

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING STORE

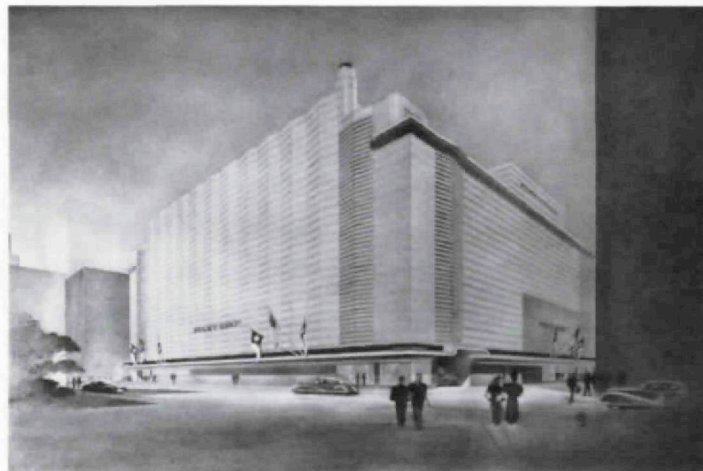
FOLEY'S DEPARTMENT STORE, DOWNTOWN HOUSTON

Bruce C. Webb



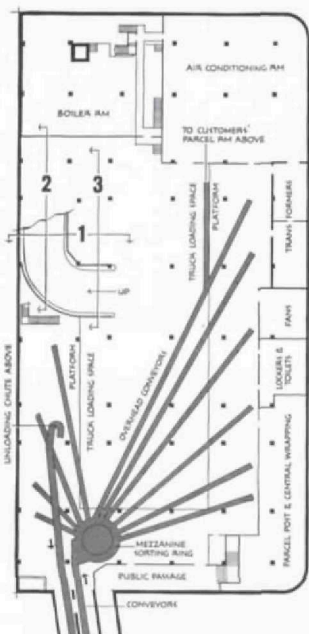
Elwood M. Payne

Foley's main entrance, 1948.



Foley Brothers Department Store. Preliminary design, Kenneth Franzheim, architect, 1945; Thomas Greacen II, delineator.

Bob Bailey Studios, Inc.



Basement plan showing route of merchandise from truck platform to sorting ring, tunnel under Travis Street, and receiving and marking area in main store. From there it was taken on wheeler lifts to stock receiving areas on each floor.

In the classical model, the form of cities was analogous to the classical structure of the atom: concentric rings of lightweight, suburban electrons spinning around a denser and more consequential nucleus. Whatever the city contained in the way of commercial, civic, and social life would naturally find its greatest concentration and most diverse expression at the center, gradually thinning and becoming more purified toward the fringes. A visitor to a new and unfamiliar city could always anticipate this arrangement, expecting that downtown he would find the "heart of the city."

Most American cities still look that way: tall buildings clustered tightly together, making the most of premium land and forming a kind of symbolic focus for the expanding suburbs and sprawling horizontal hinterlands. Even Houston looks

that way. But in Houston, at least since the 1960s, the role of downtown as the center of things has been more a matter of geometry than real life. Paradoxically, as the downtown area grew it became less diverse and less... well, *urban*, trading its retail life for sculpted highrise office towers and parking garages connected by a labyrinthine network of underground tunnels and concourses. On the plus side, the city recently added a new, first-class convention center, a performance hall, and the beginnings of a bayou park adjoining the theater district. The conversion of the old Albert Thomas Convention Center into a space-age entertainment mall adjoining the theater district should also pump up the downtown action.

But downtown Houston in the 1980s, although much grander than it was two decades ago, is far less varied as an activity center. Basically all one can do is work in the office towers by day or attend performing arts events at night. The rest of what might be called the "life" of the city — shops, restaurants, hotels, museums, and parks — is spread thinly across a broad panorama of suburban centers, some of which, like Greenway Plaza and the Galleria, have added their own tower markers to the skyline. As early as 1972, Peter Papademetriou, in his perceptive essay in *Houston: An Architectural Guide*,¹ noted the inverse relationship between the dramatic new growth and the accommodation of real diversity in the central business district, concluding that even as it lost much of its everyday, functional centrality, downtown was likely to retain at least an occasional symbolic focus, since it was still the best place to have a parade.

But then there was Foley's. No matter how many times it cloned itself in miniature satellite versions located in ever-expanding suburban orbits, Foley's always had the big store downtown to serve as a kind of Copernican center. The big store was truly big — ten city-block-size floors of merchandise offering selections and service that made the shopping-center versions look like frontier outposts by comparison. A trip

to Sharpstown Mall was routine, but shopping in the downtown store was serious business. Long-term Houstonians can recall how Foley's downtown exerted an almost magnetic attraction. In its heyday in the fifties and sixties it featured four restaurants and a "town hall" auditorium and served as the commercial "town square" for celebrating the retail solstices and equinoxes: Christmas, Easter, Swimwear, and Back to School. In a downtown always notoriously lacking in big stores, Foley's was *the* place, a position of preeminence it nurtured with public events like the "Splendida Italia" festival in 1965, a half-million-dollar extravaganza that featured art shows, musical performances, a Pinocchio village and daily marionette shows by the Italian National Puppet Theater, and, as the pièce de résistance, a two-thirds-scale papier-mâché reproduction of the Trevi Fountain in the big vista window that once marked the Main Street entrance, guarded by Italian carabinieri. Or the "Golden Anniversary" fête in 1950: to celebrate a successful half-century of growth and progress, Foley's filled the vista window with an elaborate artist's model of "The City of Tomorrow" that looked like a set from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, with an expanded 12-story version of Foley's own store positioned front and center.

More than just a store, Foley's was a symbol of retail ingenuity inextricably woven into the public life of the city. Sponsorship of the big Thanksgiving Day parade, which marks the start of the Christmas shopping frenzy, began in 1950 with one float delivering Santa Claus from Union Station to the downtown store. The one-float parade attracted such a large and enthusiastic crowd that Foley's has repeated the event for the past four decades, each year's parade a little bigger than the one before. A city bus strike in 1950 prompted Foley's to take to the airwaves in a pioneering version of a home shopping show: merchandise was displayed on television, and customers could order by phone and have their purchases delivered to their homes by the store's fleet of trucks. In 1970 a group of women's rights advocates rallying in front of the Federal Building marched on Foley's to liberate the Men's Grill, a "sexregated" sanctuary of sirloin and cigar smoke on the store's second floor. Besides seeking entry to the grill, the women were also protesting the fact that larger entrees were served there than in the fifth-floor Azalea Terrace tea room, where the ladies lunched.

Even when Sakowitz, its more upscale downtown competition across the street, joined the exodus of downtown retailers a few years ago, Foley's hung on in the familiar ten-story, windowless block of orange brick and Minnesota limestone it has occupied since 1947, its ads proclaiming its location: "At the heart of Texas, Foleecccyy's." But now, under the management of the May Company (which also owns Lord & Taylor), Foley's has pared back its flagship store to a mere six stories of retail space, consolidating the profitable departments and reassigning the abandoned space as central offices for its far-flung empire of suburban stores. The basement, formerly the site of the bargain store, has been cleared and redecored for other uses; a portion is given over to Foley's Academy, an HISD magnet program offering self-paced, individualized instruction for academically capable underachievers and dropouts. The remainder will be used as headquarters for the OASIS project, a new senior citizens' activity and service center sponsored by Foley's and Memorial Care Systems. The retail retrenchment to six stories makes the central store about the same size as the larger suburban stores, Sharpstown (390,000 square feet) and Greenspoint (310,000).



Trevi Fountain display, "Splendida Italia" festival, 1965.

Ever the good citizen, Foley's was always one step ahead of Houston. The present downtown store opened in 1947 just ahead of the downtown growth boom, replacing a series of smaller quarters that had been successively outgrown in the years since Foley's was founded by two brothers in 1900. Houstonians and Houston watchers alike hailed the opening of the big new store as a landmark event, evidence of faith in the fast-growing city. Despite its steady growth and a reputation for a raw-bones entrepreneurial attitude, Houston in the 1940s still had not acquired the look and feel of a big city; as Fred Lazarus, head of Federated Stores, said, "When the Lord distributed department stores, he forgot Houston."² Lazarus, whose firm purchased Foley's in 1945, was in a position to do something about the divine oversight. He set out to build not only the biggest but the best-planned store in the South.

On October 20, 1947, the public got its first look inside the streamlined interior of the new attraction, which the press hailed as "The Store of Tomorrow." The opening put Houston in the limelight. *Time* and *Newsweek* sent reporters. Even the *New Yorker* (September 27, 1947), while not actually present at the festivities, did cover the "road company celebration" in the Maisonette of the St. Regis Hotel in New York, devoting more attention to a bevy of cowmen delivering a four-foot-wide Texas-shaped cake, embellished with sugar bluebonnets and surmounted by a wooden model of the new store, than it did to the actual event down in Texas. Both *Progressive Architecture* (July 1948) and *Architectural Forum* (April 1947) carried extensive articles on the technical innovations and the systems approach developed by Houston architect Kenneth Franzheim and his collaborator, famed industrial designer Raymond Loewy.

Compared to the puffery and self-conscious elegance of Sakowitz and Neiman Marcus, Foley's style seemed almost willfully middle class. Loewy's extensive studies of merchandising and department store operations resulted in a store that was more a huge mercantile machine than a retail palace, a place of convenience and efficiency – the modern (or middle-class) equivalents of luxury

and elegance. *Architectural Forum* wrote that the store was "designed to express modern merchandising methods rather than glorify the architectural or decorative approach."

The design project actually involved three buildings working in tandem: the retail store on Main Street, a five-story parking garage across Travis Street connected to the store by a tunnel, and a distribution warehouse on Eastwood Street where heavy merchandise was stored. The linked parking garage would prove to have the most lasting influence on other downtown buildings, but the striking feature of the new building from the outside was its lack of windows on all but the ground floor. An extensive ribbon display window under a concrete canopy at street level created the distinctly modern illusion of a heavy, massive block floating on air. Windows had been eliminated because they wasted both space and air-conditioning, and besides, who needed to look outside when the real purpose of a retail store was to keep the customer looking at the merchandise, which was of course displayed under controlled lighting conditions? The perimeter was given over to storerooms and stocking lanes, leaving the vast interior spaces unencumbered except for concrete columns placed at 35-foot intervals and a central core of "electric stairs" running from the basement to the top floor.

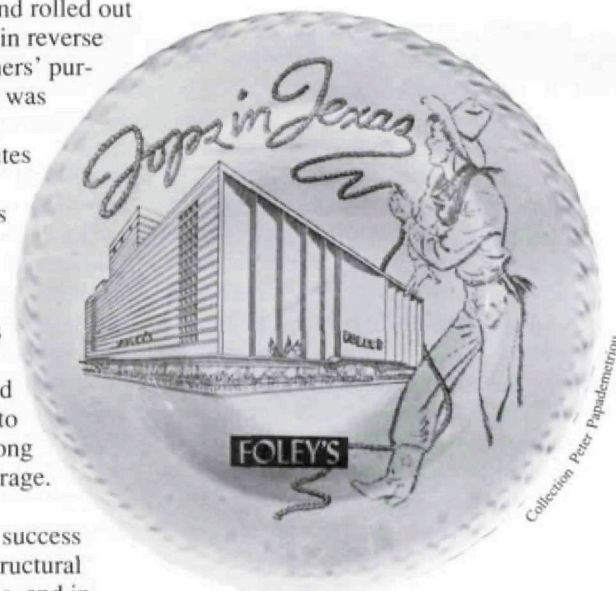
But the most radical innovation was the way Loewy and Franzheim organized and mechanized the movement of goods. Incoming merchandise was unloaded in the garage across Travis, dumped onto a conveyor belt, and transported to the store's basement for marking and pricing. It was then piled onto pallets, carried by elevator to the proper floor, and rolled out for display. A similar system in reverse was used for handling customers' purchases. Selected merchandise was wrapped, then dropped down strategically placed spiral chutes onto a conveyor belt in the basement that carried it across to the garage. Customers would find their purchases waiting for them when they returned to their cars. Besides the convenience, old-timers remember the fun children had racing down to the basement to watch their packages glide along on the overhead belt to the garage.

The designers anticipated the success of the new store by making structural provision for additional stories, and in 1955 Foley's stacked four new city-block floors atop the existing building, nudging it again into the ranks of the South's largest stores. Ironically, the recent shrinking of its retail space reduced Foley's to its 1947 dimensions, a diminution paralleled elsewhere in the



"Saga of the Century, Houston 2000 A.D." Display window on the occasion of Foley's 50th anniversary celebration, 1950. An expanded, 12-story version of Foley's downtown store is visible in the foreground of the center panel.

Retail shopping was the glue that held the downtown together, and the evolution of the department store pretty well parallels the evolution of cities in America. The museums of our everchanging fads and fascinations, they helped to show everyone just what the city had to offer.



Commemorative plate, Vernon Kilns, October 1947.

Somehow the situation in Houston – a new convention center in the midst of a dwindling retail district – just doesn't add up. Foley's still hosts the big Thanksgiving Day parade in downtown Houston, but any other day of the year that momentary focus could be replaced by the following scenario. Someone walks out of the convention center and announces that he wants to see the city. He's packed into a car and driven north, south, east, and west, always with the downtown buildings in the rearview mirror. Then he's taken out to some distant vantage point, perhaps on the South Loop, where he can look back to the cluster of gleaming towers, knotted together and looking a little like Oz. Pointing him in the right direction, his guide announces, "Look over there. That's Houston." ■

Notes

¹ *Houston: An Architectural Guide* (Houston Chapter, American Institute of Architects, 1972), p. 32.

² "Federated Foley's," *Newsweek*, 3 November 1947, p. 60.