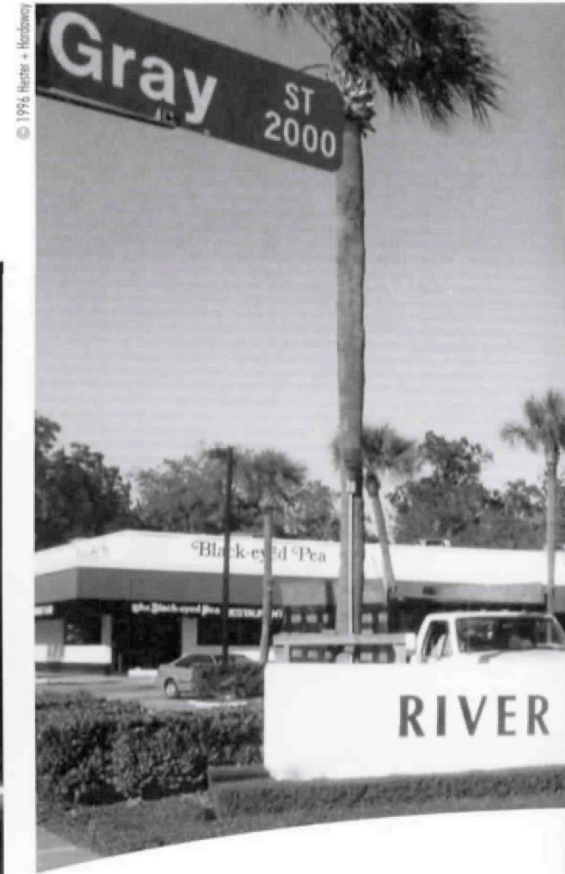




Shipley's Donut Shop at West Gray and Dunlavy, ca. 1979; demolished.



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D R E X E L



Santa Claus display, 1941, in front of Mrs. Baird's Bakery, 1700 block West Gray, Alfred C. Finn, 1938; demolished.

Gray Avenue is not a particularly lustrous street, even by Houston standards. It is named for an eminent Houston jurist, Peter Gray (1819–1874), but no one really knows that anymore. It shows up in maps as early as 1866 running perpendicular to Main Street for a dozen or so blocks, but it was not until the mid-1930s that West Gray arrived at the gates of River Oaks, a ten-minute drive from downtown, as the Hogg brothers' promotional brochure had promised. Despite its impeccable namesake, chromatic connotations die hard. So when Gray slipped across Shepherd Drive into the cabin class section of River Oaks, en route to the eponymous country club, it exchanged its name for the tonier, verdant Inwood and never looked back.

Well, almost never. For either side of the two blocks just east of the *côte basque* of River Oaks, West Gray — with a little help from the River Oaks Corporation — managed a most un-Houston transformation, in the form of a smart, well-ordered strip shopping center that remains a citywide anomaly to this day. The center's first increment, begun in 1937, welcomed pioneer consumers of the nascent 77019 zip code with a semicircular band of shops facing west onto Shepherd, defining an exedra-shaped parking area ornamented by a pair of streamlined service stations. (According to the River Oaks prospectus,

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Bob Bailey Studios



## GRAY LINE

### T U R N E R

Stephen F. Austin passed through the neighborhood a century before but was unable to procure drinking water for horses or riders.) Beyond the Piazza di Petroleo, the architects, Oliver Winston with Stayton Nunn and Milton McGinty, brought shop rows close to Gray, leaving a slender paved margin for head-on street parking. A second phase, built in 1948 on either side of the next block east (William G. Farrington Co., architects; Ray Brogniez, designer), placed continuous one- and two-story frontages just far enough back to admit a double loaded aisle of off-street parking.

The effect was something like a prophylactic transition to the disarray that lay even farther east of Eden. It hardly mattered that the center's shops and eateries were mostly ordinary, or that the movie house that arrived in 1940 (Pettigrew and Worley, architects) showed only second-run features. It was enough that the center looked and acted the part of a mercantile Via della Conciliazione, catering to the needs of a genteel clientele in search of an occasional carton of moo goo gai pan or a package of Alka Seltzer. But as shopping became more plentiful up and down Shepherd and along Westheimer Road and Kirby Drive in the post-World War II years, the center's prospects dimmed, its offerings declined, and it even began to look a little forlorn. Where once trade dress had been

*de rigueur*, aberrant awnings, come-hither nean, and over-reaching parapets sprouted.

In 1971 the Weingarten Market Realty Company acquired the center in partnership with the American National Insurance Corporation of Galveston. The new owners first proceeded to extend the center a block farther east on the north side of Gray by constructing a drab tilt-wall Weingarten's grocery store and an ancillary block of shops including a Walgreen's drug-store and a Goodyear tire store — all placed as far back from the street as possible behind a virtual sea of parking. In 1975, as if to make amends, the management set about a tactful revival of the older parts of the center. As leasing agent for the center, Mike Woods convinced several up-and-coming art galleries — Cronin, Moody, and Texas — to relocate to affordable spaces on the back, south side of the center along Peden Street. On the front he lined up a singles bar and pizzeria to replace a paint store; a ready-to-wear boutique that made fitting room for adherents of Gloria Steinheim as well as Diana Vreeland; a French bakery with a green-card-certified baguette; and a fire-breathing Hunan restaurant. To further exorcise the demons of stodginess, Woods tucked in an after-hours club and leased studio space up above shops and restaurants to the Houston Ballet and Theatre Under the Stars.

In concert with Woods's program to reconstitute the tenant mix, Eugene Aubry of S. I. Morris Architects was given brush blanche to improve the center's curb appeal. A coat of white paint was applied to the stucco and brick expanses of the upper walls to set them off from the black Vitrolite and tile cladding below; a canvas frieze of graphically muted white-on-black silk-screened signs was installed as a 15-mile-an-hour gazetteer; and dozens of full-grown Washingtonia palm trees were trucked in from Florida and planted single file up against the curb. Aubry's Gulf Coast tuxedo chic has endured several minor makeovers since — including the addition of a pair of incongruous clocks over the entrances to the courtyards of 1964 and 1973 West Gray in 1988. But most improvements have been low key, including a recent series of peripheral adjustments by architects Suzanne LaBarthe and John Rodgers that focus on making the center pedestrian-friendlier, particularly in and around eating establishments.

This last concern mirrors the predicament of the center's success: its emergence as a multiplex of more or less affordable, market-trended (and parking-intensive) cuisineries supplemented by whatever else can pay the freight. All but one of the art galleries has moved on to other track-lit venues. A few small specialty retailers remain — cameras, records, dancewear — those such standbys as a hardware store, an old prints shop, the pâtisserie, and a foreign-language bookstore have departed. Meanwhile, the arrival of such lucrative

franchises as Starbucks, Chili's, and Talbot's confirms the essential logic of the new order. The one notable holdout is the the River Oaks Theater, which in a reversal of the fortune of every other vintage movie house in Houston has survived in a mainstream "art" film format with its balcony converted into two mini-screens but its 600 orchestra seats anachronistically intact.

Outside the short but charmed corridor of the River Oaks Shopping Center, the rest of West Gray was left to catch as catch could. The few landmarks it offered have since succumbed to market forces: the pylon-prowed Golden Girl (later Captain John's) Restaurant (Stayton Nunn-Milton McGinty, architects, 1940), replaced by a Pier 1; the precariously cantilevered, Wright-angled Rettig's Ice Cream Parlor (MacKie & Kamrath, architects, 1948) ploughed under for parking; and Donald Barthelme's mildly Jetsonian Humble (later Exxon) service station, replaced first by a more conventional station that in turn gave way to a value-added olive oil dispensary, La Griglia (Kirksey-Meyers Architects, 1992), substituting table for pump service. The enormous Moderne concrete Mrs. Baird's Bakery (Alfred C. Finn, 1938), which once provided a wonderbread-white backdrop for annual Santa Claus visits and conspicuous offstreet parking for sleigh and reindeer, was recently leveled to make way for Blockbuster Video, a branch bank, and a bigger Walgreen's, the last two incorporating drive-in windows. A four-story loft apartment building is about to go up across the street. Even the Shipley's Donut Shop that once warmed the northeast of Dunlavy and West Gray with its steam-curling, pre-latte-era cup-of-coffee sign, has been dispatched, along with several acres of mostly empty real estate, to make room for River Oaks Plaza — a reservoir of parking anchored by a 12-screen Odeon Cineplex, Luby's Cafeteria, and Office Max.

"Form follows parking," as Michael Eisner explained in the October 1996 issue of *Harper's*, apropos the wonders of the pedestrian-friendly Disney new town, Celebration, which eschews chain stores in its meticulously scripted town center

for home-grown shops like those that made do for the River Oaks Shopping Center in its first incarnation. An early advertisement for the center noted that its developers had provided parking for 1,000 automobiles on 150,000 square feet of asphalt: "No disturbing thoughts of parking tickets, of swiftly ticking meters, will plague the patrons of River Oaks Shopping Center," the anxiety-prone were reassured. Yet the relative grace with which this not-inconsiderable inventory of spaces could be accommodated 50 years ago is evidently a lost art, judging from the rest of West Gray today. Even the new, woefully misdelivered U.S. Post Office adopts the full-frontal parking format of its non-competitors.

Although the River Oaks Shopping Center currently exceeds, by almost 25 per cent, the four parking spaces per 1,000 square feet of retail area required by the City of Houston's off-street parking ordinance for multi-use shopping centers, parking is nevertheless in short supply. Where the center's initial promoters once saw nothing but wide open parking spaces ahead, the restaurants that account for much of the leasing frenzy of late are parking-intensive, as reflected in the city's standard of eight parking spaces per 1,000 square feet for freestanding restaurants. In an effort to stave off parking deficit syndrome while saving the face that attracts well-wheeled cardthrifts to begin with, the center is presently contemplating bi-level structured parking for the surface lot behind 1964 West Gray among other measures.

Perhaps nowhere but Houston would the provision of a double aisle of parking between sidewalk and shop window be considered a gift to the street. But on West Gray, where even the second increment of the River Oaks Shopping Center will soon become eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, it accounts for much of the civility and competitive advantage of this reburnished remnant of an all-but-vanished middle retail landscape ■



West Gray and River Oaks Shopping Center, through the gates to River Oaks.