



Corner of Main and Lamar, 1940s: A building in the ornate Spanish Renaissance Revival style could bring stylistic diversity downtown.



Corner of Main and Lamar, today: The building still stands, but the historical façade lies covered up by unlovely travertine panels.

What Lies Beneath

The redevelopment of downtown Houston is uncovering more than new business and residential prospects—it is also bringing to light some of our hidden architectural history. Main Street, the focus of much of the recent development in Houston's central business district, is home to a number of “slipcovered” buildings—structures that have been sheathed in newer materials that partially or completely mask their original façades, along with their character, composition, detail, and ornament. Now some of these covers are coming off, allowing the classic styles beneath to shine.

Slipcovering was a national phenomenon in the decades following World War II. In the postwar period, architectural styles that had been popular at the beginning of the 20th century came to be considered passé. An obsession with the new led to the alteration of countless Victorian, Classical Revival, Art Deco, and other early 20th-century American commercial styles. When total reconstruction of a prewar structure was not practical, the cosmetic alteration of an older façade gave buildings a new appearance on a budget.

The slipcovered buildings in Houston run the gamut from small two- and three-story Victorian structures near Market Square to high-rise office buildings farther south on Main Street. The slipcover materials vary as greatly as the buildings they cover. Plaster and marble were popular materials, but their installation often caused extensive damage to the original façade beneath. Grille work, like that encasing the West Building at the corner of Main and Walker, was more lightweight, hung out farther from the original face of the building, and did not require as much of the original ornamentation to be removed.

A fire at the partially occupied West Building in 1999 revealed what had been a secret for years: Behind the gold grille

work encasing the top three quarters of the building was a 1912 façade of brick and stone. Since then, the building's owner has removed the remainder of the grille work and has plans to restore the façade to its original appearance.

The degree to which the slipcover alters the appearance of a building also varies. The slipcovering of the 1879 Stegeman Building at 502 Main hid the upper façade but did not obscure the ornamental brackets and cornice. In contrast, the exterior face of 905 Main was completely sheathed in granite panels. Great care, it seems, was taken to infill the window openings with concrete block and cover them from both the interior and exterior sides. The primary clue that this was a slipcovered building came from the historic photographs that depicted a building of identical massing. Despite the damage inflicted by the slipcover, the façade of 905 Main recently underwent a meticulous reconstruction to restore the building to its original appearance. The Krupp & Tuffly Building next door, a fanciful Art Deco edifice designed by prolific Houston architect Alfred Finn, suffered the same fate. The only hint of what lies behind the current dull monolithic façade is the Deco detailing, visible from the street, that decorates the elevator penthouse.

The upper façades of smaller, low-rise buildings often were completely covered—including windows—in order to create a cleaner appearance. The resulting large, unobstructed area could then serve as a billboard-size space to identify the occupant of the building, as in the case of “The Home of Easy Credit” and “The Hub” on the 300 block of Main. 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 unimpressive commercial building at Main and Lamar—formerly

home to Everitt-Buelow Clothiers—led to the discovery of intact arched steel sash casement windows behind storage shelving lining the outer walls. These windows had been hidden from exterior view for years by a slipcover of travertine panels. Upon further investigation of the 16-inch space between the original façade and the newer stone panels, glimpses of glazed terra-cotta acanthus leaves, medallions, Corinthian pilasters, and other ornate architectural detailing were seen. Photos taken of the building sometime in the 1940s confirmed that behind the blank travertine there was an exquisite Spanish Renaissance Revival façade.

Attorney Scott Arnold was one of the first building owners in downtown to reverse the modern alterations made to his Victorian storefront. Arnold says that he knew intuitively that there was more to the bland plaster façade at 310 Main than met the eye when he was looking for a building to house his law offices in 1994. Like those of the Everitt-Buelow Building, the windows on the second and third floors of Arnold's building had been completely covered—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,” explains Arnold. “About that same time I think I had acquired a [historic] picture of the building, so I had a pretty good idea of what it looked like originally and what was likely underneath.”

Since larger commercial buildings were typically occupied by offices that relied on access to natural light, it was not practical to cover their windows. The nondescript office high-rise now known as 806 Main was originally a 16-story structure built in 1910 by Samuel Carter—the tallest building in Houston at the time. The building was called “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 1969, the building was sheathed in Georgian marble. Remnants of the original Beaux Arts detailing are still visible at the corners where the slipcover did not completely hide the brick quoining. The elaborate conference room on the second floor, originally serving as the Second National Bank Board Room, remains intact, betraying the attempts at modernization of the rest of the building.

Slipcovered buildings are not limited to Main Street, or to downtown. Many more await attention or even discovery. Unfortunately, on some buildings too much historic fabric has been lost in the process of slipcovering 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 that hides the Richardsonian Romanesque façade of what was originally the Kiam Annex building is itself about 50 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.

Although many have come to appreciate the value and character of older buildings, we are now in danger of repeating the errors of the past. The irony is that many worthwhile examples of modern architecture are being, if not slipcovered, altered in ways that are 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 and should be respected for what they are, regardless of their period. — Paul Homeyer