



239 SELKIRK AVENUE

ST. GILES PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (QUEEN'S THEATRE)

PREPARED BY PETERSON PROJECTS – DECEMBER 2009



239 SELKIRK AVENUE ST. GILES PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (QUEEN'S THEATRE)

Date of Construction: 1889 (church); 1908-1909 (theatre)

Building Permit: 1889- N/A; 1247/1908 & 126/1909 (Plans at City Storage)

Architect: Grieve, John W. (1889); Blankstein, Max Zoel (1908-1909)

Contractor: Bears & Read (1889); day labour (1908) and Cohen, J. (1909)

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST:

This structure began as a Presbyterian church but twenty years later it had a complete facelift and was reopened as a facility for live theatre.

It is unknown at present when the present front (south) façade was completed; a list of [City of Winnipeg Building Permits](#) describes several alterations to the building in the 1930-1950 period but does not describe the specific work completed.

The angular symmetrical front is stuccoed and includes pilasters and a tall middle sections, the roofline stepping down on both sides to the sides of the building. A hooded door and a large second storey window are the only two openings in the front.



Front (south) and east façades, 2009

The newer front is a good example of the Art Deco style, popular worldwide in the 1930s and early 1940s. Because of Winnipeg's economic downturn related to the Great Depression and agriculture, there was little capital available for construction and therefore only a handful of Art Deco structures were completed here. The buildings were often cube-shaped with low-relief ornamentation based on geometric shapes. Ornamentation, window placement and design and other features were added to increase the vertical emphasis of the façades.¹

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. Alterations have been severe to the original church building; the new façade is now old enough to be considered on its own merits. A second entrance in a small addition was built on the southeast corner of the building.

Nothing is known at this time about the architect of North Presbyterian Church, John W. Grieve.

The architect for the 1908-1909 theatre conversion was M.Z. Blankstein. Born in Odessa, Russia on August 23, 1877,² Blankstein 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

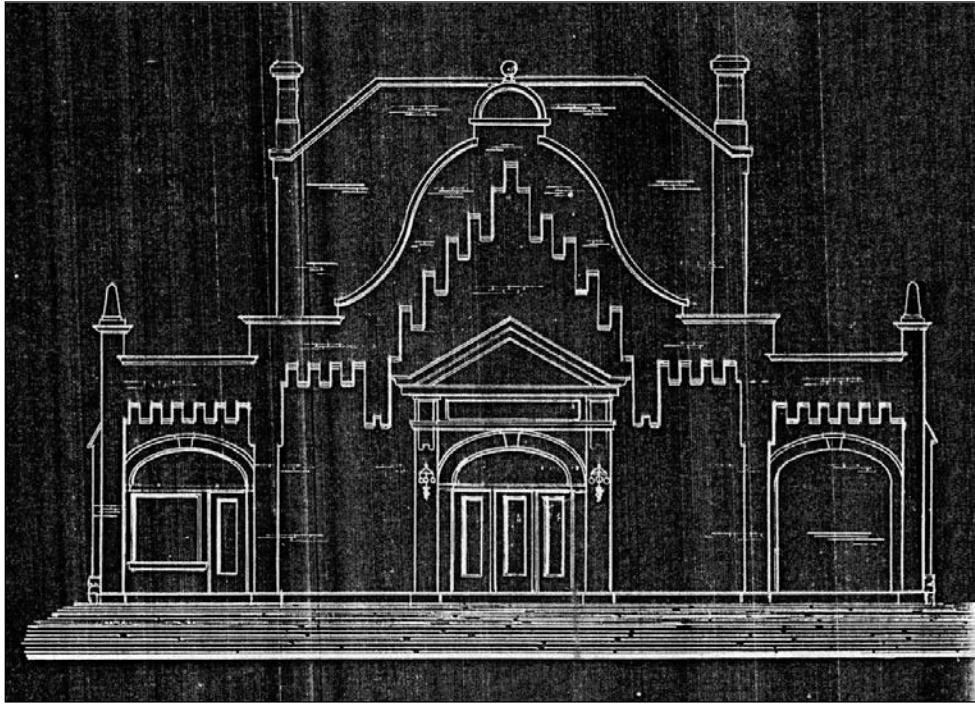
He was active in his community, supporting many of its charitable organizations. He died at his home at 131 Machray Avenue on December 31, 1931 after an appendicitis operation. He left a wife, two daughters and four sons. Two of the sons, Cecil N. and Morley, and a



Front (south) façade detail, 2009

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

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

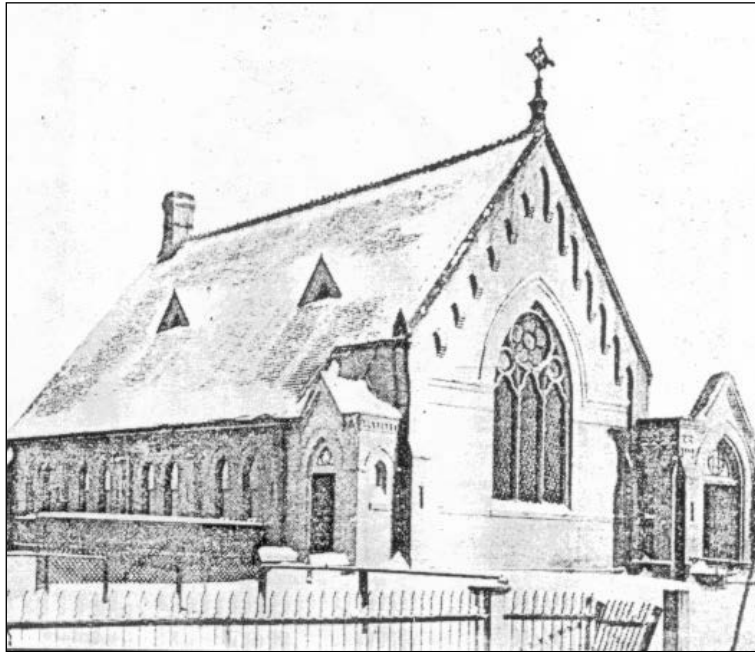


Plans for the new Queen's Theatre, #126/1909

HISTORICAL INTEREST:

Originally known as North Presbyterian Church, a mission of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Elgin Avenue, formed in 1884. After outgrowing several buildings, they constructed a brick church on Selkirk Avenue that was opened on December 1, 1889.⁷ Continued growth of the congregation, it had been renamed St. Giles Presbyterian in the mid-1890s, forced another move, this time to the corner of Burrows Avenue and Charles Street.

Their former church building on Selkirk Avenue was sold to the Hebrew Sick Benefit Association (HSBA) who converted the space into a theatre/meeting hall. Operating as the Queen's Theatre, it continued to be an important part of Winnipeg's Jewish community until the early 1930s when it ceased operations and became a Polish Apostolic Roman Catholic Church (the HSBA continued its ownership of the building). It was vacated in late 1934 suffered severe fire damage on December 7, 1934.⁸ Eventually it reopened as a bingo hall that continues to operate today.



The original North (St. Giles) Presbyterian Church, 239 Selkirk Avenue, ca.1889. (Reproduced from St. Giles' [sic] Presbyterian Church, Silver Jubilee, 1885-1910, p. 12.)

RECOMMENDATION TO HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE:

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

- its historical importance- an early Presbyterian church built in the growing immigrant area of Winnipeg's North End and an example of the type of facility needed by the various immigrant groups as they settled and flourished in Winnipeg in the pre-World War I era;
- its associations- its connections to early Presbyterianism in Winnipeg and to early Jewish live theatre;
- its design- an excellent example of the Art Deco style;
- its architect- J.W. Grieve was a known practitioner and M.Z. Blankstein was a respected local architect;
- its location- contributes greatly to the historic streetscape of Selkirk Avenue; and
- its integrity- its main façades continue to display many of their original elements and design.



Front (south) façade, 1978

ENDNOTES:

- 1 Identifying Architectural Styles in Manitoba (Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, 1991), p. 61.
- 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; 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.
- 7 St. Giles’ [sic] Presbyterian Church, Silver Jubilee, 1885-1910 (Winnipeg: St. Giles Presbyterian Church, 1910), p. 7. Below as Silver Jubilee.
- 8 Winnipeg Free Press, December 8, 1934, p. 16, and December 11, 1934, p. 5.