

209 PACIFIC AVENUE – JOHNSTONE BLOCK (KUO MIN TANG BUILDING)

Frank R. Evans, 1910



Winnipeg's Chinatown did not develop in the late 19th century in spite of a growing number of Chinese immigrants living and operating businesses in the city because of the relatively small numbers and their lack of concentration in one area of the city. This changed dramatically in the first decade of the 20th century, as the Chinese population greatly increased and the community began settling in the Alexander/Logan area – the northern portions of downtown. Here there were the familiar restaurants and laundries, but also retail stores, a Masonic Lodge, several churches, boarding houses and private homes. The expansion, both in terms of population and space, continued well into the 1920s. It wasn't until the second World War and after that Chinatown began to empty as established families and businesses moved to other neighbourhoods.

In 1910, the area was still the site of heightened development and local real estate agents James and Robert Johnstone built this two-storey, mixed-use block on the north side of Pacific Avenue to provide modern retail/office/residential space. The men owned the block into the 1940s.

The solid brick building is a fine example of the Two-Part Commercial Style, a common style for commercial districts throughout North America. Ornamentation varied greatly, the most obvious design element being the visual division of the main and upper floors that mirrored the different uses of the two levels. Often, the owner/operator of the main floor shop lived in the residential space on the upper floor.

This block cost \$27,000 to complete and immediately filled with a variety of tenants, including barbers, restaurants and small-scale businesses. A.B. Shubert Ltd., raw fur dealer, was a long-time tenant as was the Chinese Nationalist League (Kuo Min Tang). The upper floors were used for offices until the 1930s when residential space was listed on the second floor.

The building's main (south) façade begins at grade with several recessed entrances flanked by large display windows. Centrally-located on the symmetrical façade is the entrance to the stairs leading to the upper floors. The recessed entrances are embellished with tile flooring, prism glass transom windows and ornamental tin cladding on the ceiling. A complete metal entablature tops the ground floor and curves upwards above the central entrance. The upper storey window openings are large and rectilinear, topped by brick arches and framed by attached brick pendants. The flat roof is highlighted by another metal cornice and stone capped brick parapet. Beyond the painting of the brick, the front façade today is a mixture of original elements and altered spaces.

Painted advertising signage is found at the south end of the east façade, which is windowless. The west elevation features only a few window openings and the rear (north) façade includes both windows and doors on both floors, second floor openings being arched.

Accessible interior retail space on the ground floor shows a wealth of ornamental tin covering the high ceilings.

Elements of the building that would require approval if alterations were planned are:

Exterior-

- The two-storey brick building with its main (south) façade facing Pacific Avenue, the east façade facing a side lane, the west façade facing vacant property and the north (rear) façade facing a surface parking lot;
- The main (south) façade with its large display windows, recessed entrances with tin ceiling finishes and tile flooring, a main centrally-located entrance, glass block transom windows, metal entablature with curved pediment in centre, upper floor with windows in rectilinear openings below brick arches with brick pendants and roof with metal cornice and stone capped brick parapet;
- The rear (north) façade with one- and two-storey sections, openings in rectilinear openings on the ground floor and arched on the second floor;
- The windowless east façade with painted signage; and
- The west façade with small windows in rectilinear openings.

Interior-

- Examples of the ornamental tin.