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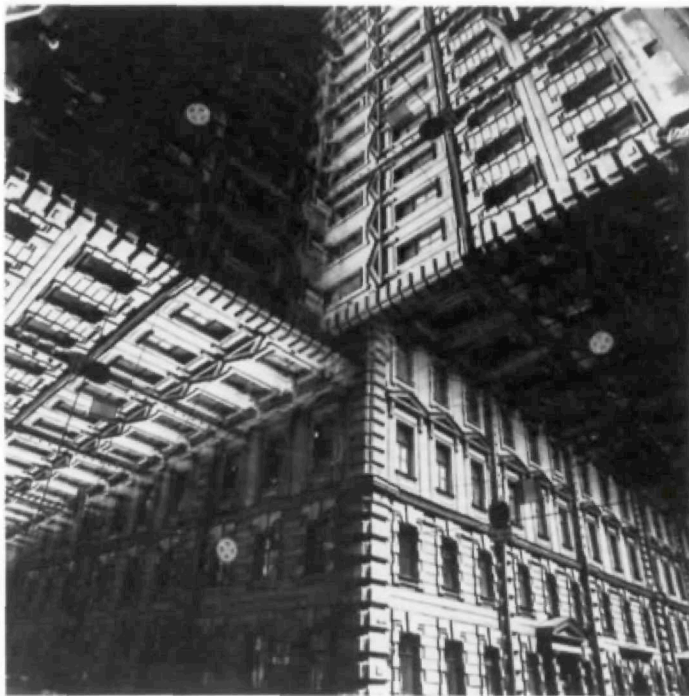
Savannah GEORGIA

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Spending an architectural weekend in Savannah at the height of its spring bloom and discovering why this seductive Southern city is currently so popular. We will spend three nights in the heart of the historic district, enjoy private homes and plantations not open to the public, dinners at private clubs and four-star restaurants, and walking tours conducted by architectural historian Stephen Fox. Participation is limited to 25 RDA members. For more information, please call the Rice Design Alliance at 713-348-4876.

Architectural Fantasies

Fotofest March 2000



Andrey Chezhin "St. Petersburg — Escher Series", Silver gelatin print.

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Down on the Corner



Top: Arminio Cantini corner store in Galveston, circa 1919.

Bottom: Sebastiano Mencacci family in their Galveston store, circa 1910.

BY BARRIE SCARDINO

Before the middle part of this century, when people went shopping for groceries they headed for the corner. In almost every community across America the corner store was not only a place to get bread, it was also a neighborhood gathering spot. Then came the car, the supermarket, and the suburbs, and the corner store began to recede into memory.

Now, though, thanks to the work of Galveston historian Ellen Beasley and *The Corner Store*, an exhibit she has curated for the National Building Museum, we are reminded of just what a crucial and connective part of our history the corner store was. As she did in her 1996 book *The Alleys and Back Buildings of Galveston*, Beasley has with this exhibit taken a small slice of Galveston history and created from it an interesting commentary on both vernacular architecture and the lifestyles of the not-so-rich and not-so-famous.

With the exception of a large streetscape mural at the entrance that looks as if it had been painted for

another show, perhaps one on Charleston in 1954, *The Corner Store* has been thoughtfully and imaginatively designed by Joseph Rosa. Across the "street" from the odd mural are photographs of the exteriors of several corner stores mounted on a white clapboard storefront. At this point, having been presented with the exhibit's subject matter, the viewer is led onto a stoop under a wooden canopy that protects an authentic-looking chamfered doorway that might have led into a 19th-century corner store. Here, photographs and text point out how important such overhangs or sheds were as commercial signage. Such a feature would differentiate the corner store from houses up and down the street that would have been otherwise architecturally similar to it.

Through the doorway is the show's first room, which displays a number of interior pictures of Galveston corner stores. In one such shot, a 1910 photo of a corner store at Avenue O1/2 and 21st streets, the proprietors, Mr. and Mrs. Mencacci and their three children, stand

on a washed plank floor surrounded by shelves of canned goods, household items hung from a high ceiling, a glass display case with cigars, and bushel baskets of potatoes, onions, and the like. (Interestingly, almost all of the Galveston stores were owned by Italian families.) As one moves along, a chronological history of Galveston stores is supplied with locations of the earliest stores overlaid on C. Drie's famous 1871 bird's eye view of the city. Beasley cross-referenced city directory listings, advertisements, photographs, and maps to identify and understand the stores she was researching. Images from all of these documents are enlarged and displayed, telling their story through a lively combination of items.

To illustrate the residential nature of the corner stores, Beasley includes floor plans of both one- and two-story buildings, along with some architectural generalizations that help solidify the image of a typical corner store. Most were utilitarian buildings not embellished architecturally. They were of wood construction, usually rectangular with a hipped roof, and in keeping with the style of the surrounding neighborhood. Street facades were flush with sidewalks, and a shed or suspended awning extended to the curb. Most stores had a corner entry with a single opening at a chamfered corner or openings on each side of the corner. Separate rear or side entrances to the owner's living quarters were usual.

Although Beasley is not a sentimentalist in her view of history, the exhibit does create a nostalgic view of "the good old days," when moms and pops worked together in the store with kids playing underfoot or doing homework in a back room. In one case study, she traces the family business of Arminio Cantini, who came to Galveston in 1910 at age 19 from northern Italy. He opened his first grocery store in 1912. The Cantini story is illustrated with his 1919 wedding photograph, pictures and locator maps of his three successive corner stores, and family photographs. A charming "day in the corner grocery store," as told by Elena Cantini, begins its narrative when the store opens at 5 a.m. She kept the store in the afternoons, while Mr. Cantini took an after-lunch nap and then went out to buy produce and provisions. When he returned, Elena would go upstairs to be with the children and fix dinner. They both worked in the store after their evening meal until it closed at 9:30 or 10 p.m.

The exhibition tries to go beyond Galveston with images of a handful of corner stores in other parts of the U.S., but as the title of the exhibit's catalog admits — *The Corner Store, An American Tradition, Galveston Style* — Galveston is the focus. Though Beasley does include some historic photographs, mainly exteriors, from New England towns, the show would have been fuller had more examples from the rest of the

nation been included. Toward the end of the exhibit is a wall painting of a map of the United States with snapshots of corner stores that were solicited from the public attached to their appropriate sites. Early on, only a few examples were in place, but time should yield a more effective display.

The 48-page, illustrated, soft-cover catalog written by Beasley adds extra dimension to the National Building Museum exhibit, giving the reader a chance to ponder the significance of the corner store in the continuum of American architectural and social history. This modest building type almost always provided not just commercial space but living space as well. The proprietor's family life centered, both physically and emotionally, around the store. Neighbors came, often daily, to shop and gossip, creating what Beasley calls the neighborhood parlor. These buildings anchored the street corner, providing "connective tissue that held small towns together."

In the catalog's last chapter, titled "Continuity and Change: Preserving the Legacy," we're told that despite all the changes in the culture, some corner stores still operate, particularly in older neighborhoods where loyal customers continue to patronize them. Other stores, meanwhile, have become convenience stores. Because of their prominent locations, writes Beasley, "the importance of corner stores goes beyond their original use. Many have acquired not only physical but also associative values that make their preservation critical." (p. 43) Finding new uses for these landmarks can often help revitalize a neighborhood. Restaurants, florists, bookstores, gift shops, and similar small commercial enterprises are finding that the ubiquitous architectural spaces adapt easily to new uses. While such reuse isn't a direct continuation of the whatever-you-need market, it does allow for an ongoing commercial presence in a residential neighborhood, providing for the sort of diversity that communities enjoyed before restrictive-covenant suburbs became common.

For the past three decades, Beasley has documented corner stores through both her own camera lens and archival study and interviews. Her purpose has been to nudge people to start seeing and appreciating these often ignored buildings. It's a purpose well fulfilled by this comfortable exhibit, and its equally well-done catalog. ■

The Corner Store will run through March 6 at the National Building Museum, 401 F Street NW, Washington D.C. For more information, call 202.272.2448, or check the museum's website at www.nbm.org.

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