541 SELKIRK AVENUE

MERCHANTS HOTEL (STEIMAN BLOCK)

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

February 2013
The development of the North End is one of the most unique aspects of Winnipeg’s 19th and 20th century evolution. It was, according to renowned author and historian Gerald Friesen, Canada’s first great multicultural experiment that produced a new cultural form model. It was the final destination for thousands of immigrant families looking for a fresh start in the new and growing country of Canada.

Immigration to Canada came in three discernable waves, 1900-1930, 1945-1970 and 1970-present, and the North End’s development was intimately connected to the first two waves and to a lesser degree, with the third. Immigrants from across Europe settled along its many streets, these unique ethnic groups mixing with each other and, as time went on, with the established non-immigrant society beyond the boundaries of the North End. It produced a wealth of associations, organizations and businesses attempting to promote and assist in this mixing of cultures and traditions. It was one of the major driving forces in the development of 20th century Winnipeg.

While this inter-ethnic mixing within the North End was an important and unique process, so too was the evolution of the relationship between the immigrant and non-immigrant groups in Winnipeg. This fostered great debate as benevolent societies, church missions and charitable organizations formed to improve the life of families in the North End. The goals of these groups and the larger society as a whole was often assimilation; another interesting aspect of the North End’s history. The civic, provincial and federal governments also struggled to define their roles in the process, as did non-immigrant businessmen who attempted to supply the varied demands of the “foreigners.”

And for the North End, Selkirk Avenue was the hub. Along its sidewalks were banks, churches and synagogues, theatres, delis and restaurants, bowling alleys and pool rooms, butchers’ shops, department and grocery stores, union halls and benevolent society headquarters. Shoppers could
find almost anything in one of the many modest shops along Selkirk Avenue, many of the businesses catering to specific immigrant groups.

During the most prolific growth phase of the City, the years leading up to the First World War, a local businessman looked to take advantage of available capital and his own commercial success and build a modern home for his retail store as well as provide several storeys of rental space above. Although the development appears to have had initial problems,\(^1\) once completed, it became an important part of the Selkirk Avenue and North End landscape (Plate 1) – the Steiman Block.

**STYLE**

The Steiman Block/Merchants Hotel is designed in the Classical Revival Style, popular in the first quarter of the 20\(^{th}\) century. The style uses a combination of historically-based architectural elements to increase the buildings conspicuousness on the street and was seen as a reaction to the picturesque styles of the late 19\(^{th}\) century.\(^2\) It was a common style used along the main streets of most North American cities. Pediments, columns with ornamented capitals and bases, complete or partial entablatures, rectangular openings for windows and entrances and flat rooflines are some of the most common characteristics and details. The structures were often symmetrical and featured smooth surfaces of brick or stone.

\(^1\) City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #147/1913. The front of the original Permit is covered with writing stating that, “On no account must any portion of building be used for dwelling purposes” – suggesting there may have been issues with the type of development the owner Mr. Steiman was planning. The original permit also contains references to a number of fines levied against Steiman for failures to fix problems identified by city inspectors.

CONSTRUCTION

The original three-storey rectangular structure featured a full basement and measures approximately 32.0 x 10.1 metres. A concrete foundation supported the superstructure, clad in red Menominee face brick. Stone and metal are used as accenting. In 1933, major alterations were completed on the interior and exterior of the building, converting it into a hotel. Costs totalled $5,000 (see Appendix I for more information on the building).

A one-storey concrete structure was built beside the block in 1921 but was demolished and replaced by the current one-storey concrete block addition, completed in 1958.

DESIGN

As originally designed, the building featured two main façades, the front facing south onto Selkirk Avenue and the east facing Andrews Street (Plates 2 and 3). The front included a recessed entrance framed by two large plate glass display windows for the merchandize of the retail space as well as an ornate entrance to the upper storeys, with pediment, at the west end of the front. The Andrews Street façade featured more plate glass display windows at the south end and a modest side door for the retail shop located towards the north end of the block. The north corner of the east elevation included an entrance to a second smaller retail shop with a large plate glass window and a set of double doors leading to stairs to the basement and second storey space.

The second and third storeys were similarly finished and laid out with rectangular window openings embellished with stone lug sills. Most of these openings are grouped in threes, separated by attached square columns with ornamental stone bases and capitals. A modest metal cornice runs the entire front and east façades above these stone capitals. The roof is highlighted

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3 Architect’s Plans, #147/1913, courtesy of the City of Winnipeg; and Assessment Record, Roll No. 103691-12-3 (PC 45), below as AR.

4 The red brick was, at an unknown date, painted a dark brown, which can be seen fading and/or chipped off on the upper storeys.

5 AR; and City of Winnipeg Building Permit (below as BP), #1362/1958.
by a complete entablature with heavy overhanging metal cornice topped by a stone capped stepped brick parapet.

The rear (north) and west façades were much plainer in design and included square headed windows on all floors. A fire escape to the third storey was built onto the rear elevation. Neither of these façades has seen significant alteration (Plate 4).

The 1933 conversion into a hotel resulted in major alterations to the original exterior and interior of the building. The original ground floor of the main façade was been severely altered with a small door and glass blocks filling the original display window openings (Plate 5). A number of the openings were closed in on the east side and new doors were added. The upper two floors of the main façades were not severely affected by the 1933 work, although windows at the south end of the east façade were closed.

A one-storey addition was built on the west side of the building in 1958 and features a curved glass block entrance.

**INTERIOR**

The original plans call for a ground floor with a large retail store with loading doors and a freight elevator at the rear (north end) of the building and a smaller retail space facing Andrews Street towards the rear of the block (Plate 6). The second floor had 12 offices (4 @ 3.7 x 4.6 metres, 2 @ 3.4 x 3.7 metres, 4 @ 3.2 x 3.7 metres, 1 each @ 4.3 x 4.6 metres and 4.7 x 4.9 metres) and the third floor contained open storage (became Steiman’s Hall) – Plates 7 and 8. Stairs were located at the front and rear against the west wall.6

The 1933 alteration created a completely new interior. The ground floor was given modern wiring and partitioning, the original front retail space was divided into a hotel rotunda (lobby) in the southwest corner and a large parlour in the middle. The small store in the northeast corner

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6 BP #147/1913.
was left as originally built (Plate 9). On the second floor, two windows on the west side and three on the east were bricked in, the offices converted into 20 single rooms, with men’s and women’s washroom/shower facilities near the rear of the floor (Plate 10). Six windows (3 on the west and 3 on the east) were bricked in on the third floor which was laid-out similar to the floor below (Plate 11). Both floors received new wiring.

Today, the building, which has been closed for over a year, features heavily altered spaces and more original areas (Plates 12-16). The ground floor features a main entrance and lobby counter in the southeast corner, a large beverage room in the central area and a kitchen/restaurant in the 1958 addition. The upper two floors are divided into private rooms, some single, some double, all with sinks and a few with private bathrooms. There are common bathroom facilities on each floor. Some of the original ornamental tin ceiling can be found on both the second and third floors.

INTEGRITY
The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. The exterior of the ground floor of the building has been almost completely altered from the original but the upper two floors have remained virtually untouched.

STREETSCAPE
This large structure has sat on a busy intersection in one of Winnipeg’s North End’s most important thoroughfares, Selkirk Avenue, for 100 years. It is an important contributor to two major streetscapes (Plate 17).

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS
The designer of this block was Russian-born and trained Max Z. Blankstein (1877-1931), one of Canada’s earliest Jewish architects (Plate 18). Blankstein had a long, distinguished career that was
continued by three of his children (see Appendix II for biographical information). Blankstein has received 10 points from the Historical Buildings Committee.

The named contractor for the 1913 work was the owner, hardware merchant Robert Steiman.\textsuperscript{7}

Green and Blankstein (later Green, Blankstein and Russell, GBR and now Stantec) designed the conversion of the block into a hotel in 1933. This was one of Winnipeg’s most prolific mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century firms responsible for such important buildings as the Winnipeg Post Office, 266 Graham Ave. (1954), Polo Park Shopping Centre, Portage Ave. (1954+), St. George’s Anglican Church, 168 Wilton St. (1958), Winnipeg City Hall, 510 Main St. (1958) and the Norquay Building, 401 York Ave. (1958).\textsuperscript{8}

**PERSON/INSTITUTION**

Robert Steiman, hardware merchant, was the original owner of this block, also occupying the retail space on the ground floor until its conversion to a hotel in the early 1930s. Steiman was born in Lithuania, moving to Winnipeg in 1901. He founded a hardware/furniture business, which operated out of his Selkirk Avenue business block until it was converted into the Merchants Hotel. Steiman operated the hotel until his retirement and move to Los Angeles in 1947. He died in 1953.\textsuperscript{9}

The hotel property was sold to John Konosky, a long-time hotelier who owned and managed the facility until his retirement in 1957.\textsuperscript{10} Konosky was born in the Ukraine in 1900 and settled with his family in Silver, Manitoba (just south of Arborg). Over his career as an hotelier, he operated

\textsuperscript{7} BP #147/1913.
\textsuperscript{8} Author’s files.
\textsuperscript{9} Winnipeg Free Press, August 8, 1953, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{10} City of Winnipeg Assessment Rolls, Roll No. 14010369200, 1915-1960.
several establishments including the Gladstone Hotel, the Leland Hotel in Rosenfeld, the Manitoba Hotel in Riverton, the Transcona Hotel and the Merchants. He died in 1980.\textsuperscript{11}

Besides Steiman and Sons, hardware, the early office space of the Steiman Block was filled with small-scale retailers such as the International Dental Parlours, Novelty Ladies Red-To-Go Wear, Palestine Kosher Delicatessen and a number of dentists, doctors and barbers.\textsuperscript{12} The hall was used by many community groups throughout its existence, including during the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. The building has been vacant since 2011.

EVENT
There is no known event connected with this building.

CONTEXT
This building’s construction and early use were part of the major expansion period of Winnipeg’s early 20\textsuperscript{th} century history – from 1900-1915 almost every aspect of Winnipeg grew, including major regional thoroughfares. One of the most famous was the North End’s Selkirk Avenue, which evolved into the commercial and service hub for the entire area and the centre of immigrant-based commerce in Western Canada. Steiman’s mixed-use commercial/professional block filled an important role in that evolution, providing modern space for retailers, health care providers and business people.

Its conversion into a hotel underlines the changing face of Selkirk Avenue – the need for office and retail space had waned but its reuse reflects the demand for this type of facility in the North End, a temporary bed for visiting salesmen and a beverage room and restaurant for area residents.

\textsuperscript{11} Winnipeg Free Press, September 23, 1932, p. 13 and April 26, 1980, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{12} Henderson’s Directory, 1913-1930.
LANDMARK

The Merchants Hotel has been an important part of the Selkirk Avenue neighbourhood for 100 years and is a well-known structure in the neighbourhood.
APPENDIX I

CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report
Assessment Record

Building Address: 541 Selkirk Avenue
Building Name: Merchants Hotel

Original Use: retail/office building
Current Use: hotel

Roll No. (Old): 103691 (2066-67)

Municipality: 12  Ward: 3  Property or Occupancy Code: 45

Legal Description: 36W St. John, Plan 187, Block 9, Lot 35/6

Location: northwest corner Andrews

Date of Construction: 1913  Storeys: 3 + B

Heritage Status: ON INVENTORY

Construction Type: Brick and stone foundation

147/1913 $20,000 (original) [A]; 4247/1933 $5,000 (conversion to hotel) [A]; 2502/1935 $200 (alteration); 788/1949 $1,000 (repairs); 1564/1951 $2,000 (acoustic ceiling); 3288/1957 $1,000 (new cooler); 1362/1958 $40,000 (renovations & new building); 406/1962 $5,000 (alteration); 1772/1967 $200 (alteration); 172/1968 $2,000 (alteration to 2nd floor); 3508/1973 $4,000 (alteration)

Information:
- 33 x 105 x 42½ = 147,262 cu. ft.
- flat tar and gravel roof, Menominee face brick
- Assessment includes 543/5 Selkirk Ave., a 1-storey concrete structure built in 1921 and demolished & rebuilt in 1958 (Permit 1362/1958), used as restaurant and beverage room

ARCHITECT: M. BLANKSTEIN
CONTRACTOR: R. STEIMAN (OWNER)
Max Zev Blankstein

M. Z. Blankstein was born in Odessa, Russia on August 23, 1877\(^1\) 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) – Inventory
- Palace Theatre, 501 Selkirk Avenue (1912) – Inventory

\(^2\) Information courtesy of grandson Arthur Blankstein, December 2002.
\(^5\) 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):

Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue (1913) – Inventory
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) – Inventory
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
Plate 1 – Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue, front (south) and east façades, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 2 – Architect’s drawing, “Front Elevation.” (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Plan #147/1913.)
Plate 3 – Architect’s drawing, “Side Elevation.”  (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Plan #147/1913.)
Plate 4 – Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue, rear (north) and west façades, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)

Plate 5 – Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue, detail of front (south) façade, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 6 – Architect’s drawing, “Ground Floor Plan.” (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Plan #147/1913.)
Plate 7 – Architect’s drawing, “Second Floor Plan.” (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Plan #147/1913.)
Plate 8 – Architect’s drawing, “Thirde (sic) Floor Plan.” (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Plan #147/1913.)
Plate 9 – Architect’s drawing, “Ground Floor Plan.” (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Plan #4247/1933.)
Plate 10 – Architect’s drawing, “First Floor Plan.” (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Plan #4247/1933.)
Plate 11 – Architect’s drawing, “Second Floor Plan.” (Courtesy of the City of Winnipeg, Plan #4247/1933.)
Plate 12 – Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue, front (southeast) entrance and counter, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)

Plate 13 – Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue, restaurant (1958 addition), 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 14 – Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue, beverage room (ground floor), 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 15 – Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue, second floor residential space, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 16 – Merchants Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue, second floor hallway, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 17 – Selkirk Avenue looking east, 2013. (M. Peterson, 2013.)
Plate 18 – Max Z. Blankstein, no date. (Courtesy of A. Blankstein.)