

**86 ALBERT STREET (227-237 McDERMOT AVENUE – ALBERT BLOCK)
*D. Orff (Minneapolis), 1901***



Located on a wedge-shaped city block radiating from Winnipeg's Market Square, this building has an irregular shape facing McDermot Avenue and Albert Street. Constructed in 1901, the Alexandra Apartment Block was a speculative venture of two prominent local lawyers and a land developer. James S. Tupper and his brother William J. Tupper were co-founders of one of Manitoba's top legal firms representing such companies as the Canadian Pacific Railway, Hudson's Bay Company and the Bank of Montreal. They were the sons of Sir Charles Tupper, a former premier of Nova Scotia and a Father of Confederation. The other investor was Walter Suckling, who had made his fortune in local real estate development. Jointly the syndicate financed the construction of the Alexandra Block, with the realtor's company maintaining ownership of the building until c. 1906.

Minneapolis architect Fremont D. Orff designed the new block with local architect W.B. Lait supervising the project. Orff practiced in the United States from 1879 to 1912 and designed

more than one hundred school buildings and numerous courthouses throughout the American northwest.

Built by contractor George Alsip for \$52,000, the Alexandra Block has changed very little in its external appearance. The lower portion of the building was divided into stores with plate glass fronts. The super-structure of solid brick was veneered with dark red pressed brick and ornamented with buff stone trimmings quarried on the Kettle river in north-eastern Manitoba. The two storeys above the store fronts were carried almost entirely on steel beams supported by iron columns. Steel lintels, above the window openings, allowed a continuous line of brick without arches. In order to provide each of the apartments with an abundance of natural light and ventilation, lightwells were cut into three elevations of the building. Surface articulation was restrained with emphasized brick quoins and a projecting metal cornice. Above the entrances to the suites from Albert and Arthur Streets a stone entablature was placed.

The upper floors were arranged for 36 bachelor apartments comprising two or three rooms. With a passenger elevator, steam heat, electrical lights and “fitted with all necessary sanitary improvements,” the building was comfortable and up-to-date.

Not long after its completion, a restaurant was opened on the ground floor by Frank Mariaggi. Corsican-born, Mariaggi had an appealing European flair that delighted Winnipeg’s wealthy restaurant goers. While the main dining-room with adjoining private dining rooms were on the ground floor, it was the Grotto, located in the basement, that intrigued patrons the most. Made up of a series of small dining rooms and a bar, a cave-like ambience was created by using sand and mortar freely applied to the walls, columns and bar. Dim lighting and a small waterfall tumbling into a pool stocked with goldfish completed the effect.

Based on the success of his restaurant enterprise, Frank Mariaggi converted the rest of the building into a luxury hotel. Elegant furnishings including heavy velvet carpets, thick draperies, oak chairs covered in soft leathers, oriental divans and ornamental brass beds made the Mariaggi the first “European Plan” hotel that was without equal for luxury in Manitoba.

In 1908, with competition from the newly opened C.P.R.'s Royal Alexandra Hotel, Mariaggi sold the enterprise and returned to Corsica where he died ten years later.

After having a variety of proprietors, the hotel closed in 1915 only to reopen two years later as it had been initially planned. Stores were located on the main floor and the upper floors converted to apartments.

The Albert Block still has residential suites on the upper floors. The commercial space on the ground floor had been leased as professional offices serving manufacturer's agents and textile wholesalers. At present it is home to Warehouse Artworks, a framing shop and art gallery, and Northern Traditions, a native crafts store.