

## FIVE MILLION DOLLARS

Every month, about the 10th, we mail checks to hundreds of women in Houston. In the past 15 years, Baubles & Beads Resale Boutiques have mailed checks totaling over \$5,000,000.

Getting on our mailing list is easy. Bring your gently-worn currently-styled clothing to one of our shops, and next month, you'll probably be looking at one of our checks!

We're located in your neighborhood!



America's Finest  
Resale Boutiques

**BAUBLES & BEADS,  
1955 W. GRAY, HOUSTON  
630-6557**

## Clothing for boys, young men and their fathers.



**VILLAGE  
VARSITY  
SHOP**

2515 Times  
(Next to Cobler Books)  
Open 10-6 529-7778

## HindCite

### The Houston Strip Tease

Bruce C. Webb



*Alabama Theater, 1939, W. Scott Dunne, architect; rehabilitated in 1984 by Morris Aubry Architects (Photo by Paul Hester)*

A friend was in town for a visit a few weeks back, and we went out on Sunday afternoon to see how the city had changed since his last visit. In between stops at some of the bigger attractions, we decided to take in the opening of The Bookstop in the renovated Alabama Theater strip shopping center. The afternoon was near perfect; an early cool front had pushed all the way down to the Gulf Coast, blowing out the stale summer air. After months of the same, oppressive summer heat, there was cool weather again.

The parking lots in front of and behind the dressed-up old strip center were full and the sidewalk in front was jammed with people, most of them were crowding into the entrance to the old theater, although a fair number were also making their way to the recently opened Whole Foods Store two doors down. On the face of it, as my friend pointed out, it wasn't much enticement for such an enthusiastic crowd, especially for Houston which is usually given to much grander demonstrations of commercial excesses at the scale, say, of a new shopping mall or high-rise tower. This was a modestly scaled vision; one which emphasized the idea that a good city is a collection of places and activities, pieces which can hold your attention.

The newly renovated Alabama strip center is a particularly zany piece of Houston's architectural collection, one which evokes a certain amount of geographic and temporal nostalgia. I had already heard the Whole Foods Store being described as reminiscent of Austin in the '60s. Others in the crowd were curious about how the new tenants had treated the old Alabama Theater, the scene of many long running movies (remember *Reds*?) and the weekly, Saturday night *Rocky Horror Picture Show* ritual. In part, The Bookstop's opening was a big success because of its discount marketing strategies. But it also benefited from buying into a piece of the urban collection which people care about.

The new owners have treated the old theater respectfully despite making a rather incomplete job of collaging the old and the new. While they did a creditable job of maintaining significant details and restoring the painted decorations in the old deco building, the old and new are strangely indifferent to one another, almost as though they were afraid to touch. The vacant seats in the balcony, inexplicably sealed off to customers, look out across rows of bookshelves to the empty screen in a strong, white light which reveals too much about the once mysterious space. Only the candy concession in the lobby has been given a new interpretation and now serves as the check-out counter instead of a dispensary for Dots and popcorn. If the owners of The Bookstop were to open up the balcony to watchers and browsers and sell Cokes and popcorn to its customers, I think they could bring the concept full circle and turn the scene below into a living theater. The proprietors have plans to use the big screen for advertising purposes, and activities over time will, no doubt, help to knit together the theater/bookstore metaphor.

The Alabama Theater block has reintroduced the strip center, always an urban anomaly, back into the city's social and physical fabric by removing it from the non-place realm of the car and giving it a sense of pedestrian identity. In between the mega-schemes of the planner's scale of operation and the virtuosity of individual buildings are these ubiquitous urban fragments whose chief virtues seem to be convenience ("Oh thank heaven for 7-Eleven") and the fact that there are so many of them ("If you can't find a Pilgrim in ten minutes, you're lost"). The Alabama Theater block teases us with more tempting possibilities by reaffirming the importance of the intermediate and connecting scale of urban design.

Engaging one of the city's favorite pastimes of hanging out in places to browse and shop, The Bookstop promises to stay open until midnight and on Sundays. Together with the Whole Foods Store (itself a kind of food museum for browsing and buying), Cactus Records and a few eateries, this promises to become a favorite corner for the late evening and Sunday afternoon crowd. The trick seems to be the same one you might use to put together a good party: the right combination of people gathering in circumstances where they can be themselves.

Houston, like most American cities, has measured its recent growth in terms of the high-rise and the shopping center where the parts are made to conform to the anonymous, gridded landscape of the whole. Pluralistic messiness is subjugated to larger units of geometric tidiness. In the process not only is a sense of the historic city obliterated as these new and larger units of urban development portray a more purified version of city life, but there is also a concurrent loss in the social and physical contexts which reflect and respond to the diversity of urban life. The penetration of diverse modes of life into one another is a characteristic feature of the neighborhoods of great American cities. With the renovation of the Alabama Theater strip to new purposes, a fragment of Houston becomes known by its distinctive corners of lines and shops. This place represents a gathering of individual elements growing together over time. You could almost build a city this way. ■