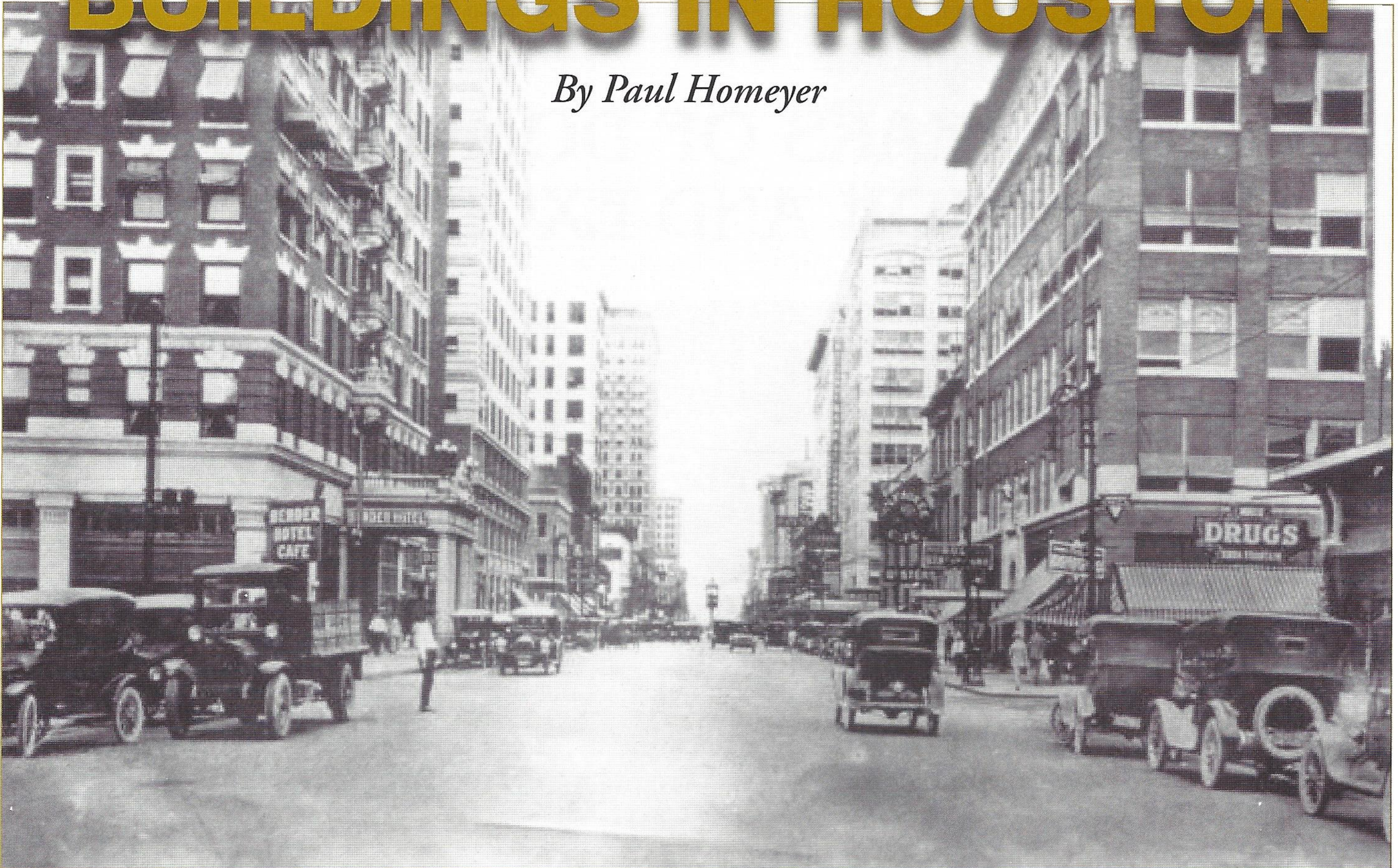
UNMASKING MAIN STREET: A LOOK AT SLIPCOVERED BUILDINGS IN HOUSTON

By Paul Homeyer



Main Street, c. 1920s Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

The current renaissance of downtown Houston has illuminated the faces of numerous historic buildings that—until recently—had not seen the light of day for years. Downtown's Main Street, the focus of much of the recent development in the central business district, is a great laboratory for the study of "slipcovered" buildings—those structures whose facades have been sheathed in a newer material which partially or completely masks the original.

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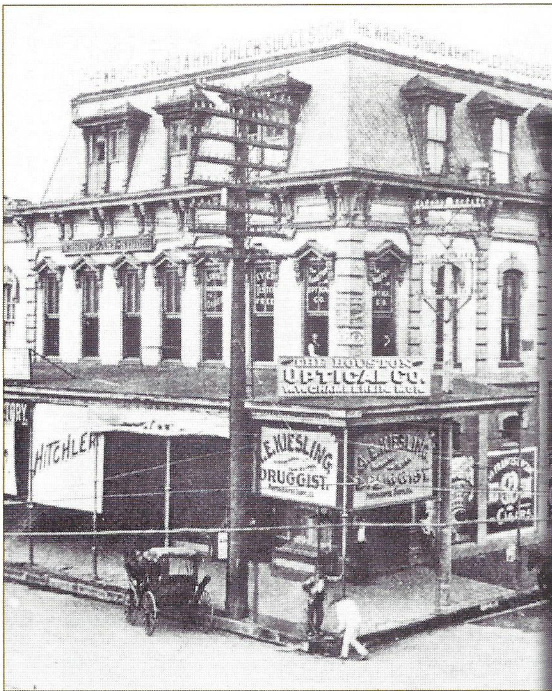


The slipcovering of 1879 Stegeman Building at 502 Main did not fully obscure the upper ornamental brackets and cornice capping the building. These visible remnants of the past helped to inspire the building tenant to remove the slipcover and begin restoration work on the original façade beneath.

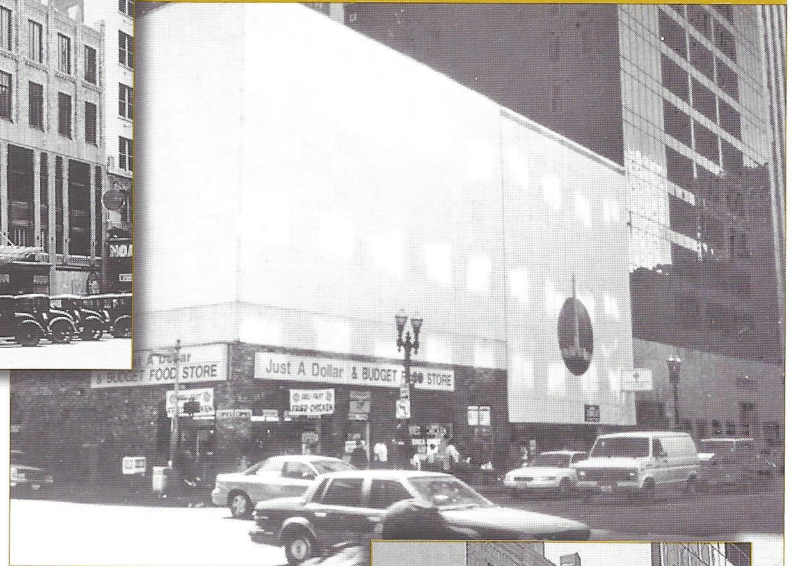
Building slipcovering was a national phenomenon from the mid-1940s through 1960s. In postwar America, the architectural styles popular at the beginning of the twentieth century were considered passé and not representative of the aspirations of the forward thinking generation. An obsession with the new and modern lead to the alteration of countless Victorian, Classical Revival, Art Deco, and other early twentieth-century American commercial styles. These alterations included the partial or complete masking or obliteration of the building's original character, composition, detail, and ornament. When total reconstruction of a pre-war structure was not practical, the cosmetic alteration of an older façade gave the appearance of a new building at a more modest cost.

Standing at the corner of Main and McKinney looking north one can compare the view to a c.1920 photo taken from the same vantage point. The interesting thing is that almost all of the buildings seen in each view are the same. They have been altered so much in the past eighty plus years, however, that the casual observer would likely not recognize but a few.

A fire at the West Building at the corner of Main and Walker in 2000 revealed what had been a secret for years. Behind the gold grille work encasing the top three-quarters of the building resided a 1912 façade of brick and stone that had been hidden for decades. The current owner of the building has since removed the remaining panels to expose the entire façade and plans a restoration of the building in the near future.

The slipcovers in Houston run the gamut from small two and three story Victorian structures near Market Square to high rise office buildings on Main Street. The slipcover materials vary as much as the buildings they cover. Plaster and marble were popular materials and their installation often resulted in extensive damage to the original façade beneath. Grille work, like that encasing the West Building, were typically more lightweight, hung out further away from the original face of the building

The Krupp & Tuffly Building at 900 Main Street and its neighbor at 905 Main Street (right side of image without awning), fell victim to the slipcovering trend. San Jacinto Savings took occupancy of 905 Main in the mid-1960s and covered its façade with a mosaic of the San Jacinto Monument.
Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library



and did not require as much of the original ornamentation to be removed—thereby better preserving the original façade.

The exterior walls of many older buildings were built of permanent materials like cast iron, brick, stone, and terra cotta. These materials were an integral part of the façade making their removal during a cosmetic update more difficult. More often than not, they were simply covered over and, although they have sustained some damage, are still intact beneath the slipcover. Ironically, in some cases, the mask of the slipcover has helped to preserve the architectural features behind it.

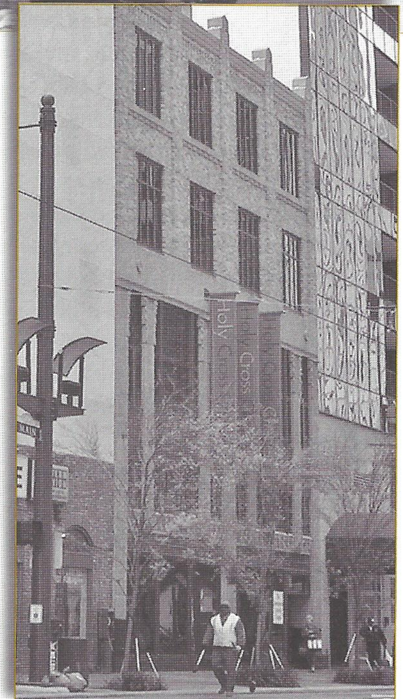
The degree to which the slipcover altered the original appearance of the building also varies. The alterations to the 1879 Stegeman Building at 502 Main included the slipcovering of the upper façade but failed to obscure the ornamental brackets and cornice capping the building—leaving little doubt that there was an older building behind the visible façade. These visible remnants of the past helped to inspire the building tenant to remove the slipcover and begin restoration work on the original façade beneath.

In contrast to the Stegeman Building, the original exterior face of the building at 905 Main was completely sheathed in granite panels—giving no indication of what lay behind. Even upon further investigation at the interior of the upper floors it is not immediately apparent that there was more to this building than met the eye. Great care, it seems, was taken to infill the original window openings with concrete block and cover over them from the interior as well as the exterior. The primary clue to the building's original identity were the historic photographs depicting a building of identical massing. The slipcover of 905 Main was removed in 2002 and the façade meticulously restored to its original appearance.

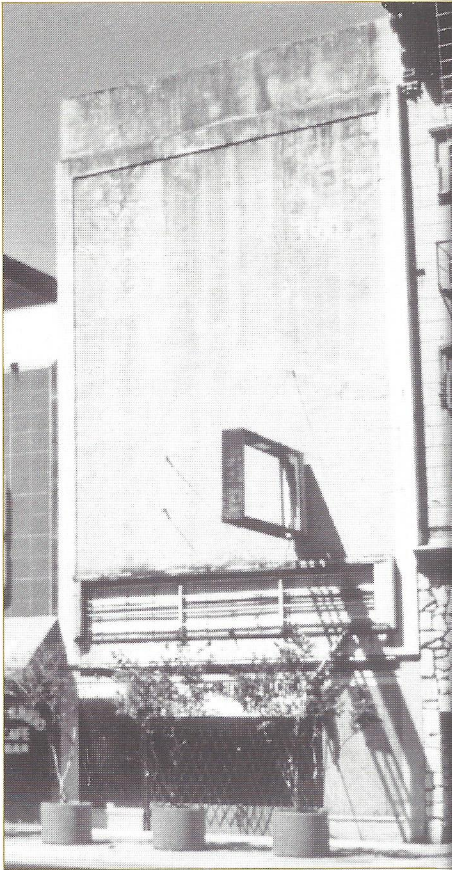
Next door to 905 Main, the Krupp & Tuffly Building, a fanciful art deco edifice designed by prolific Houston architect Alfred Finn, was slipcovered around the same time as its neighbor. The only hint of what lies behind the current dull monolithic façade is the deco detailing decorating the elevator penthouse visible from the street.

The upper façade of smaller, low-rise buildings such as these was often completely covered in order to create a cleaner looking, monolithic appearance and in so doing, covering the windows. This large new unobstructed area often served as a billboard sized space to identify the occupant of the building. Unlike 905 Main, in many of these buildings, the windows—as well as the back of the slipcover—are visible from the interior.

A visit to the unoccupied second floor of the nondescript commercial building at Main and Lamar—which was once home to Everitt-Buelow Clothiers—led to the discovery of the original arched steel sash casement windows still intact behind storage shelving lining the outer walls. These windows had been hidden from the exterior for years by a slipcover of travertine panels encasing the upper façade of the building. While investigating the 16" space between the original façade



In 2002, the Holy Cross Chapel restored the façade to its original appearance, and later received a Good Brick Award from the GHPA for their efforts.



The 310 Main St. building (c.1880) was the first to receive a Certificate of Appropriateness under the 1995 City of Houston Preservation Ordinance. It was also one of the first renovations in downtown Houston's recent renaissance.

and the newer stone panels, I discovered glimpses of glazed terra cotta acanthus leaves surrounding the windows, medallions, Corinthian pilasters, and other ornate architectural detailing. The subsequent acquisition of photos taken of the building sometime in the 1940s confirmed that the behind the monolithic travertine panels covering the second floor existed an exquisite Spanish Renaissance Revival façade designed by noted Houston architect Joseph Finger—apparently considered out of style at some point in the building's recent history.

Attorney Scott Arnold was one of the first building owners in downtown to reverse the modern alterations made to his Victorian storefront building near the county courthouse complex. Arnold says that he knew intuitively that there was more than first met the eye to the bland plaster façade at 310 Main when he was looking for a building to house his law offices in 1994. In a similar manner to the Everitt-Buelow Building, Arnold's building had been altered in such a way that completely covered the windows on the second and third floors facing Main Street—at least from the exterior.

"We were able to get up to the second floor…and get up to the front of the building. Then of course we could see the back of the windows." explained Arnold. "The window sashes had been taken out… The wooden window frames were still there but none of them had been filled in. And you could look out the window and you could see about six or eight inches of fairly ornate corbels and pediments and columns and all that kind of stuff… Unfortunately, the stuff that stuck out the furthest had been knocked off with a hammer prior to putting the (new) façade on…About that same time I think I had acquired a picture of the building so I had a pretty good idea of what it looked like originally and what was likely underneath…"[1]

Since larger commercial buildings were typically occupied predominantly by office space and relied on access to natural light and ventilation, it was not practical or common to cover the windows as often happened to smaller structures. The 1960s looking office high-rise now known as 806 Main was originally built as a sixteen story structure in 1910 by Samuel Carter and was at the time of completion the tallest building in Houston. The building was referred to as "Carter's Folly" during construction by skeptical Houstonians who scoffed at the idea of a building so tall. Despite its critics, the Carter Building proved so successful that six additional stories were added in the 1920s.

In an effort toward modernization, the building was sheathed in Georgian marble in 1969. Remnants of the original Beaux Arts detailing are still visible at the corners where the new slipcover did not completely cover the original brick quoining. The elaborate conference room on the second floor, originally serving as the Second National Bank Board Room, as well as other vintage architectural elements remain intact, betraying the attempts at modernization of the rest of the building. After nearly forty years of wear, the marble panels installed in 1969 are beginning to show their age. Some have warped to the point of nearly cracking, prompting the building owner to replace them with painted plywood out of concern that they may pose a safety risk to pedestrians. As of this writing, 806 Main is under contract to a developer who plans to remove the entire slipcover and restore the façade to its historic appearance.

Slipcovered buildings were not limited geographically to downtown Houston. Further south on Main Street—outside of what is considered downtown sits an art deco gem, though you wouldn't know it by looking. Sears & Roebuck opened in 1939 to much acclaim. At the time of its completion it was the largest department store in Houston and the first major department store located outside the central business district. Sears boasted the city's first escalators that were capable of carrying 6,000 people per hour between the three levels. In the late 1960s, fearing that the race riots that had ignited in other cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. would erupt in Houston, the powers that be at Sears had almost all of the show windows at the ground floor bricked in. At the same time, the sleekly elegant upper façade was clad in beige metal siding.

While some slipcovers can—and should—be removed, each building should be considered individually when contemplating the merits of exposing its original façade or restoring its original appearance.

Unfortunately, too much historic fabric has been lost in the process of slipcovering some buildings to justify restoration. Preservation philosophy may also influence the treatment of a building's slipcover. Some historians and preservationists view the slipcovers as part of a building's history and evolution. The lathe and plaster slipcover covering the Richardsonian Romanesque façade of what was originally the Kiam Annex building is, itself, over fifty years old. The current owner of the building has no intention of removing it—and in fact—has recently completed a restoration of the slipcover.

While the recent reversal of many of these cosmetic "updates" signals a renewed interest in historic preservation and sensitivity to the original integrity of a building's design, we would be wise to be vigilant that the same pattern is not repeated. Today's irony is that many worthwhile examples of modern architecture are being—if not slipcovered—altered in ways dramatically inconsistent with their original appearance in an effort to make them look more traditional. Buildings of architectural merit add richness and texture to our cityscape regardless of their period.

Sears Roebuck and Company's New Super Store at Houston, Texas

SEARS

SEARS ROEBUCK AND CO

Houston — Fastest Growing City in the United States

PHOTO BY ELWOOD M. PAYNE

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

In the late 1960s, almost all the show windows on the ground floor of the Sears building were bricked in. Sears feared that riots might erupt in Houston, as they had in other cities, due to the recent assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The rest of the building was slipcovered at the same time.