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The Marble Manor That Turkish Tobacco Built

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THE new exterior iron doors on the old Schinasi house, at the northeast corner of 107th Street and Riverside Drive are among the final touches on the restoration of the 1909 marble mansion, one of the biggest private houses left on the West Side. Prof. Hans Smit, its owner, has been working on the project for almost two decades.

In the 1880's, the predictions for the future of Riverside Drive were bright. All the rich people with mansions on congested Fifth Avenue would surely soon move over to the picturesque Hudson River, where they could build graceful, free-standing houses surrounded by light, air and grass. But by the early 1900's most of the rich folks had decided that they liked Fifth Avenue, even if it was congested with sightseers and its mansions had less breathing space than tenements.

But not everyone agreed with the prevailing wisdom. The Pennsylvania steel millionaire Charles Schwab finished his full-block house from 73d to 74th Street in 1906, and then in 1907 Morris Schinasi began what is now the most impressive house in private ownership on Riverside Drive, at 351. Although a few private houses went up on Riverside Drive after 1909, none approached the Schinasi house in scale or design.

Schinasi emigrated from Turkey in the 1890's with his brother, Solomon. They brought Turkish cigarettes with them and popularized the much stronger tobacco here, building and cornering the market within a few years. In 1919 Solomon Schinasi's obituary in The New York Times said "the taste for Turkish leaf was quickly acquired by American smokers, and the sale of Schinasi brands soon became enormous."

In 1907 Solomon Schinasi, living in a rowhouse at the northwest corner of 95th Street and Central Park West, bought and occupied the old Isaac Rice mansion at 89th Street and Riverside Drive, and Morris Schinasi, then living at the original Eldorado apartments on Central Park West, at 90th Street, began work on a new house a mile north, at 107th Street.

Morris Schinasi retained William Tuthill, the architect for Carnegie Hall, who had a fine, light hand for detail. For Schinasi, Tuthill copied almost exactly a slightly smaller house he had designed in 1903 at the northeast corner of 93d and West End Avenue, which is no longer standing.

The French Renaissance-style, Vermont white marble mansion that he designed for Schinasi was called by the Real Estate Record & Guide "a four-sided house, and exquisite from any side." To mitigate against what the journal called the "incorrigible vandal" of New York's polluted air, Schinasi had water taps distributed around the outside of the house to permit frequent washing.

The white marble blocks -- placed in construction in accordance with their veining -- are set off by a

bright green tile roof with fanciful copper cresting.

The magazine *New York Architect* called Schinasi "a broad-minded and artistic gentleman," who eschewed the usual practice of rooms in various periods, which would be like "delivering a speech, the various sections of which were each in a different tongue."

Instead, Tuthill designed for Schinasi a rich, flowing series of rooms that are generically Renaissance, but which also have unusual and distinctive touches. The library was decorated with East Indian teak panels (imported by the Tiffany decorating firm), Tinos marble, bronze, mosaics and, at the ceiling, an oval dome of lacquered gold in iridescent colors.

The dining room, of mahogany and Numidian marble, mixed decorations derived from both pineapples - a traditional sign of welcome -- and tobacco leaves. The vestibule was of beautifully veined Greek marble with a faience tile ceiling. Most of the main rooms also carried elaborate mural decorations at the cornice level.

For such an impressive house the principal rooms are rather small -- to judge from published plans, the living room is about 15 by 18 feet -- and *Architects' and Builders' Magazine* praised this as "the Oriental idea of seclusiveness in the house." But it also felt that the interior was too opulent, and said that "the Oriental ideas of the owner have . . . overwhelmed the good taste of the designer."

But surrounded by plantings and set back from the property line on all sides, the design of the three-story high house reproached the tall, densely built mansions going up on the East Side.

Hans Smit, who is a law professor at Columbia University, says that the third floor has a peculiar arrangement of small rooms leading onto a single, large room; "It was his harem floor" says Professor Smit. The third floor would typically be the servants' floor, and if Schinasi indeed kept a harem, he had catholic tastes: Census returns indicate he lived in the house with his wife, Laurette (also Turkish-born), three daughters and a changing group of household servants from England, Germany, Italy, Sweden and other European countries.

WHEN Morris Schinasi died in 1928 he left an estate of \$5 million, earmarking \$1 million to build and support a hospital in Magnesie, Turkey. His family sold the house in 1930, and it was at first a school and later a day-care center. A 1965 photograph shows the building surrounded by a chain link fence with barbed wire, but otherwise generally intact. The building was designated a landmark in 1974.

In 1979, Professor Smit bought the building and, in an interview last month, he said he was now "just a couple of inside doors" short of a complete interior restoration. The outside is presentable, but not pristine.

"If I really fix up the outside, the undesirable elements will pay attention" he says. "When I bought it, most people said, 'You're a raving maniac.' But it's the best investment I ever made -- it's greatly increased in value."

"I own houses all over the world -- the Hudson River Valley, Amsterdam, Leyden -- it's a nice hobby," adds Professor Smit.

But he is critical of how the American system treats historical buildings, which he calls "shameful."

"In Holland I get subsidies up to 60 percent for historical restoration, and I can deduct the cost

immediately; in the United States, they impose only penalties."