

Andrew Morrison

## **Green, Blankstein, Russell and the Construction of Modern Winnipeg**

The city of Winnipeg saw a boom in modernist architecture beginning in the 1950s. This is especially apparent in the blocks neighbouring City Hall on Main Street and on the Campus of the University of Manitoba. Few architectural firms could claim to have had a greater impact on this development than Green, Blankstein, Russell. From civil to religious, educational to industrial, their influence continues to be felt throughout the city nearly ninety years after the founding of the firm.



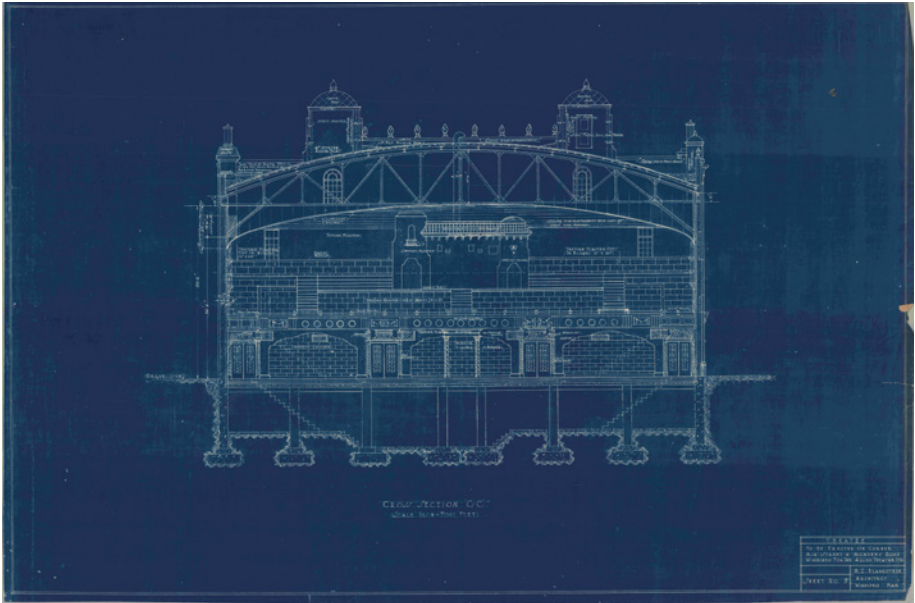
Cecil Blankstein, graduation, JM 3882m, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada photograph collection, 1929

Formed in 1932 by Lawrence Green, Cecil Blankstein, G. Leslie Russell and Ralph Ham as Green, Blankstein, Russell and Associates, the firm would work steadily in the first two decades of its existence. However, it wasn't until after World War II that they would begin to develop their own modernist style and begin to truly make their mark on the city. After a number of low-cost housing proposals for the municipal government failed to receive funding, the firm put the experience and knowledge they developed into the Wildwood Park neighbourhood in the city's south.

Major works for the Jewish community began in 1950 with the construction of Shaarey Zedek Synagogue (quick sandbagging prevented the building from being overwhelmed by the 1950 flood before it had even opened). The same year also saw the opening of the YMHA building on Hargrave Street. Three years earlier, the firm

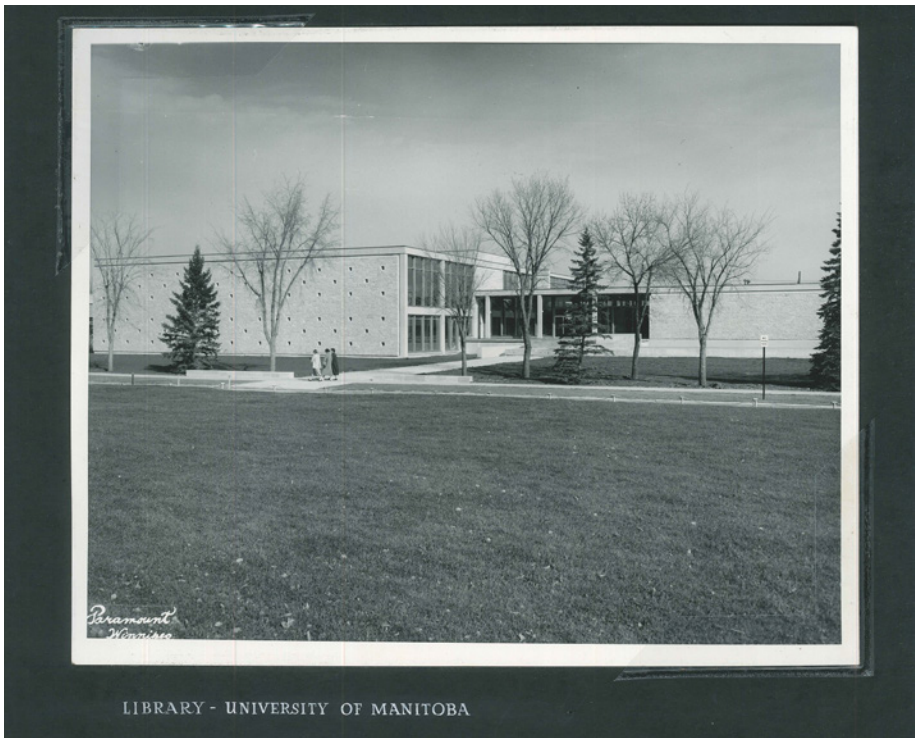
also designed the Glendale Country Club, a club that was opened by the city's Jewish golfers who were excluded from the other local clubs.

The 1950s also had the firm develop churches (St. George's Anglican Church and St. Paul's College and Chapel), commercial spaces (Polo Park Shopping Centre) and office buildings (Great West Life Building). However, their biggest impact on the city was to come in the following decade.



Theatre to be erected on corner Ash Street & Academy Road, Winnipeg, for the Allied Theatre Ltd. Sheet No. 9, A1081, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, 1930

The renewal of the city's downtown began with the new GBR designed City Hall complex in 1964. By the end of the decade, this urban development project would continue with the Manitoba Centennial Centre designed by a consortium of GBR and two other local firms.<sup>1</sup> This complex includes the Centennial Concert Hall, the Museum of Man and Nature and the Planetarium directly across from City Hall. The Modernist style of the University of Manitoba campus would be heavily influenced by GBR. Notable GBR projects on the Fort Garry Campus of the University include the Elizabeth Dafoe Library (1951–52), the Science Complex (1961–62), St. Andrew's College (1963) and the Duff Roblin Building. The aesthetic brought to the campus by GBR and other local firms would come to be called University of Manitoba Modern. This style would later be praised for its “clean lines, [and] a sculptural treatment of form.”<sup>2</sup>



Library—University of Manitoba, JM 4815, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada photograph collection, ca. 1955

The firm would continue to develop projects in various sectors throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s. This includes the Asper Jewish Community Campus (1997) that currently houses most of the city's Jewish organizations. In 2004 the firm was acquired by the Edmonton-based firm Stantec.

Collections at the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada that highlight the work of GBR include the Cecil Blankstein fonds, which includes photographs and drawings of the firm's work as well as newspaper clippings, newsletters, and correspondence.

Cecil Blankstein was the son of architect Max Blankstein; his brother Morley and his sister Evelyn would also enter the same profession as their father. Max Blankstein was one of the first Jewish architects to register and practise in western Canada. The holdings of the JHC include 12 diazotype drawings by Max Blankstein of one of Winnipeg's most iconic buildings. The Uptown Theatre was completed in 1930 and has maintained a prominent cultural presence on Academy Road. The building was converted into a bowling alley in 1960 and operated as such until 2019. The building is a municipally designated historic site and is currently being redeveloped into a mixed residential-commercial use.



City of Winnipeg Official Opening of the New City Hall souvenir programme, JHC 765 F 11, Easton Lexier fonds, 1964

Easton Lexier joined for GBR in 1948 and became Chief Structural Engineer 10 years later. He later joined the firm's executive as Secretary-Treasurer. He retired in 1993. The Easton Lexier fonds at the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada includes memorabilia commemorating some of the firm's most prominent projects, including the opening of Winnipeg City Hall, the Winnipeg General Post Office and the Winnipeg Airport. Several decades of staff photos are included along with awards and commendations received by Lexier during his career. Lexier was also an avid curler and this is demonstrated by the badges, buttons, and trophies in the collection from the Maple Leaf Curling Club.

Further records relating to the work can also be found in the Maitland Steinkopf fonds at the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada. Steinkopf served as Provincial Secretary and Minister of Public Utilities in the government of Premier Duff Roblin. He was also responsible for the celebrations of Manitoba's Centennial in 1974. He then went on to become Chairman of the Manitoba Centennial Corporation that oversaw a major urban development project that included the Centennial Concert Hall, the Museum of Man and Nature and the Planetarium. Among the extensive holdings documenting his career in the political and business activities, his personal life and charitable works, are records document the publicity surrounding the centennial projects and the provincial government's involvement.

The human landscape of Winnipeg in second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be almost unrecognizable without the work of Green, Blankstein, Russell. They brought a modernist spirit and design to the city's downtown, the University of Manitoba campus and elsewhere. They achieved this through strong relationships with various levels of government, educational institutions and the city's Jewish community. Ninety years after its founding the firm's work continues to shape the daily lives of the people of Winnipeg.

**1**

'Centennial Concert Hall', *Winnipeg Architecture Foundation*, accessed 10 April 2021, <https://www.winnipegarchitecture.ca/centennial-concert-hall/>.

**2**

Jeffrey Thorsteinson and Brennan Smith, 'City Visionaries: For Decades, Architectural Firm GBR Transformed Winnipeg's Skyline', *Winnipeg Free Press*, 12 May 2018, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/books/city-visionaries-482411123.html>.