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El Mercado del Sol

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Atrium, El Mercado del Sol, 1985, PDR, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)

El Mercado del Sol, Houston's first large, Mexican-style shopping center, opened its doors to the public on 2 June 1985. Housed in a complex of rehabilitated warehouses located at the intersection of Navigation Boulevard and Jensen Drive in the near East End, the Mercado is slated to become upon completion the largest adaptive-reuse retail development in the United States. The complex eventually will occupy 15 acres and will offer 407,000 square feet of retail and office space; a 3-acre public park and plaza for music and folkloric performances; three 525-seat movie theaters; market stands for fresh fruit, vegetables, and meats; food vendors; push-cart merchants; three restaurants; a private dinner club; and meeting space for conventions as well as banquet halls for social gatherings. The plaza itself will feature an amphitheater and a *zócalo*, a staple item of Hispanic urban culture, which here will be surrounded by greenery and sport a kiosk as well as a three-tiered fountain. The culminating touch of this ambitious scheme is the park's principal promenade, which when finished will serve as a dramatic link between the developer's vision and the picturesque neighborhood church of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

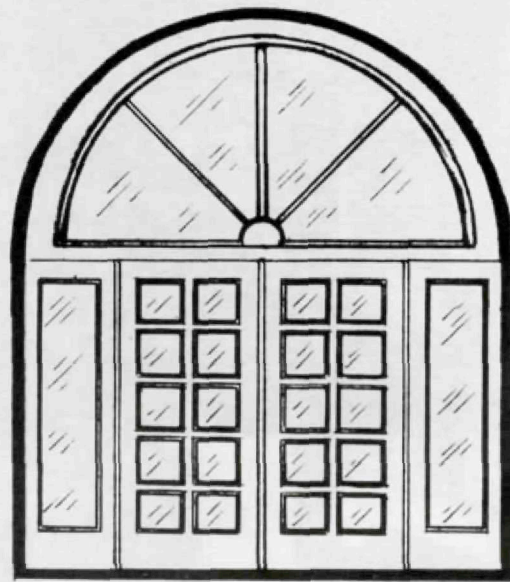
Located in a predominantly lower-income Hispanic neighborhood, the Mercado might appear misplaced were it not for its ethnic affinity with the area. Though falling within the shadow of downtown, the area does not share any of the vitality and optimistic verve characteristic of most of Houston. Instead, it is eclipsed by a peripheral uneasiness typical of a warehouse district that is hardly alleviated

by the convivial spirit of the new Mercado. Also, the Mercado's formidable size might seem out of scale in a neighborhood where single-family dwellings, small retail centers, abandoned lots, and junkyards comprise a significant portion of the urban fabric. These seeming disparities, however, might be explained upon consideration of its developers' intentions. The entire project is a joint venture of the City of Houston and Arnold Development Company, and one its goals is to stir the neighborhood from its lackadaisical stupor and provide an incentive for urban renewal.

The back side of the Mercado, a long, almost windowless expanse of wall five-stories high, is visible from U.S. Highway 59 just where the freeway circumvents downtown. The Mercado rises up out of a sea of low-income public housing units, making it seem somewhat like an oasis. The buildings fall on an east-west axis, with the prominent entrance façade facing towards the Houston Ship Channel. Buffalo Bayou, sluggish and low at this point, skirts the northern edge of the premises.

When approaching the Mercado on Navigation, the unstimulating and abject domesticity of the neighborhood camouflages the developer's intentions. At the intersection of Navigation and Jensen no "Mexican marketplace" comes into view. What is immediately visible, aside from the little church that figures prominently in the developer's vision of the finished project, is a large, low brick structure, painstakingly restored by what one might assume to have been a philan-

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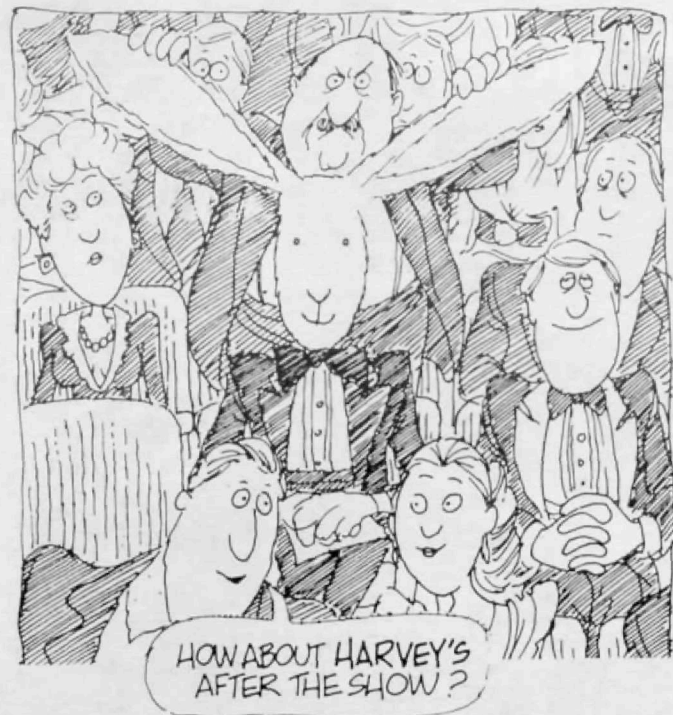


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Model showing east elevation of El Mercado del Sol (Photo by Paul Hester)

thropic effort, and whose dignity of line and form suggest an austerity reminiscent of Dominican convents. This is the earliest portion of what originally was the Lottman-Myers Manufacturing Company factory, built in 1903. Its understated elegance hardly disrupts the peaceful lethargy of the area. This edifice, in fact, forms the south face of the Mercado. One is only convinced of it after reading the sign and seeing the accompanying logo (a stylized version of that ubiquitous Mexican sun, prominently displayed above the entrance porch). Half expecting to see the results of a cross between a Fiesta supermarket and the Alamo, wrapped around with De Chirico-like arcades, and incorporating every conceivable purchasable item of Hispanic culture, one is pleasantly surprised that the architects, PDR, avoided most of the predictable "Mexicanisms" and opted for a more restrained approach.

Driving into the parking lot, it becomes obvious that two distinct groups of buildings comprise the main body of the Mercado. There are, in fact, six existing industrial loft buildings, but because of stylistic similarities and approximate age it is more convenient to consider the first four as belonging to one phase and the last two, built in the late 1920s, to another.

The main entrance to the marketplace occurs where the two disparate wings collide, and a large, covered porch which partially obscures the unfortunate resolution is only marginally successful in uniting the two. The porch itself consists of a metal roof painted a sienna to match the intense terra-cotta color of the old bricks, and it is supported by thin, steel pipe columns painted bottle-green. The central portion is raised into a triangular, pediment-like form, marking the main entrance into the Mercado. The space beneath this porch is ample enough to accommodate a variety of activities. Immediately in front of it, and verging on the parking lot, is a small plaza that serves as an extension of the covered porch area. Black wrought-iron chairs have been placed beneath Sauza Tequila umbrellas, creating the necessary intimacy and continental ambiance desirable for successful outdoor cafes.

Beneath the porch are two entrances, at right angles to one another, that lead into the Mercado. The entrance that is aligned with the outdoor plaza space leads into what appropriately has been dubbed the food court. One stumbles unceremoniously into a space filled with dozens of eateries, mostly of the fast-food variety encountered in malls, here interpreted with a Mexican flair. Chairs and tables occupy the main circulation space, which is divided into several levels by short series of steps and ramps. Stuccoed walls, decorative ceramic tile, as well as other paraphernalia that do not interfere with the homogeneity of the exterior, have all been incorporated into the interior, giving it that unmistakable, feigned exuberance and often misleading South-of-the-Border look. The stalls seem to have been lifted straight out of some amusement park where "Mexican villages" are placed next to "Swiss chalets," all with the same degree of unconvincing exactitude.

The second entry leads into the most congenial space in the entire complex. The narrow, rectangular, residual space between the three older warehouses and the newer two has been roofed over, resulting in an atrium space that reaches the full height of the buildings flanking it. Clerestory windows provide ample light. The space, despite its high and narrow configuration, is not at all confining due to the transparency of the adjoining walls which provide visual as well as physical access to other parts of the Mercado. The brick walls of the older warehouses have been left intact, except where replacement has been mandatory. The aged condition of these walls lends the space an authentic rusticity. Windows and balconies overlook the atrium from different levels. Concrete stairs flanked by wrought-iron railings lead to open retail areas half a floor level below, as well as to restaurant and other shops half a floor level or more above this space. The floor is paved with stone tiles of a dark, volcanic color.

In sharp contrast to the brick walls of the older warehouses which line two walls of the atrium space, the walls of the newer warehouses that form the remaining sides have been heavily remodelled. One wall is now dressed in a series of arched openings, composing the entire five-story façade. The structure supporting these openings is hidden behind a thick appliqué of stucco, painted off-white. Cookie-like medallions, done in the same paste, and intended as decoration, adorn the walls at various intervals, imparting a cheap, overworked aspect to this otherwise pleasant enclave.

The open retail space in the basement area, with its concrete floor and chain-link partitions, remains very Spartan. But the vaguely confusing layout of the stalls, which is a welcome change from the severe linearity of most malls (and which encourages lingering), and of Mexican *artesanía* easily suggest a partially modernized marketplace in Mexico. Similarly, outside across the parking lot, but still within the premises, the outdoor fruit market that is set up beneath the shade of the existing trees exudes such provincial charm that were it not for the peeping downtown skyline, the illusion would be complete.

The upper floors of the Mercado eventually will be occupied by offices as well as house the banquet and meeting facilities. The rooftop Tortuga Bay Nightclub will offer a privileged view of the surrounding neighborhood, once the eye traverses the vast expanse of parking lot. A lot of work, especially landscaping, remains to be done. Workers are busy plastering interiors, patching exteriors, and in the process, covering what ought to remain exposed. The stunning, heavy-timber structural members of the old warehouses soon may be hidden behind acres of drywall (partially to satisfy fire-rating requirements), and the original floorboards concealed beneath tiles that are easier to maintain.

The effort involved in transforming a defunct structure into one capable of sustaining a successful commercial enterprise is considerable and commendable, especially in an area which is socio-economically unattractive to most investors. The risks of attempting urban renewal in such an area are relatively high. Precedents for urban revitalization abound, especially in older, northeastern cities, and perhaps it is an indication of Houston's coming of age that such a project was conceived for a city which so far has been largely deaf to the pleas of preservationists. The opening of El Mercado in a restored complex of old warehouses brings hope that the preservation of our architectural heritage is under way, and is definitely a step in the right direction. However, the mixed cultural heritage of

the area, the immense scope of the project, and the lack of any successful precedents within Houston are bound to pose certain problems that might interfere with its projected success. There is also the ever-present danger of it lapsing into yet another shopping center, albeit with ethnic overtones, if care is not taken to cultivate the unique qualities of the neighborhood as well as the buildings themselves. ■

Detail of south elevation, El Mercado del Sol (Photo by Paul Hester)



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