

Scenes from the Past



Many passersby are struck by the looming white enamel and glass block building at 1326-46 Florida Avenue, NW, seemingly out of place in the 1300 block. Most may have been first introduced to the vast complex of buildings when part of it served as the first location for Art-o-matic in 1999, but it's the dramatic Art Deco façade that often causes a double-take.

The complex is actually comprised of three major buildings, the westernmost of which was constructed in 1877 when the area was a rather desolate one far from the urban core of the city. It was designed by John B. Brady as a car barn for the Washington & Georgetown Railroad Company. A steam plant was added in 1908, and a large addition in 1926 designed by A.S.J. Atkinson. Behind the current Art Deco building that faces Florida Avenue is an original stable and warehouse built in 1911.

The Art Deco building of glass block and enameled panels, designed by architect Alexander M. Pringle, was built in 1936 at a cost of \$50,000 to house the Manhattan Laundry, which specialized in dry cleaning and rug cleaning. The company was founded by John W. Lowe about 1905 and initially occupied the former car barn on the westernmost side of the complex.



photos—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



An advertisement from 1905 promoted the laundry's trustworthiness and fair prices.

The new, 1936 building was incorporated into the complex of the other buildings creating a vast array of storage buildings for cleaned rugs. Because wool rugs were susceptible to moths in the summertime, as well as being unsuitable inside typical Washington residences during the hot and humid summers, it was common for households to have them cleaned and stored during the summer months and replaced for the duration with woven grass matting.

The lower two floors of the Art Deco building were utilized for laundry and dry cleaning, with administrative offices on the third floor, designed by Bedford Brown. The exterior walls and interior separating walls were composed of glass

block that created a dreamy, dramatic effect as shadows and figures could be seen through each wall, especially at night.

The Lowe family sold the business in 1973, and it moved to more modern facilities, leaving the Florida Avenue complex abandoned and soon vandalized. It suffered a fire in 1978, and was scheduled to be razed in 1979. Instead, it was partially restored by developer Jeffrey Cohen into an office and storage facility.

In 1999, about a dozen artists toured the building with the idea of assembling a large consortium of artists for a massive art show appropriately coined Art-o-matic. Within a month, over 350 artists cleaned, electrified, painted and presented artwork in its 100,000 square feet with over 20,000 visitors attending the exhibits over a period of six weeks.

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