

# T H E V I

*If we don't have it, you don't need it.*

D A V I D K A P L A N



# V I L L A G E

In a busy block on University Boulevard between Kirby Drive and Morningside, the L.A.-trendy restaurant Baci, with its faux Rome-in-ruins façade, nestles beside sleepy Peterson's Pharmacy, built in — and still feeling like — 1940. Such juxtapositions define the Village (also referred to as Rice Village or University Village; insiders and old-timers just call it the Village). The Village shatters almost every Houston shopping-center stereotype. It has stores with names such as, on the one hand, Atelier and Ar-té-fact and, on the other hand, Dromgoole's Typewriter Shop. There are no anchor stores. It is not a mall. Instead of facing a freeway, it lies in the midst of tree-lined neighborhoods. And somewhere in it you can find almost anything. Unplanned and the better for it, the Village manages to remain unpolished, relaxed, and open to small-scale entrepreneurial vision. Take Iowa, at 2422 Rice Boulevard, for example. It features

American folk art, mostly from Iowa, tracked down by owner Jacqueline Schmeal. Not even Iowa has such a place.

The quirky history of the Village is a study in local culture. About 30 years ago, 2446 Times (now Tony's Alterations) was a hole-in-the-wall cafe called Blanche's Diner. According to a nephew of the late John and Albert Olson, who developed the Village, "Blanche looked like Mae West in her younger days, and her mother, who also worked there, looked like Mae West at the end of her career. They'd both sling hash and tell bawdy jokes. It had a vaudeville atmosphere." Cathy Klinger Irby remembers that on Thursday nights during the 1950s, a dress shop called the Mirror staged fashion shows inside Foote's Cafeteria next door on Rice Boulevard. In 1968, Bay Surf Shop at 2445 Times sold 7,000 surfboards, more than any other store in the United States, according to its former owner, Eric Rinkoff. For a short

time in the seventies there was a boxing gym next to G&G Model Shop on Times. Writer and Rice English professor Max Apple recalls: "It was a wonderful place, . . . a great big place. They had a regulation ring and a video library where you could watch the greatest fights of all time. You could put on trunks and get in the ring and fight." In the early 1980s on Rice Boulevard, across from The Baby's Room, Caribana, a spirited nightclub frequented by an international crowd, was one of the few clubs in America featuring live reggae music nightly. The Village has been, at one time or another, home to just about every kind of small business. It has never had a huge department store or car dealership, but it was the birthplace of the Rice food store chain and Otto's Office Supply; Tootsies first opened in the Village, as did Moeller's Bakery; the British Market (now British Isles Inc.) continues to be one of a kind, as is the card shop Iconography; while some old

favorites such as Sheer Insanity have closed their Village location or, like Gramophonics, a late-sixties hippie-intelligentsia record-and-bookstore on Rice, gone out of existence.

Local architectural historian Stephen Fox says that the Village, with its free-standing buildings under separate ownership, "resembles a little downtown." Fox describes Village buildings as "funky fifties commercial-modern architecture" and notes how strikingly different the Village is from contemporary linear centers such as the River Oaks Shopping Center and Highland Village that were developed as a whole piece. The Village, in contrast, was developed slowly, over time, by various interests.

George E. Olson, Jr., remembers the early forties, when the Village was a "ne'er-do-well frog pond," a flood-prone area with vacant lots, homes, and a few businesses. During the Depression, Olson's uncles, John and Albert Olson,



bought 60 vacant lots on Rice, Times, Bolsover, Kirby, Dunstan, and Amherst from a loan company. There were already some businesses on University and Rice boulevards, including Levy's Rice Boulevard Food Market at 2501 Rice Boulevard, opened in 1938; Peterson's Pharmacy; a Henke & Pillot grocery store; Campus Cleaners; and University State Bank. But the Olsons were the first to build on the scale of a shopping center.

The Olsons, who were in the home-building business, prepared for their venture into retail construction by going on a fact-finding mission. John Olson visited some of America's pioneer shopping centers in Dallas, Chicago, and St. Louis. In Kansas City he looked at the Country Club Plaza (1923), "the granddaddy of all shopping centers," says George Olson, who accompanied John on that trip and worked for his uncles in construction. John Olson brought back a Country Club Plaza lease agreement, on which he modeled leases for his Village tenants.

As Village developers, John and Albert took on separate roles, George recalls. Albert was Mr. Downtown, the urbane, well-dressed partner who could schmooze with the bankers. The less dap-

per John was the thinker of the team, the man most involved in construction.

It was John's decision to make his Village buildings out of reinforced concrete. "It cost more to build, but we could get better rent for them," George Olson says. "It would hold up in an atom bomb blast. That was a big deal back then." His cousin, Albert Olson, Jr., who was also involved in the development of the Village, says the greater consideration was that reinforced concrete was sturdy and less expensive to maintain.

The Olsons opened their shopping center in phases, beginning in 1948. They started with the block bounded by Kirby, Times, Amherst, and Village Parkway. Among the first Olson stores were Wagner Hardware; Schepp's, a women's boutique; Rodney's, a men's store; a laundromat; Kegg's Candies; and a One's A Meal diner. Key to the character of the Village today was the fact that the Olsons' land holdings were spotty — a block here, a block there. Buildings by other developers sprouted up in between the Olson properties, creating architectural diversity. Franklin Olson, a partner with the real estate developers Olson & Associates and the son of the late John

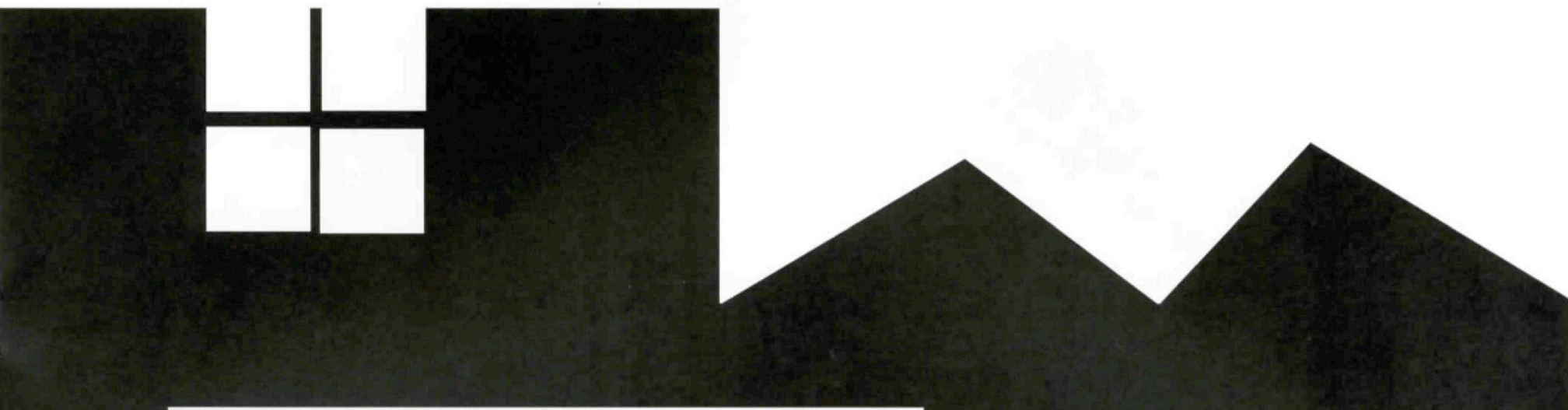
Olson, explains: "The Village had already been laid out in lots and tracts. What my father and Uncle Albert did was synthesize the concept of the small town and the shopping center. They didn't do it on purpose, necessarily. In their minds, it was a shopping center, but it turned out to be a little town."

Much of the original Olson property was sold in 1976 to Lamesa Properties, but it is not hard to identify the Olson-developed buildings. They are the ones with parking on the roof. John and Albert's brother, George, Sr., came up with that idea. "My father and uncle were particularly proud of the roof parking," says Franklin Olson. "They thought it was ahead of its time, and it was. But it took us years to get people to start parking there."

The Village filled up and prospered during the 1950s and early 1960s. But economic decline by the early 1970s brought vacant offices and storefronts. The boom that Houston enjoyed in the seventies had a negative affect on older areas such as the Village. Property values in surrounding neighborhoods were stagnant for a decade or more. Since the 1980s, though, West University Place,

Southgate, and Southampton have flourished as young families have moved in and speculators have replaced "tear-downs" with new, more expensive houses. With greater purchasing power, nearby residents once again are spending their money in the Village. Franklin Olson offers another theory: "People are tired of malls, which are impersonal and not as safe. In the Village, you can drive right up to the door, and there's still the atmosphere of the individual entrepreneur tenant." Olson speculates that the Memorial area's Town and Country Mall attempted to emulate the Village concept with drive-up-to-the-door parking and freestanding buildings, but he suggests that it wasn't as successful because "it was too uniform, too planned, and lacks the Village's funky, hodgepodge appeal."

But a new, upscale pink-brick shopping center along the north side of University Boulevard has begun to change things. The Village Arcade boasts national chain stores that, unlike Iowa, are traded on the New York Stock Exchange: the Gap, Structure, Express, Eddie Bauer, Starbucks, Victoria's Secret. The Arcade has become a lightning rod of controversy, representing either the glories or the



perils of progress. Stretching from Kirby all the way to Morningside between University and Amherst, and taking up most of the Times-Morningside-Amherst-Kelvin block as well, by Village standards it is a monolith. Its emergence mirrors the teardown phenomenon in nearby neighborhoods, where little bungalows give way to new, larger houses. In both cases, the retail Village Arcade and the new home construction, scale and neighborhood history are all but ignored in the quest for more bang per square foot.

The Village Arcade does not completely disregard tradition, however. Stephen Fox is among those who maintain that the Arcade is deferential to existing patterns of development in its relationship to the sidewalks and streets, its drive-up-to-the-door parking, and its low-rise, open-air configuration. Compared to other new Houston developments such as Shepherd Square, which has an immense parking lot in front with stores pushed far back from the street, the Arcade does blend with the old-time Village. Closing off Amherst to make way for the Arcade parking garage is a troubling precedent, but parking has always been the Achilles' heel of the Village,

Fox observes.

Some longtime Village tenants, including the owner of Variety Fair 5&10, Ben Klinger, are grateful to the Arcade for pumping new life into the area and ensuring the Village's future prosperity. Others have complaints. Eric Rinkoff, who owns the defiant strip of property at Times and Kelvin on which the B. F. Goodrich Tire Center stands — the only non-Arcade part of that block — says of the Arcade: "It sticks out like a sore thumb. It's nice for what it is, but it doesn't blend in with the other stores. There are centers that look just like it from here to Dallas."

Patty Bender, associate director of leasing for Weingarten Realty, the developer of the Arcade, says Weingarten originally considered breaking up the Arcade as a series of freestanding buildings but determined that it would be too expensive. "We went through a hundred designs," Bender notes. She says that the Arcade's architect, Jack O'Brien of O'Brien-Dietz & Associates of Dallas, integrated architectural elements from neighborhood houses — she cites the brick chimneys at Arcade Phase II as an example — as well as from Rice University. Bender says the Arcade

deserves some major credit for revitalizing the Village. Before the Arcade opened, much of the University Boulevard strip of the Village was in a state of decline, but now everything is bustling from University all the way to Bolsover.

While the buildings on the Arcade property are owned by Weingarten, the land itself belongs to a wholly owned subsidiary of Rice University. Rice owns several other pieces of Village property as well: on University Boulevard, the site of the West University Bank and the Train Store; the Beautique mini-block between Times and Amherst along Kelvin; several houses on Chaucer; and two office buildings on Greenbriar. Rice treasurer and vice-president for investments Scott Wise says Rice decided to purchase Village property beginning in the mid-1980s. "The land is strategically located just west of the university. For long-term purposes, it makes sense for Rice to own that land. It's the only direction the university could grow. It allows flexibility for our successors, in fifty years or more, if the need should arise. In the short term, we think it's a good investment."

The Village has lately begun to cultivate night life. Along Morningside, for

example, there's everything from the popular casual Italian diner Collina's to an always-packed pub, the Gingerman. Further north, at Dunstan, the former University State Bank building houses multiple eateries: the trendy benjy's Restaurant as well as the Bank Draft, Antone's, and Thai Spice. Ovations, a multilevel music bar featuring live performances, is located on Times in a windowless vault that for years kept Houston matrons' mink coats in cold storage during the summer. Next to Ovations, Main Street Theater offers high-quality live theater in a cozy recycled store space. Restaurants in the Village span the gamut — Indian, Chinese, Italian, deli-American, Thai, Mexican, and French. Coffee houses, taco bars, ice cream parlors and the like attract customers into the late night. Serious nightclubs range from the Arcade's urbane jazz bar, Cody's, to the more basic and bluesy Big Easy at Kirby and Robinhood.

Walking along the Arcade sidewalk with a cup of Starbucks coffee in hand, I pass the site of the Art Deco Village Theater and the legendary World Toy & Gift. A nostalgic Village Hall of Fame begins to form in my mind: Burgerville

## 5 &amp; 10 VARIETY FAIR 5 &amp; 10



#2, one of the few black-owned businesses in the Village, made the perfect hamburger (Village trivia: there was never a Burgerville #1). The Village Cheese Shop, which my friend Mary Ellen Allen opened on Bolsover in 1976, was among the pioneer unique-niche stores at the forefront of the Village renaissance. A Baltimore native, Mary Ellen chose the Village for her shop because it reminded her of charming neighborhoods with mom-and-pop stores on the East Coast. The Poor Man's Country Club, a barbecue-and-beer joint frequented by neighborhood regulars and businessmen, is still mourned. So is Rodney's.

Hire's Fabrics at 2408 Bolsover is among the recently departed legends. It opened on Rice Boulevard in 1950, moved to Bolsover in 1961, and closed in July 1996. Just days before its end, a longtime customer rummaged through the silk remains, remembering Hire's in its prime. "They had just about anything in the line of sewing and fabrics," she said, "and people from all over Houston and out of town came here for special buttons, unusual notions, the finest trimmings, and imported fabrics from places like Liberty of London. Miss Ima Hogg

stopped in for millinery supplies. They sold French and Italian silk and the finest lace," she mourned. "They had gorgeous ribbons and velvet. Mr. Hire knew fabrics from A to Z. He was almost like a father to you, he was so nice. We could all just sit down and cry because there won't be another place like this."

It is sad to see a place like Hire's just pack up and go. But it is also nice to see Kahn's Deli at 2429 Rice Boulevard, which pays tribute to a former Village legend, Alfred's delicatessen. Owner Mike Kahn is the son of the late Alfred Kahn, who opened the popular Alfred's in the Village in 1948. The walls of the 13-year-old Kahn's, catty-cornered from the former Alfred's site, are hung with black-and-white photos of Alfred's in its heyday. As a boy, Mike Kahn was part of a gang of Village merchant kids who roamed the shopping center, leaping from rooftop to rooftop; they hung out in World Toy and watched cartoons in the Village Theater on Saturdays. In the fifties, Alfred's was somewhat exotic, one of the few places in town where you could find dark mustard. Mike could boast that his father sold chocolate-covered ants and chocolate-covered grass-

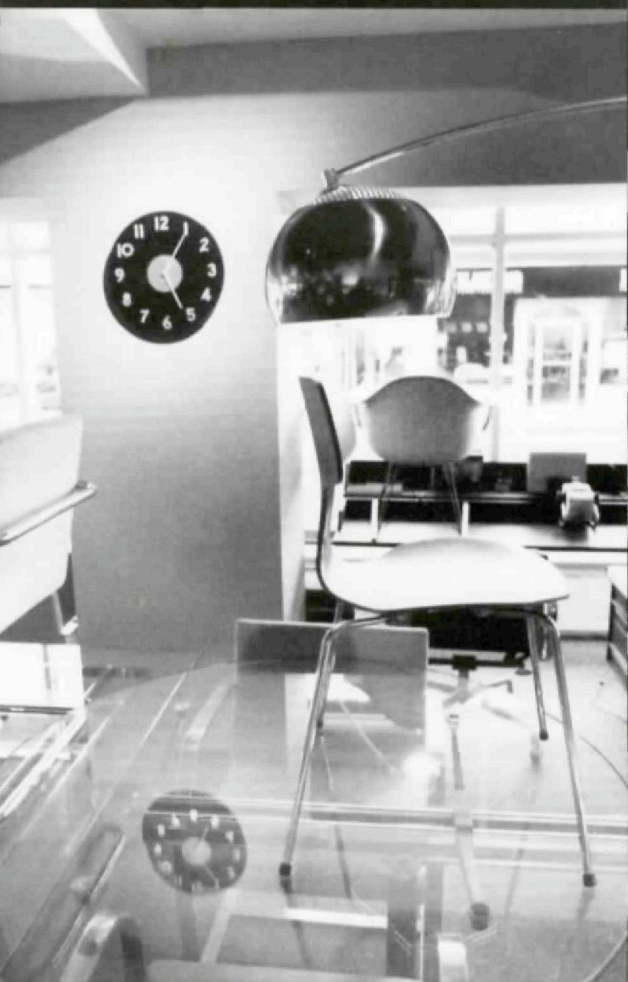
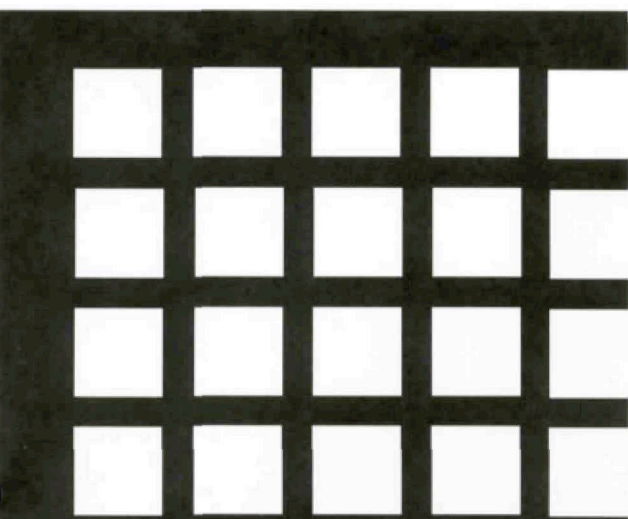
hoppers. Before Rice football games, Alfred's sold corned-beef sandwiches in box lunches from a stand in Rice Stadium. Alfred's original Village location, with its cozy Manhattan ambiance, closed in 1982.

Many still miss World Toy & Gift — a toy store with age and character whose spirit, like Alfred's, is not completely gone. Owner Rose Behar died in 1992. But her longtime store sidekick, Adelaide Friedman, now 87, still comes to the Village. Mrs. Friedman misses the old place on University — especially all the kids who came in and years later came back with kids of their own. But she doesn't spend all her time looking back, she says. On Saturday afternoons she works at Gepetto's Treasures, a doll store on Robinhood. The diminutive Mrs. Friedman still waits on customers and repairs dolls, restringing their limbs and touching up their faces the way she learned from Mrs. Behar.

While many Village legends have faded, a few survive, such as G&G Model Shop, Wagner Hardware, and the Bead Shop. And, of course, there is Variety Fair 5&10. It's a sweet place. Ben Klinger has me convinced that he is living

in the best of all worlds: owning a family store, his wife and daughter and grandkids by his side. Sharing his sense of the absurd with whoever happens in. And selling almost everything — from nuts and bolts to giant lips, and thousands of other items that, in Ben's words, are "hardly stocked in today's world." He rings it all up on his ancient National cash register. On a scorching July afternoon, Klinger greets a customer walking in: "Is it still snowing out there?" "I wish there were snow," the customer replies. Says Ben, "We've got some in a spray can." ■

# Hip Village Strip



Arguably the most cosmopolitan spot in all of Houston, this strip in the heart of the Village — on Times between Kelvin and Morningside — houses a number of unusual spots.

**Mientje's** (2470 Times) is a New Orleans-style coffeehouse where customers linger to enjoy the music of artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Astor Piazzolla. The founders of Mientje's also owned the legendary New Orleans nightclub Tipitina's.

**Atelier** (2445 Times), a hair salon with a piano in one corner, is owned by stylists who hail from Munich. Co-owner Peter Spann says he picked the Times location over others he investigated in a wide variety of Houston neighborhoods, not only because he liked the space, particularly the oversized windows, but also because of the cozy street, "where you can stroll and stop for coffee." Spann calls this block "the place in Houston with the most European flavor."

**The Bead Shop** (2476 Times) is a wonderful and imaginative homage to the bead. With its glass-encased displays, the 27-year-old store feels more like a museum. The flamboyant decor includes bead-adorned chandeliers and a stuffed South American peacock.

**Planet Anime** (2439 Times) is one of the largest Japanese animation video stores in the United States. A current fad among the intelligentsia in Japan, Japanese animation also has an underground following among American adults. In business on Times since 1993, Planet Anime attracts college students and an international crowd.

**Japon** (2444 Times), an intimate sushi bar, has a romance and appeal all its own among the sushi restaurants of Houston. Japon's glass-fronted Village location overlooks all the action in this block of Times, where the street seems almost hidden from the rest of the Village hubbub.

**Point Five** (2444 Times) is a studio that sells midcentury modern furniture inside a glass cube that looks into Japon next door, an intriguing scene that owner Joseph Gregg likens to watching French cinema in Todd-A-O Cinemascope. The furniture at Point Five is low-key and unpretentious, but extremely stylish. *D.K.*