



The Main Street Sears (Nimmons, Carr and Wright, 1939) was once Houston's premier retail outlet. But since the late 1960s, when its Art Deco design was covered under a cloak of brick and beige metal, it has declined in appearance and appeal.

## When Good Buildings Go Bad

Though you can't tell by looking, the Sears store at Main and Wheeler is still open. How long that will be the case, though, is anyone's guess. The parent corporation is reportedly going to close the store soon due to poor economic performance. Not that the poor performance should be any surprise to Sears executives. How, after all, do they expect to attract Target and Wal-Mart customers to shop at one of the least attractive and uninviting stores in town?

It wasn't always so. Underneath all that present ugliness is an Art Deco gem—underappreciated, largely unrecognized, and terribly threatened. The store opened on November 16, 1939, to great acclaim. With three stories and a basement, 194,000 square feet, free parking for 700 cars, and a construction budget of \$1 million, the Main Street Sears was a bombshell. It was Houston's largest department store, it was in the "windowless style" (air conditioning and controlled lighting obviated the need for fenestration), it had the city's first escalator, capable of carrying 6,000 people per hour, and across Fannin it had the city's largest

service station, with 16 gas pumps and 12 mechanic's stalls.

But the real impact lay in the Main Street Sears' positioning as a large, first-tier department store not located in the central business district. Easy to get to, quick to get in and out of, with free parking, it was an instant success, and a kind of petri dish for Houston's postwar boom in suburban shopping centers.

Aside from its impressive statistics, the store had a deserved architectural reputation. Designed as a modern prototype by the Chicago firm Nimmons, Carr and Wright, the Houston project had Art Deco siblings in Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, and Glendale, California. Alfred C. Finn was the local associate architect, and Knutsen Construction Company built it. With a structure of reinforced concrete, the store had a projecting base that incorporated show windows that were surrounded by granite cladding. The mezzanine roof was utilized for special promotional displays or Christmas decorations. The upper floors, clad in stucco, featured triple vertical glass block accents, and the roof parapet was elegantly articulated by a simple "pie crust"

crenellation. On the main floor, artist Eugene Montgomery provided a series of heroic murals depicting Texas history from the time of the Spanish to the present.

The architectural provenance of the site reaches back to the 19th century. When "The Country Place," with its outstanding craftsman-style interiors, was built in 1895 at 4301 Main Street, the site contained 35 acres and featured landscaped gardens and tennis courts. After the Walter B. Sharp family vacated the house in 1917, it was leased to R.L. Blaffer, whose family lived there while their own house was under construction in Shadyside. In the late 1920s the building was converted to offices, whose prestigious tenants included a Who's Who list of Houston architects: John Staub, Kenneth Franzheim, Harry D. Payne, Maurice Sullivan, Birdsall Briscoe. In 1938 the property was sold to Sears and Roebuck and cleared for construction.

Sears really was a flagship store for Houstonians, and made customers feel wonderful—from the free popcorn at the door, to the best Santa Claus and toy department in town, to the well-trained and courteous sales staff. It didn't hurt

that customers nationwide considered the company's appliances and hardware stock to be the best.

What happens to cause good buildings to go bad? In the case of Houston, it was the threat of race riots. In the tumultuous aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968, local Black Panther activist Lee Otis Johnson organized an 8,000-person strong memorial march, which unsettled much of the business community. Sears, watching from a Chicago torn apart the same summer, reacted by bricking up almost all the Houston store's show windows and cladding the elegant upper stories with beige metal. And so Fort Sears has remained ever since, hiding from an evolving international city and culture, and wondering where all the shoppers went.

As the slip-covered deco building awaits its uncertain future, it is worth recalling the dedicatory remarks uttered by Robert E. Wood, then Sears' chairman of the board, on that opening day in November 1939: "We are loyal to our customers and to our employees. And we want to be good citizens." It seems, somehow, so long ago. — *Barry Moore*