



"The Cairo ... Offers You the City Itself": The Story of an Eccentric Building

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Cityscape

“The Cairo . . . Offers You the City Itself”

The Story of an Eccentric Building

BY SABRINA M. PETERSON

Amid the modest townhouses of Q Street between 16th and 17th Streets, NW, one building suddenly soars 164 feet — 12 stories — making the rest of the neighborhood seem almost Lilliputian. Gargoyles and daunting winged creatures hover high above the front entrance, while the stone façade, carved in intricate detail, lends an exotic flavor. Inscribed above its Romanesque Revival arched entrance is the building’s name: The Cairo. As charming and unexpected as the Moorish detailing and ghoulish griffins are, it is the Cairo’s size relative to its neighbors that is truly its most striking feature. Crane your neck and you still may not be able to see the building’s ornate cornice in much detail.

In 1894, 30-year-old architect and developer Thomas Franklin Schneider built the Cairo at 1615 Q Street, NW, in a rapidly developing neighborhood east of Dupont Circle. Both an apartment building and residential hotel, the Cairo was the tallest private building in Washington at the time. Completed in nine months at a cost of \$425,000 (about \$94 million in today’s dollars), the Cairo was the city’s first steel-frame building, constructed using an architectural technique then considered revolutionary. More than a century later, though no longer considered the epitome of

modern innovation and technology, the Cairo still looms over its Q Street neighbors.

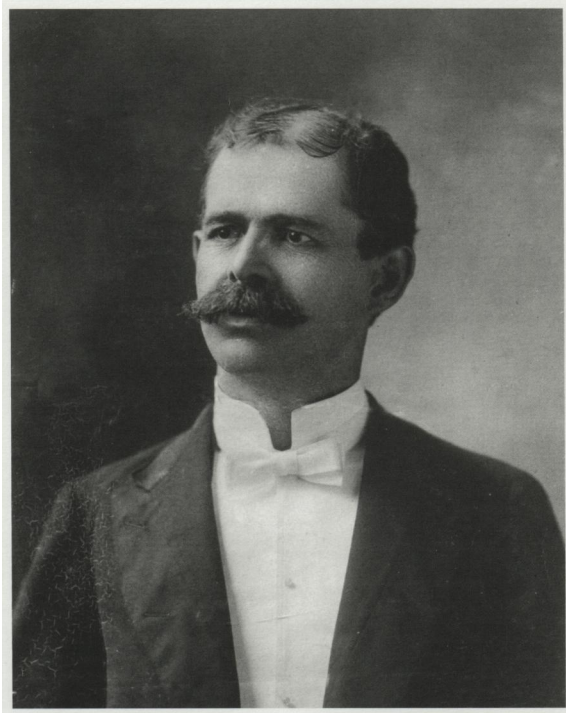
The seemingly anomalous Cairo actually has influenced larger trends and movements in both its neighborhood and the city at large. In its early days, the Cairo helped confirm apartment house living as the residential choice of the elite and sparked the debate over height restrictions that would shape the city’s skyline. In the mid-20th century, the Cairo’s decline into squalor and decay both reinforced and mirrored that of much of its neighborhood. In the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, its renovation and rebirth reflected and fueled the trend toward recycling and cherishing historic buildings. For all its unique features, the Cairo is a microcosm of its neighborhood and city.

The origins of the Cairo lay in the transformation of apartment living in Washington in the late 19th century. As the federal government expanded during and after the Civil War, a burgeoning population created a housing shortage and drove up housing prices. The high cost of living meant that many politicians and government officials were unable to purchase residences appropriate to their status; renting lavish apartments in the most sophisticated areas of the city provided a desirable

The Cairo has retained its dignity and ability to charm, even in tough times such as 1970, when this picture showing jury-rigged hotel signs and a sagging canopy was taken. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

alternative. Though apartment living in Washington was originally popular with low-income residents, especially clerks and mechanics who occupied humble buildings or flats carved from former single-family houses, by the 1890s apartment living was gaining traction with the middle and upper classes. Apartment houses, as the new rental buildings tended to be called, were home to both permanent and transient residents and offered luxurious accommodations with many hotel services such as large lobbies, reception desks, drug-stores, barbershops, and public dining rooms.¹

Thomas Franklin Schneider capitalized on this growing apartment house trend to become the city's first architect to specialize in apartment house design. Often credited with popularizing the Beaux-Arts style in Washington around the turn of the century, Schneider was also a businessman who built and owned many of the buildings he designed, including the Cairo. Born to German immigrant parents in Washington in 1859, Schneider attended the city's public schools before becoming an apprentice in the office of prolific Washington architect Adolf Cluss, who designed nearly 90 red-brick structures in the city. In 1875 Schneider left Cluss's practice to open his own office at 911 F Street, NW. His ambition quickly



Prolific architect Thomas Franklin Schneider designed the Cairo and many other apartment houses in the city. *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

earned him the moniker, "Young Napoleon of F Street." By 1880 Schneider had accumulated a fortune by building entire blocks of granite-faced townhouses. Though he dabbled in other pursuits (in 1904 he established the first motorized bus company in Washington and launched the battery-driven "Autocarrette," an endeavor that proved unsuccessful), Schneider first and foremost was an architect, credited with building about 2,000 residences and more than two dozen apartment houses and hotels by the time of his death in 1938. In addition to the Cairo, Schneider designed many prominent apartment buildings in the city's northwest quadrant that still exist today, including the California Court and California House (formerly Florence Court) at 2153 California Street and 2205 California Street, respectively, the Albemarle at 1700 T Street, the Iowa at 1325 13th Street, the Woodley at 1851 Columbia Road, and the Portsmouth at 1735 New Hampshire Avenue.²

For the building that would become the Cairo, Schneider chose a spot far from downtown to the east of Dupont Circle and near the up-and-coming 16th Street, which then did not extend past Florida Avenue. In the 1870s the Board of Public Works had begun developing the public infrastructure around Dupont Circle (then known as Pacific Circle), triggering a wave of construction that brought an architecturally eclectic mix of luxury houses to the area. The neighborhood became increasingly heterogeneous, with doctors, lawyers, teachers, government clerks, craftsmen, servants, and laborers living side by side with high government officials, diplomats, and the socially elite. In 1882 Congress authorized the installation of a memorial statue to Civil War Rear Admiral Samuel Francis du Pont, one of many late 19th-century statues that were part of the infrastructure of new real estate development, especially in areas attracting the affluent. Though the original bronze figure was replaced in 1921 by the white marble fountain that still stands, the statue likely helped to spur development and reinforce Dupont Circle's desirability as a place to live and build.³

And build Schneider did. Schneider's source of inspiration for the Cairo was his 1893 visit to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The Cairo's very name was plucked from the Chicago Fair's Midway, the primary entertainment section of Egyptian Revival and Moorish style buildings, dance halls and cafes, Near Eastern exhibitions, and a thoroughfare named Cairo Street. Schneider was enchanted by the Transportation Building,



Schneider became known early for granite-front townhouses, including this row on the 1700 block of Q St., NW. *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

designed by the famed duo of Chicago architects, Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan. That pavilion's portal, popularly known as the "Golden Doorway," exhibited the lavish and highly original ornament that was Sullivan's signature work. In addition to the influence of the fair, Schneider likely was inspired as well by the Osborne apartment house at 205 West 57th Street in New York City, the design of which, as historian James Goode points out, is too similar to that of the Cairo to be merely a coincidence.⁴

Somewhat of an architectural hodgepodge, the Cairo contained Romanesque, Tudor, and Gothic styles, in addition to traces of Adler and Sullivan themes. The Cairo also exhibited elements of Moorish design rarely seen in Washington. The Romanesque Revival entrance, with its massive stone arch and opulently carved frieze, was strikingly intricate and eye-catching, as was the immense six-foot-high ornamental flat metal cornice that embellished the building at the roof line on the front and side façades.⁵

The interior of the Cairo combined elements from what was then considered the exotic Orient with the ornate sophistication of the western Gilded Age, replete with mosaics, beaded lamps, balustrades, and stone maidens. The entryway led to a lobby with classical pillars surrounding a marble fountain, nude stone nymphs, potted palms, and Oriental rugs. Beyond the lobby an arched skylight lit a rear courtyard; adjacent to it was the Oriental Room, a parlor bedecked with Moorish and British Indian decorations. Other public spaces included the dining room on the 12th floor, where most residents ate their meals, a drugstore, ballroom, bakery, coffee shop that sold whiskey, and an English basement that offered a bowling alley and billiard room. The popular open-air roof deck served refreshments during the summer and was one of the first roof gardens in the city. According



The 1893 Chicago Fair, and especially Louis Sullivan's Transportation Building, influenced Schneider's exotic design for the Cairo. *Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston, courtesy, Library of Congress*

to one of Schneider's early brochures, patrons could see Alexandria, Fort Washington, Mount Vernon (with the aid of a glass), and Sugar Loaf Mountain from atop the Cairo. The roof deck, however, was short lived; amazed at how high up they were, guests liked to drop pebbles over the side of the roof's railing, leading to its closure.⁶

Initially called the Cairo Flats and offering apartments and hotel rooms, as did many other buildings at the time, the Cairo was distinguished by its shape. Where its contemporaries were U or V-shaped, the Cairo was almost square. But a more important distinction lay in its sheer size. Comprising approximately 110 mostly one-bedroom apartments and roughly 100 hotel rooms, it was considerably larger than other Washington

"The Cairo . . . Offers You the City Itself"



The Cairo's lobby, a fantasia of mosaics, stone maidens, oriental rugs, and a marble fountain. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

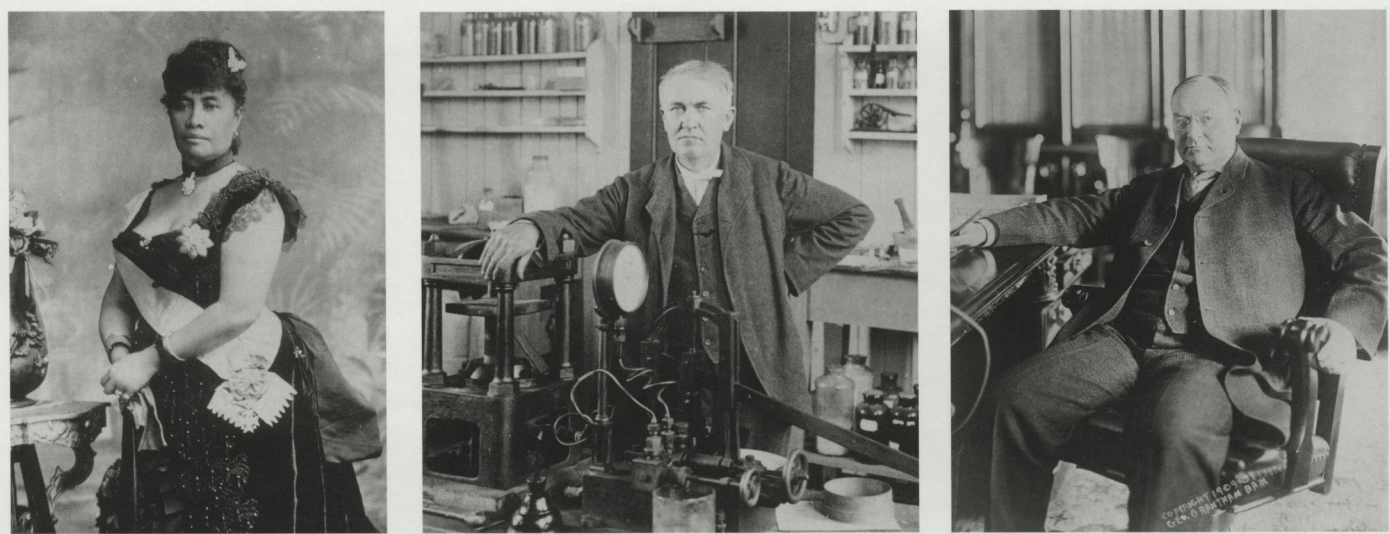
apartment houses, which on average contained 40 units. Moreover, while the majority of Washington apartment houses were six-story buildings, the Cairo rose twelve stories, making it the tallest non-governmental structure in the city at the time. Shorter apartment buildings had been the norm because the city's population was neither large enough nor dense enough to warrant the expense of the tall structures that were beginning to appear in Chicago and New York City.⁷

The Cairo's architecture and style initially garnered mixed reviews. One writer in the December 1894 issue of *The Inventive Age and Industrial Review* appreciated the building's "subdued yet tasty decorations," while critic Montgomery Schuyler derided the Cairo as "an architectural aberration" in the 1894 *Architectural Record*. The building "is a box full of holes" that is "painfully weak and thin," Schuyler continued. "The decorative flourishes have no more artistic origin than the desire to 'obtain variety,' and variety without purpose is mere confusion."⁸

Despite the mixed reviews, the Cairo was marketed to the wealthy as a glamorous and modern refuge. It also claimed to fill a distinct niche in Washington, according to Schneider's original rental brochure. "Washington our beautiful and



The glamorous Cairo of the 1930s appeared in a postcard. *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*



From left: Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani, inventor Thomas Alva Edison, and Vice President James Sherman, direction, all resided in the Cairo during its heyday. Courtesy Hawaii State Archives; Library of Congress

wonderful capital," the brochure proclaimed, "has for many years been in need of a first-class apartment house. The frequent 'going and coming' of Congress which causes many statesmen and men of wealth, who follow in the wake of our legislators, to take up temporary abode in our charming city, has made us feel the necessity of an establishment which would give all the comforts of home and protect one from the many minor worries and troubles of housekeeping on a large scale."⁹

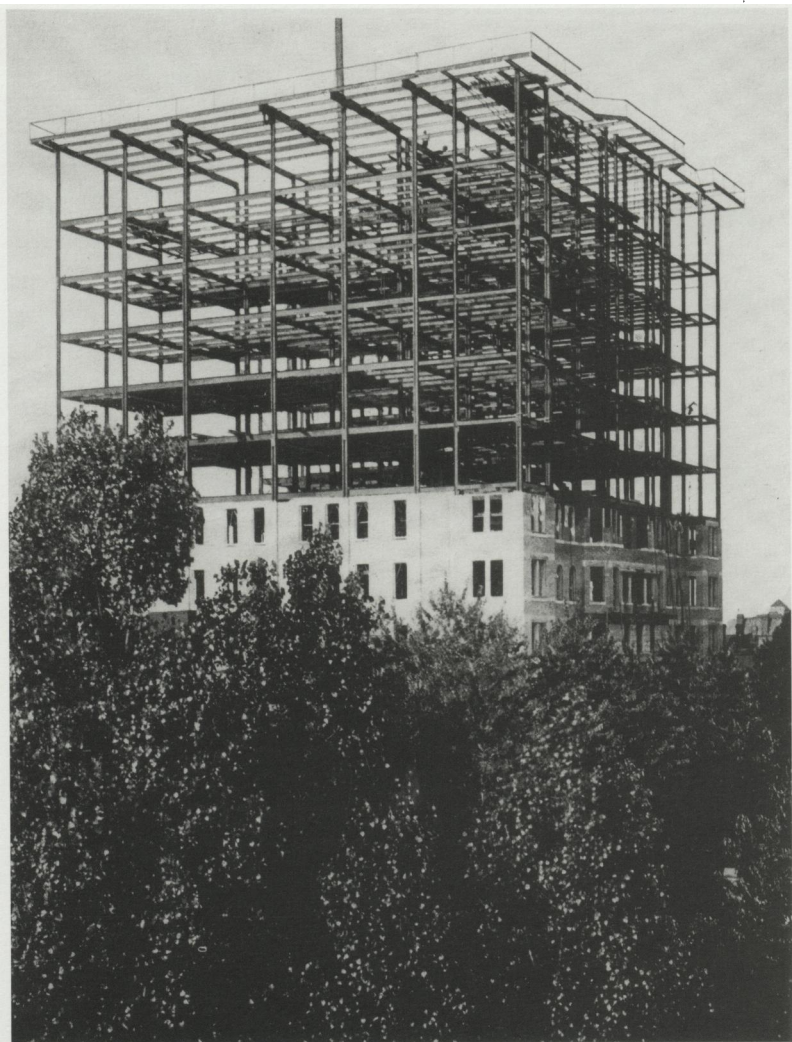
The Cairo's marketing emphasized modern comforts, with one early advertisement praising the building as the "most thoroughly equipped establishment of its nature south of New York City." Another ad from 1899 used an exceptionally large font to tout the "New fourteen story, modern steel frame, fireproof building." In addition to its novel structure, the Cairo, unlike most of its peers, offered electric lighting, the most modern plumbing, and four high-speed elevators. As Schneider's brochure glowingly described, "Two of the most completely equipped elevators, with artistic electro bronze cars, carry one quickly and silently from ground floor to roof, landing among palms and tropical trees, which is made more realistic by the play of electric fountains, bubbling here and bursting forth there, keeping the atmosphere moist when the sun is high and adding charm to its surroundings when dancing in the moonlight."¹⁰

The Cairo quickly met the promise of its promoters and attracted prominent short- and long-term res-

idents. In its early years, guests and residents included Thomas Edison, Vice President James Sherman, who served under President Taft, judges, high-ranking military officers, and many members of Congress; Schneider and his family even lived in the Cairo from 1900 to 1910. In February 1897 Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani moved in after she was deposed from her throne and remained for six months. In her memoirs she remembered the Cairo for its "newness and immaculate cleanliness" and marveled at how "everything was done by the owner, Mr. Schneider, and his lovely wife, as well as by the manager, Mr. Sherman, and his amiable wife, to render the stay of our whole party agreeable to us."¹¹

The Cairo also hosted the types of high-profile society events that appeared regularly in the social pages of the *Washington Post*. One 1896 story read, "Mrs. Richard Gray Park entertained at a handsome 5 o'clock tea yesterday afternoon in her apartments at the Cairo. Groups of palms added a charm to the rooms, garlands of smilax were about the chandeliers, the lights were shaded with pink, and pink roses were prettily arranged upon the mantels. Ornamenting the handsome carved oak table was a daintily embroidered centerpiece, with a tall cut glass vase filled with pink roses, and the pink capped candelabra carried out the dainty effect."¹²

But not all of the Cairo's news coverage was glamorous. In 1895 the *Post* reported that a steam fitter named Albert Deal was installing the building's radiators when he fell ten stories down the



The Cairo's revolutionary steel frame is visible during construction, 1894. *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

elevator shaft. Deal miraculously survived and later filed a suit against Schneider for \$25,000, claiming Schneider's negligence had been responsible for his accident (the courts disagreed). The Cairo's bad luck did not end there. In 1904 night clerk and watchman Washington McGuire was found dead in the building, his body suspended between the elevator and the wall of the shaft. An autopsy determined the death was due to natural causes. In 1906 Representative Rufus E. Lester of Georgia died when he accidentally fell 30 feet through Cairo's skylight. That same year, a non-union painter named J. Frank Hamby plunged to his death from the level of the cornice when the rope holding the scaffold on which he was working broke. Charges immediately surfaced that hostile union workers had used acid to sever the rope. In the end, investigators proved the allegation false

and wrote that the rope "undoubtedly" broke from "the swaying back and forth of the scaffold."¹³

The general public proved unenthusiastic about the Cairo. A *Washington Post* reporter wrote that people "wondered how a man could risk so much money on a venture that they said was certain to have a hard time under the best of circumstances, and probably would end up as a storage warehouse." Others referred to the building as "Schneider's Folly." The most enduring public disapproval settled on the Cairo's height. Neighbors worried that the value of their properties would depreciate, and they expressed concern that if a fire broke out in the Cairo, it would likely spread to adjacent structures because the fire department's ladders were not tall enough to reach the building's higher echelons. Likely in response to this fear, ads for the Cairo often emphasized that the building was fire-proof, proclaiming "tourists could sleep in Washington's finest and most popular hotel without fear of destruction by fire."¹⁴

As modern elevators, electricity, and steel-frame construction made the proliferation of tall buildings in Washington increasingly likely, the arguments against the Cairo's height evolved into one against tall buildings in general because they blotted out fresh air and sunlight. In 1905 one writer to the *Washington Post* claimed that "it is the opinion of most students of sanitary conditions that the average lifetime . . . of all those obliged to do business in or near the skyscraper [*sic*] of New York will . . . be lessened by from ten to fifteen years."¹⁵

Before the Cairo even was completed, anxiety over its impending height led the city's Board of Commissioners, which then governed Washington, to amend the D.C. building regulations. As of July 1894 the new regulation, modeled after similar codes in Berlin, limited the height of future residential buildings in the District to 90 feet and commercial buildings to 110 feet. The amendment further mandated that no building could be erected whose height exceeded the width of its street. When Schneider appeared before the Commissioners to protest the new regulation, the Commissioners assured him that the regulations would not affect any of his current projects.¹⁶

Schneider was fortunate because, according to the *Evening Star*, "It was the erection of the Cairo Flats that directed the attention of the Commissioners to this matter." After neighbors had lodged several protests with city leaders, Commissioner and rival developer George Truesdell took up their

cause. "While nothing could be done to stop the erection of the present building, [Truesdell] thought the Commissioners should pass an amendment to the building regulations forbidding such high buildings in the future." The *Star's* editors praised the Commissioners for "their wise amendment to the building regulations," and one of the newspaper's columnists agreed that the new legislation to prevent skyscrapers is "in line with the policy of making this city the handsomest in the world." In 1899 and 1910 Congress bolstered this legislation. The Height of Buildings Act of 1910 confirmed the residential height limit of 90 feet with a maximum of eight stories, raised the height limit of commercial buildings to 130 feet with a maximum of 11 stories, allowed buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue between First and Fifteenth Streets, NW, to rise to 160 feet, and placed further restrictions on private buildings located in close proximity to federal buildings.¹⁷

The Cairo gradually lost its glamour. As early as 1918, its newspaper advertisements had grown small and modestly presented hot and cold running water as the building's main attractions. By the 1920s, the once-stylish address was no longer considered modern, and its architectural style had become passé. The Cairo became a tourist hotel in the mid-1920s. A 1927 brochure was aimed at motorists, and by the late 1930s, according to the *Washington Daily News*, neighbors were complaining about tourist buses being parked on the streets for as long as two days. In 1938 prominent hotelier James T. Howard leased the Cairo with plans to modernize it, promising newly painted and redecorated rooms. However, Howard died soon thereafter, and his plans were never executed. After World War II, the surrounding area began to decline, dragging the Cairo down with it.¹⁸

In 1955 Schneider's heirs sold the building, along with many of his other properties, to a group that called itself the Cairo Hotel Corporation. The sale expedited its descent into disrepair. At first a low-income hotel for students, it then was used by the D.C. Human Resources Department as a shelter for the needy and a halfway house for people discharged from St. Elizabeths Hospital. In 1957 a Coast Guard employee recently discharged from St. Elizabeths killed himself by jumping from an 11th-story window. The *Evening Star* reported in 1959 that the hotel had been denied an operating license three years before "because of housing, electrical, and plumbing deficiencies," and noted that a 1958 fire had done extensive damage to

about 20 rooms. By the 1960s squatters, drunks, prostitutes, and elderly pensioners who couldn't afford to live anywhere else occupied the building. Nobody really knew what to do with it; one writer in 1966 proposed making it an alcoholic treatment center, but the proposition promptly died after the Dupont Circle Citizens Association noted that there were 144 establishments selling liquor within a six-block radius. The neighborhood became known for narcotics raids and burglary and theft; nearby Corcoran Street earned the moniker "Stab Alley."¹⁹

The Cairo's rebirth began in 1972, when the Inland Steel Development Corporation bought the aged building and launched a massive renovation project. Inland Steel, then relatively unknown in Washington, hired prominent architect Arthur Cotton Moore to oversee the Cairo's rehabilitation. Moore would later go on to design the renovation of the Old Post Office building in 1983 and the controversial 1985 Washington Harbour development in Georgetown, but at the time he was best known for his design of Canal Square, a shopping and office center in Georgetown that had combined a restored antebellum warehouse with a modern building. For Canal Square, Moore had originally proposed that new offices be built on stilts over a row of charming old houses. Though that part of his plan did not come to fruition, Moore approached the Cairo project with the same innovative flair. He envisioned a row of built-in, two-story townhouses all along the Cairo's sides, thus making use of the old building's basement and nightclub space, and a glass bubble over the building's former roof garden.²⁰

When his firm first inspected the Cairo in 1970, Moore recalled in 1993, the interior was almost demolished: "Packs of wild dogs roamed inside, and the only occupant was an old woman who lived in the lobby and kept warm by holding her feet over an electric hot plate." Inland Steel's Washington-area vice president told the *Post*, "It would have taken the reporter from the *National Enquirer* at least two months to sift through the garbage."²¹

Moore aimed to return the Cairo to its roots as an exceptionally modern residence. His workers gutted the building and replaced much of the structural steel and about 40 percent of the floor. After four years and an estimated \$3.5 million, the Cairo reopened in 1976 as a rental facility that offered 44 efficiency units, 66 one-bedroom apartments, and 52 two-bedroom apartments, along



The Cairo's last pre-restoration tenants sit in the stripped-down lobby, 1972. Photograph by Ken Feil, courtesy, Washington Post

with eight two-story townhouses. Units now had galley style kitchens and exposed brick walls, and rough-sawn cedar replaced the old woodwork. Rents ranged from \$170 per month to \$360 per month for the duplexes.²²

Wolf Von Eckardt of the *Washington Post* considered the Cairo renovation exceptionally important because it demonstrated that a private developer could find saving and converting handsome old buildings both practical and profitable. "For years we have talked about 'rebuilding our cities' and that has meant bulldozing them and building from scratch," Von Eckardt wrote in 1972. "That is hubris. It can't be done. To catch up with our desperate need for housing, we have to recycle much of what we have, we must learn to preserve and rehabilitate." The *Post's* Charles Krause echoed the sentiment three years later: "An old, historic building will have been saved, a crime-infested block will have been made safer and a neighborhood will have been further rejuvenated."²³

Inland Steel's willingness to take on the project and Moore's enthusiasm for overhauling a decrepit building indeed reflected a new appreciation for historic buildings that was beginning to

take hold in Washington after decades of careless destruction of the city's historic structures in the name of urban renewal and progress. Their approach was part of the wider trend in Washington that helped to change the way people thought about and interacted with historic structures, much as Thomas Franklin Schneider was part of a movement nearly a century before that defined opulent and luxurious apartment houses as the most desirable addresses for well-to-do Washington residents.

The historic preservation movement began in Georgetown in the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the Historic Georgetown Act of 1950. The movement gained momentum in the 1960s thanks to the citizens group Don't Tear It Down, a precursor to the DC Preservation League. Bolstered by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which called for the protection of historic buildings and archaeological sites, historic preservation began gaining momentum in Washington. Ten years later, the 1976 Tax Reform Act established tax incentives to encourage investment in historic buildings. While not directly benefiting Inland Steel's Cairo project, the new

law had a notable impact on Washington, as it encouraged residents to undertake what would otherwise have been extremely costly historic renovation projects.²⁴

Dupont Circle became a hub of preservation activity. As commercial development crept northward from downtown, many of the neighborhood's historic and architecturally significant buildings were threatened. Dupont Circle residents and preservation groups, often joined by city officials, fought various development projects, including developer John Antonelli's plan to raze three historic townhouses built by Thomas Franklin Schneider on the 1700 block of N Street, NW, as they tried desperately to preserve Dupont Circle as a lower-density, mixed-use neighborhood. At the request of the Dupont Circle Citizens Association, in 1976 the Joint Committee on Landmarks of the National Capital created two separate historic districts to help protect the area: the Dupont Circle Historic District and the 16th Street Historic District. The Cairo, however, was not part of either district and came under historic district protection only in 2006 when the Dupont Circle district was expanded to include it.²⁵

Inland Steel's marketing strategy for the refurbished Cairo acknowledged the new appreciation for historic preservation. Its advertising pamphlets emphasized the Cairo's past, describing the building's prominence in the Victorian era and its role in the debate over building height limits. As Schneider had so many decades before, Inland Steel sold the Cairo as thoroughly modern with top-of-the-line amenities: "All-new electric kitchens. Walls of warm exposed brick. Wall to wall carpeting. Many apartments feature ornamental fireplaces, and some at ground level offer a small private garden. . . . There's an intercom security system, a landscaped public courtyard for all tenants to use, and a master TV antenna."²⁶

When Inland Steel began its renovations in the early 1970s, crime was still common in the neighborhood, described by the *Post* as "a sort of uneasy no-man's land between the struggling residential area to the west and the encroaching neglect on the east." One resident called the Cairo's immediate surroundings "vacant and sinister," adding that "you'd walk a couple of extra blocks just to avoid" the Cairo. Yet in marketing the building, Inland Steel painted an optimistic picture of the neighborhood. "The Cairo . . . offers you the city itself—a full time environment of action and



A laborer steps past a sign advertising the Cairo as rental apartments, 1974, top. Below, a workman tends to the remains of the old lobby, 1975. Photographs by Frank Johnston and Douglas Chevalier, courtesy, Washington Post.

color, with many possibilities for delightful urban living," read one advertisement. "Walk to work downtown along treelined avenues, or take one of the buses which crisscross at this focal point of public transportation. . . . Discover nearby Rock Creek Park's network of bicycle paths. . . . Stroll up Connecticut Avenue and enjoy a feast of art galleries, gift shops, and specialty clothing stores. Or linger in Dupont for a free concert—and some

"The Cairo . . . Offers You the City Itself"



The Cairo Hotel looms over its neighbors in this view from the 1960s. *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

unbeatable people watching.” After the Cairo reopened, one local attorney observed, “money really started to flow” into the neighborhood. Dupont Circle increasingly became an eclectic and upscale place to live. Inland Steel’s investment paid off handsomely—in 1979 it sold the Cairo to Holland and Lyons Associates for \$5.5 million, and the units were sold as condominiums.²⁷

As public appreciation for Washington’s historic buildings grew in the 1980s and 90s, the Cairo became increasingly valued for the complex and multifaceted story behind its massive façade—not only the building’s history but also the eccentric and unusual people it seemed to attract. “Don’t try to categorize Cairoites,” observed Paul Hendrickson in a 1993 *Washington Post* article recounting ghost stories and rumors that the CIA used the Cairo to spy on the Russian Embassy. Hendrickson also noted the architectural remnants of the original building, including marble pillars in the lobby, antique doorknobs, and “the occasional piece of ornamental grate covering a heating duct. . . . It’s a little like being on an architectural dig and coming up with shards of pottery and blue-bottle glass.”²⁸

By the time the Cairo celebrated its centennial in 1994, it had become a source of pride for Dupont Circle. When the building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1994, the community hosted a centennial birthday party and ribbon-

cutting ceremony. The Dupont Circle Residents Association donated \$1,000 in the building’s honor to the after-school program at nearby Ross Elementary School, and students sang “Happy Birthday” to the Cairo.²⁹

More than a century after Thomas Franklin Schneider built the tallest apartment house the city had ever seen, the Cairo retains a sense of mystery and fascination. It not only still towers over Q Street, it also has reshaped the city around it. The Cairo’s original construction as a glamorous apartment house in the 1890s helped to redefine residential living in Washington and hit a collective nerve that provoked the height restrictions that still govern the city today. Its decline in the mid-20th century reflected and reinforced the decline of Dupont Circle and other older D.C. neighborhoods. And its recent rebirth echoed the wider trend of historic preservation in Washington and reinforced its role as a transformative force in Dupont Circle.

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Notes

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