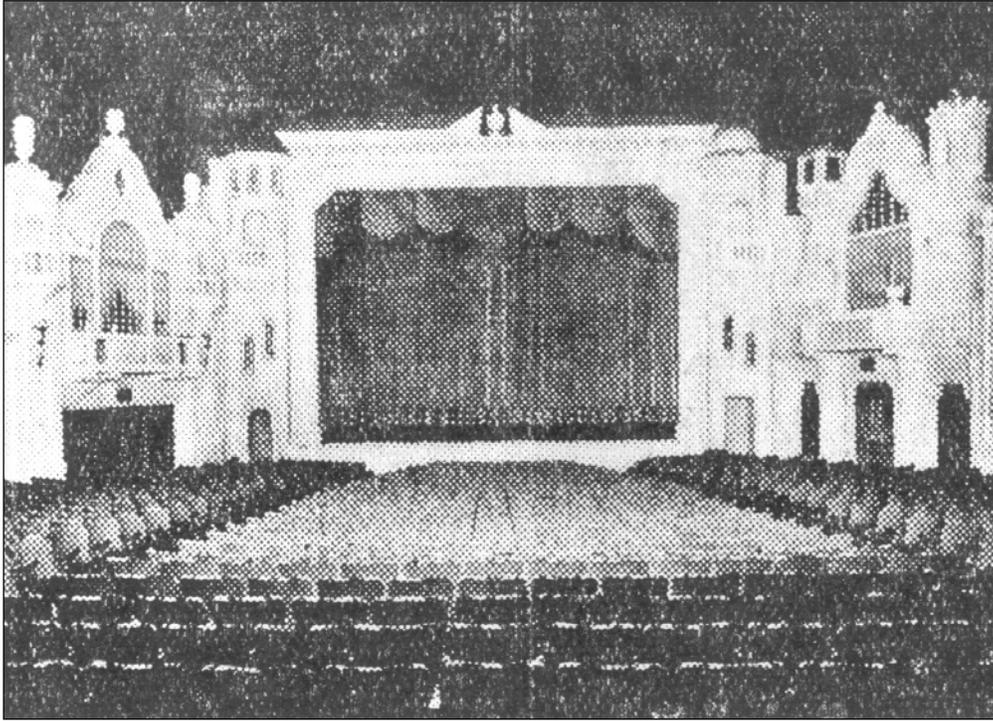


Plate 5 – Interior of the Uptown Theatre, shortly after opening, 1931. (Courtesy of Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)