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Modernism for the Masses

Foley's Department Store gave average Houstonians a window on the wider postwar world

BY STEVEN R. STROM

WRITING IN PARIS during the 1930s, the German-Jewish social philosopher Walter Benjamin began work on a massive project to document the city's 19th-century material culture. Benjamin maintained that an examination of the already decrepit Parisian Arcades, the über-shopping malls of Western culture, and of the products and goods sold to shoppers in the Arcades would reveal virtually everything about the material life of Paris in the 1800s. While the "Arcades Project," as it has come to be known, was never completed—Benjamin committed suicide in 1940 after the German invasion of France—Benjamin's ideas ultimately helped to inspire the study of material culture as an entirely separate discipline. In today's fashionable intellectual parlance, the discipline is increasingly referred to as the study of "things."

An enormous amount of information about the material, social, and cultural life of Houston in the mid-20th century is revealed by the goods, services, and civic activities provided by downtown Houston's Foley's department store, designed by architect Kenneth Franzheim and completed in 1947. Foley's became

intimately intertwined with the lives of tens of thousands of Houstonians from the late 1940s through the early '60s, when population growth and suburbanization eventually combined to limit the influence that any single store could have in the city. During that economically expansive era, Foley's virtually defined for many what it meant to be a middle-class Houstonian. From the styles and colors of appliances that went into local kitchens, to the rows of some of the first television sets ever sold in the city, to the dreamlike conception of what constituted Christmas in hot, muggy Houston, Foley's was the arbiter of middle-class consumers' expectations and desires. For many years after the store's opening, its window displays were practically tourist attractions in their own right, particularly during the holiday season, when long lines of cars would slowly circle the block so passengers could view the store's show windows. Indeed, visits to Foley's made lasting impressions on postwar baby boomers lucky enough to accompany their parents on downtown shopping expeditions.

And it was not merely the sale and display of consumer goods that helped

Foley's make such an indelible mark on Houston's social history. If any single building fit the mood of prosperous, post-World War II Houston in an architectural and design sense, this was it. Franzheim's modernistic exterior never would have made the impact it did without the accompanying interiors by famed industrial designer Raymond Loewy, but the combined efforts of the two men made nationwide headlines when the store opened in October 1947. Because of its many design innovations, Foley's looms large in Houston's technological history. Foley's quickly became a nationally known symbol of architectural modernity, intertwined at every level with the latest standards of industrial efficiency. In many ways, Foley's was one of the earliest antecedents of the wave of technological futurism that swept the United States after World War II. In the postwar popular mind, technology was good and more technology was better. Although the past is in many ways—to use historian David Lowenthal's phrase—a "foreign country," Foley's in those first years after the store's opening offers us a doorway to Houston's past and makes that past a great deal less



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strange and remote. And for that matter, the store's history offers us a window into our present.

The last time a feature article about Foley's appeared in the pages of *Cite* ("The Incredible Shrinking Store," *Cite* 23, Fall 1989), author Bruce Webb's tone was decidedly downbeat, and with good reason. Foley's seemed to be emblematic of a declining downtown, or as Webb succinctly pointed out, "Main Street is mainly history." Today, however, Foley's finds itself in the position of being the last surviving major downtown department store, poised now to take advantage of downtown's revitalization and rebirth.

Following the end of World War II, Houston's department stores had an enormous spurt of growth, even though the slowing down in sales of consumer goods during wartime had scarcely impacted the booming Houston economy. In fact, from 1939 to 1949 Houston ranked No. 1 in the country in percentage gain for retail sales for cities of more than 500,000 people. Much of this gain was accounted for during 1945 to 1949, when pent-up consumer demands were finally met by factory owners who were now able to

convert from the production of war-related items to the manufacture of consumer goods. In the context of the nationwide postwar economic boom, Houston's vibrant sales figures made the city a prime spot for retailers seeking to expand their mercantile empires.

In 1945, Foley Brothers Store—founded in 1900 by two nephews of William A. Foley, known as the dean of Houston dry goods merchants—was sold to Federated Department Stores of Cincinnati for \$3.5 million. By the time Fred Lazarus, Jr., the head of Federated, visited Houston in 1945, Foley's had been the city's leading department store in sales since the 1920s. Lazarus was so excited by the possibilities for Houston's growth in the postwar economy that in May 1945, the same month that he purchased Foley's, he announced his plans to build a new \$6 million store that would occupy the entire block bounded by Main, Travis, Lamar, and Dallas.

The new Foley's store soon came to symbolize all that was modern and futuristic in the popular American imagination, a role that Houston would play many times in the coming decades. The store

was among the first large-scale, postwar construction projects and the first entirely new large department store to be built in the United States since 1929. Houston and the nation followed the development of the new store through newspaper and magazine accounts, which reported the progress of the massive six-story building. Stories of the construction were carried in periodicals as varied as *Business Week*, *Life*, *Progressive Architecture*, and *The New Yorker*. To many observers, the national interest in the project meant that Houston had finally arrived as a legitimate player among America's cities. And the timing of the new Foley's store could not have been better. As the World War II alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union quickly degenerated into a cold war, consumerism was increasingly represented as the best defense against Stalinism and communism.

Architect Kenneth Franzheim had made a name for himself in New York, Washington, D.C., and Houston as an exponent of Modernism, and he was highly attuned to the economic possibilities for architects in the postwar period, making him a perfect fit for the massive Foley's

1. Architect Kenneth Franzheim (right) at the 1946 unveiling of the model of his proposed design for the new Foley's department store. Looking on from left to right are Federated Department Stores officials Maurice Lazarus, Max Levine, Robert Ewing, and George Cohen. With the construction of Foley's in 1947, Franzheim began a decade of outstanding architectural achievements in Houston, including the Prudential Building (1952) and the Bank of the Southwest building (1956). *Photo courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.*

2. This shot of Foley's was taken the weekend before the store's grand opening, which took place on Monday, October 20, 1947. The store's six and one-half floors and basement covered slightly more than 11 acres in total area. During the opening ceremonies, Max Levine, the president of Foley's, announced to the waiting crowds that Foley's was "the finest department store that architectural skill and engineering genius could devise." *Photo courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.*

3. Rendering of Foley's Main Street entrance show window, known as the vista window, which had a span of 105 feet and featured many spectacular theme displays through the 1960s. The delineator of this 1946 rendering was a young Thomas Greacen, who would go on to become a well-known Houston architect in his own right during the 1950s and 1960s after leaving Franzheim's office and beginning his own practice. *Photo courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.*

4. Foley's garage on the store's opening day, with a line of cars waiting to park in the new structure. With space for 500 automobiles, the garage played an integral part in what the *Saturday Evening Post* dubbed "the super-duper mechanization" of the store, particularly with its mechanized conveyor belts that delivered goods from the garage to the store and customers' packages from the store to the garage. The parking garage also housed the store's heating and air-conditioning plants. *Photo courtesy Houston Photographic and Architectural Trust, Bob Bailey Studios Photographic Archive, Center for American History, UT-Austin.*



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project. Franzheim published an oversized book in 1946 titled *Post-War Planning: Houston*, which contained renderings of projects, both completed and proposed, to show future clients the crisp, clean architectural look that his firm was capable of achieving. Similarly, New York-based Raymond Loewy was the perfect designer for Foley's, as he was also well attuned to the enormous possibilities presented by postwar architecture. Loewy had read a 1944 study by William Snaith, his fellow designer and future partner, titled *The Store of Tomorrow*, prepared for the Associated Merchandising Corporation. Snaith, who would later serve as a Foley's design consultant, demonstrated that by maximizing mechanization, any store could cut costs. However, almost all existing stores were prevented from achieving this potential because of their inherent design flaws. Snaith maintained that a newly built store could maximize efficiency and profits by means of a utilitarian design scheme. Loewy was excited by the prospect of designing a new store and was certain that the functional utility of Foley's would "produce entirely new architectural forms."

In Franzheim's completed plans, the most abrupt departure from traditional department store architecture was the total lack of windows above the first floor, although massive plate-glass show windows ringed the store at street level. The store's exterior was faced with buff-colored Minnesota stone and matching brick. But beyond Franzheim's sleek exterior, it was Loewy's interior design contributions that did the most to estab-

lish Foley's reputation as a bulwark of functional Modernism.

Great care was taken to harmonize all of the store's color schemes, and Loewy insisted that every fixture in the store meet his standards. There were 5,619 different types of lighting fixtures scattered through the store. Escalators were specially made by Westinghouse to be 48 inches wide, giving customers a feeling of expansiveness, not to mention allowing them to carry more packages as they rode. Ceilings were dropped to a height of 14 feet on the first floor and ten feet nine inches on the remaining floors (much lower than usual) to allow for economical heating, lighting, and air conditioning. The lack of windows above the first floor kept out the harsh Houston sunlight and also contributed significantly to heating and cooling efficiency.

Sales departments were arranged to fan out from the escalators toward the perimeter of the building with related merchandise grouped in logical arrangements, an innovation that shoppers take for granted today. Supporting columns were spaced 35 feet apart, which gave greater flexibility in the arrangement of sales departments. In many instances, the wide spacing of the columns meant that entire departments were unbroken by a single column, contributing to the orderly lines of sales counters and display cabinets. Another unique sales aspect for the time was the grouping of all women's accessories on the first floor, which was laid with pink marble. Every aspect of the store's floor plans maximized the efficiency of crowd movement, while simulta-

neously plying customers' senses with the wonderful delights of consumerism.

One of Foley's most novel features was its six-story, enclosed, companion parking garage, located across the street from the Travis entrance, for few American buildings of any type had separate parking facilities at the time. In many ways, the garage was the cornerstone of the Foley's efficiency spree, since it played a pivotal role in the moving of merchandise and shoppers. In older cities, department stores were often scenes of great traffic congestion, with delivery trucks trying to unload merchandise and cars jamming adjacent streets in an attempt to find parking spaces.

The Foley's parking garage eliminated much of this potential problem by providing 500 parking spaces, and shoppers could avoid the street and the weather by traveling directly to the store through a pedestrian tunnel, one of the first in the city. Goods were delivered to the parking garage, and a conveyor belt took them to Foley's, where they then traveled by elevator to the appropriate department. Conversely, shoppers could place their purchases on another conveyor belt, sending them to the parking garage and their waiting cars.

It was only 19 months and 19 days from the Foley's groundbreaking ceremony on March 1, 1946, to the grand opening on October 20, 1947, and some of the construction statistics are still staggering. The store's price tag had ballooned to \$13 million, the equivalent of more than \$100 million today. The six-story building, along with its basement and

parking garage, covered an area of more than 11 acres. More than 22,000 cubic yards of concrete; 3,500,000 bricks; and 1,500 tons of reinforcing steel were used for the store's construction. The electrical system comprised 225 miles of wire, which powered enough electricity to serve the needs of a city of 15,000 people. The air-conditioning system's 16 miles of ductwork conveyed 600,000 cubic feet of air per minute into the store, and the air was completely recycled every five minutes.

On October 19, 1947, the night before the grand opening, an elaborate dinner was held for such dignitaries as Jesse Jones and William O'Dwyer, the mayor of New York City, who reportedly referred to Foley's as "the store of tomorrow." This quote was widely reprinted in the press, which gave the new store's architecture and design rapturous reviews. After the formal ribbon-cutting the next day by Mayor Oscar Holcombe, carried live by several local radio stations, some 8,000 people poured into Foley's each hour on that opening day, and they were greeted by the store's 2,000 employees. Few Houston shoppers were prepared for what they saw, since almost all Houstonians were used to crowded, nonfunctional department stores offering a jumble of goods and limited selections. Model rooms with furnishings, three model kitchens, a tea room that served 200 people, a fully stocked drug store, a beauty salon with 75 hair dryers, an enormous soda fountain, a men-only restaurant accessible from the men's clothing department—the list of firsts for a Houston department store went



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on and on. There were 135 separate fitting rooms for women on the third floor alone. From tropical fish to Top 40 records, the downtown Foley's carried practically everything.

Soon after the opening, the store was integrated into Houston's civic and social fabric. Red Cross, Community Chest, and cancer drives; scouting functions; and patriotic crusades all took place at Foley's. In 1950, as the cold war gradually intensified, a Crusade for Freedom display was mounted on the first floor, where visitors could sign a Freedom Scroll "to lift the iron curtain," and then view a replica of the Liberty Bell. Thousands of Houstonians signed the scroll during the first week of the display.

Not all of the activities sponsored by Foley's were so serious. The store regularly featured fashion shows and sponsored sports events, and in 1951 the first Foley's Thanksgiving parade (now sponsored by Washington Mutual) was held. This parade became a Houston tradition, drawing huge crowds to a downtown that customarily had been deserted on Thanksgiving Day. Foley's was also one of the largest sponsors of major civic events, including the Houston Symphony and the Fat Stock Show. And no holiday was complete for many Houstonians without a trip to Foley's, not only to shop but also to see the displays, exhibits, and decorated windows. Many thousands of Houston- and Gulf Coast-area children had their first glimpse of Santa Claus in Foley's elaborate Christmas village, which was usually followed by a trip to the adjacent Toyland.

The year 1950 marked Foley's 50th anniversary. Fittingly, that same year the American Institute of Architects awarded Foley's its national award for commercial architecture. The award was presented to Max Levine, president of Foley's, and Kenneth Franzheim. Throughout the 1950s and early '60s, Foley's continued to expand along with Houston. In 1955, four more stories were added to complete the store's current height, and Foley's continued to add updated products and sales departments to keep pace with increasingly sophisticated consumers. But as Houston grew and Foley's began to expand to suburban branches, the "store of tomorrow" was gradually subsumed by the "city of tomorrow," as Houston increasingly came to be identified with the Space Age. By Houston standards, where the past was almost always an unwelcome intrusion, a store designed in 1947 was hopelessly antiquated by the 1960s.

But it was Foley's that led Houston into the heady Modernism of the post-World War II years, and then was the first store to expose many Houstonians to the goods and services provided by modernity's industrial efficiency. Its functional beauty made it a beacon of Modernism for many years after its opening and a well-loved Houston landmark. Today, although Foley's is firmly anchored in a revived downtown and accessible to travelers on the METRORail, the store no longer occupies such a prominent place in the lives of many Houstonians. But unlike the Parisian Arcades, which were supplanted by the newly emerging department stores, Foley's survives as a viable

commercial entity, providing all of us with a window into Houston's past, present, and future. ■

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5. Glistening new television sets portend the technological future in this 1949 photo. Foley's was the first Houston store to sell television sets in mass quantities, and many Houstonians saw their first television program while shopping at downtown Foley's. Station KLEE-TV (later KPRC-TV) went on the air on New Year's Day, 1949, so the birth of television in Houston virtually coincided with the opening of the new Foley's store. Large crowds would congregate around the flickering, black-and-white sets in Foley's radio and television department to catch a glimpse of the new technology during the medium's early years. After the commercial production of color television sets began in 1954, crowds gathered once again around the Foley's color TV displays hoping to catch a glimpse of Perry Como or Milton Berle in "living color." *Photo courtesy Houston Photographic and Architectural Trust, Bob Bailey Studios Photographic Archive, Center for American History, UT-Austin.*

6. Nighttime shot of Main Street display windows and storefront decorations at Christmas 1948. Foley's lavish window displays, which became a local sightseeing attraction in their own right each Christmas season, were the midcentury product of highly refined theories of department store window decorating that were first developed during the 1890s to 1910s. One of the principal theorists behind display windows in the United States was L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*. Baum edited the influential trade journal *The Show Window* from 1897 to 1902 and founded the National Association of Window Trimmers. The rise of department store window displays coincided with the availability of electric lighting, which, combined with large glass windows and the use of vivid colors, showcased consumer goods to their best advantage. Foley's was well known for carrying its window displays to the level of an art form. The prediction by *Houston Magazine* before the store's completion that Foley's would be "the brightest eye-catcher in downtown Houston during the Christmas shopping season" proved to be highly accurate. *Photo courtesy Houston Photographic and Architectural Trust, Bob Bailey Studios Photographic Archive, Center for American History, UT-Austin.*

7. This photo of the women's handbags section on the first floor of Foley's, taken during the 1947 Christmas season, shows Raymond Loewy's original interior design scheme. Counters and displays could be reconfigured in many parts of the store for Easter, back-to-school, and other pivotal highlights in the retail sales calendar. At the far left, the down escalator from the second floor is visible. The store's escalators, manufactured especially for Foley's by Westinghouse, were the widest in the world when the store opened, and were specifically designed to enable women shoppers to carry larger and wider packages. Today, the escalators are one of the few Loewy design contributions still extant. In another notable innovation, the glass cases visible in this shot enabled shoppers to look directly at the merchandise. Traditionally, when department store customers asked a sales attendant for goods, the salesperson would pull the requested item from an enclosed drawer. *Photo courtesy Houston Photographic and Architectural Trust, Bob Bailey Studios Photographic Archive, Center for American History, UT-Austin.*