

January 25, 1988

TESTIMONY OF RICHARD STRINER, REPRESENTING THE ART DECO SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, BEFORE
THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA ZONING COMMISSION, CASE # 86-26

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission:

The rezoning initiative sponsored by the Cleveland Park Historical Society, ANC 3-C, and other civic organizations is in many ways exemplary. It is neighborhood conservation. It is enlightened planning. And it is democracy in action. The Board of Directors of the Art Deco Society of Washington, a non-profit preservation and cultural organization, strongly supports this rezoning initiative for two major reasons.

First, it will help to reinforce the protection already conferred by the designation of the Cleveland Park Historic District on a concentration of streamlined commercial architecture from the 1930s that is one of the most important of such concentrations in the city. On the basis of my own scholarship -- consisting of a survey of over 400 buildings and structures from the Art Deco period in Washington, published in 1984 by Smithsonian Institution Press -- I feel confident in stating that the commercial segment of Connecticut Avenue in Cleveland Park is one of the most significant clusters of commercial Art Deco and streamlined architecture from the 1930s in the Nation's Capital. From its centerpiece, the celebrated Uptown Theatre of 1936, this commercial concentration embraces a wealth of subsidiary streamlined architecture, some of it contiguous (such as the streamlined block connecting the Uptown Theatre to the 1939 Macklin Apartments), and some of it disbursed amid related commercial architecture of the early-to-mid-20th century. This commercial node, with its rich presence of "modernistic" design from the 1930s, serves as an important link to related residential buildings, such as Sedgwick Gardens and the Kennedy-Warren apartments, respectively north and south on Connecticut Avenue. The loss or mutilation of these buildings due to pressure from incongruous zoning would be a tragic waste of an architectural and cultural resource whose value to the city will become more and more apparent in the years to come. Though some of these buildings are temporarily cluttered with plastic signs and the like, a trip to almost any of the downtown commercial historic districts across the country reveals that the appropriate re-use of older 20th-century commercial buildings, often under the aegis of sophisticated planning and zoning, can turn such buildings into a powerful commercial (as well as cultural) asset. The value of these buildings to students of American architectural and community development has been confirmed by the scores of distinguished scholars who supported the creation of the Cleveland Park Historic District.

Second, approval of this rezoning will set an important standard, both across the city and throughout the region, for responsive planning that seeks to integrate valid preservation findings of local government review boards with other pertinent planning policies. It makes no sense to overload the city's review process by allowing historic designations and zoning to contradict one another's purposes. The two should be made consistent. The 1958 zoning was a planning aberration: it was wildly inconsistent with the earlier planning for Connecticut Avenue.

86-26
ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 86-26
EXHIBIT NO. 260

January 25, 1988

Testimony of Richard Striner

Page Two

which sought to guarantee long-term stability through commercial areas that were carefully limited to serving the adjacent residential areas. The rezoning application would restore the original and laudable planning objectives for Connecticut Avenue while, at the same time, assimilating the new and congruent steps in preservation planning by the D.C. government. The city government should no longer have to find itself in the position of encouraging preservation and conservation in appropriate parts of the city while being obliged by mistakes of a quarter century ago to encourage resistance to preservation at the same time. Please use your authority to remedy this Catch-22 situation by reinforcing the decisions of the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board along with Mayor Barry's support for appropriate neighborhood conservation. Your approval of this rezoning initiative will complement our highly-praised preservation ordinance and will keep the Nation's Capital in the forefront of preservation planning. Thank you.