

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: S. H. Kress & Co. Building
(aka St. Germaine Lofts)
OWNER: 705 Main Venture Partners, L. P.
APPLICANT: Mr. Randall Davis
LOCATION: 705 Main Street
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: Feb-15-2000

AGENDA ITEM: Ia
DATE ACCEPTED: Jan-24-2000
HPO FILE NO.: 00L086
HAHC HEARING: Apr-13-2000
P C HEARING: May-04-2000

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 4, 5, 9, 10 and the northeasterly or front 100 feet of Lot 11, Block 80, and a tract of land southeast of and adjoining Lots 4 and 5, being a tract of 0.47 feet by 100 feet of what was formerly Fannin Street, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The buildings on the site include an 8-story commercial building at Main and Capitol and a 4-story commercial building at Fannin and Capitol.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Kress Building was designed by Kress corporate architect, Seymour Burrell, and constructed by S. H. Kress & Co. in 1913 for use as one of its many five-and-dime stores. Many of the first buildings the company erected included rental space on the upper floors. Moreover, the upper floors were planned for professional offices; in some cases the building's primary identity and look were those of an office building. The building in Houston is an example of this building approach on a grander scale. As the chain grew, multipurpose buildings became less common and the upper floors were used for warehousing merchandise and company offices. The Kress Company's architectural philosophy was unique. While many retailers approached the construction of new stores on a piecemeal basis, Kress maintained an architectural division to oversee the design of everything from storefronts and office space to fixtures and furnishings. This commitment to architectural excellence and to providing consumers with quality merchandise and responsive services at the lowest possible prices, made the S. H. Kress & Co. chain of five-and-dimes one of the most unique and most successful retail operations of the twentieth century. Kress pioneered the establishment of company identity by means of a "signature storefront." It was architecture aimed primarily at pedestrians or at people driving slowly down the street. Kress also pioneered uniformity of signage on all his stores, which identified the store as belonging to a larger group of chain stores of the same type. It gave strong impetus to the idea of the building as advertisement. Furthermore, the S. H. Kress & Co. helped enhance the nation's commercial architecture and played a vital role in shaping Main Street America.

According to Richard Longstreth, architectural historian, George Washington University, "For much of the twentieth century, 'commercial' was a dirty word in architecture. Branding a work 'commercial' meant that it had been compromised by the demands of the marketplace, its designer selling out the ideals of art to the exigencies of the bottom line." The Kress Company stores were conceived not just as efficient containers of merchandising and storage functions but also as works of art, civic art that would contribute to the urban landscape. American commercial centers were supposedly to be handsome places that symbolized the progress and potential of their respective communities. The Kress building at 705 Main is an example of

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

commitment by the Kress Company to a highly stylized architecture. The building exhibits a range of highly ornamented, classical detail in a bright array of colors and is the only Houston building faced entirely with terra cotta. Kress stores showed progressively more sophistication with the use of glazed terra-cotta for cladding and ornament, and the use of terra-cotta, recalling the idea of department stores as marble palaces, denoted a store's higher rank in the Kress chain.

Even during the Depression, Kress continued to erect his emporiums with the finest materials in the most elaborate designs of the era. Perhaps Kress justified his approach as a means to pull away from the fierce competition, something many retailers sought to do in other costly ways as they were faced with a shrinking market. Longstreth further states that "altruism seems to have been at work here too. The fact that Samuel H. Kress was a passionate collector of art and that his stores are rich in iconographical references, many of them regional in orientation, suggests that he saw the expenditures as his stores' gift to their communities – public art, as it were, that could be widely appreciated as well as attract the consumer's eye." Kress had considerable artistic interests, one of which was a concern for the appearance of the stores. He was especially interested in the storefronts. No plans left the home office without his approval, often signified by the initials "SHK" on the outside. Whatever his reasoning, Kress became one of the nation's most successful businessmen. Kress's vast fortune, gained on the sale of small, practical items that improved daily life, was invested in objects of surpassing beauty that would grandly and permanently enhance our national heritage. From the mid-1920s to the end of the 1950s, he and his foundation amassed one of the most astonishing collections of European old master paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts ever assembled through the efforts of a private individual. Even more remarkable was the manner in which the Kress Collection was shared with the American people. Viewed together, the donation of the Kress collection of over 3,000 works of art, constitutes the single most important gift of art in the nation's history. The collection was not given to a single museum or city, but to more than 90 institutions in 33 states, one being the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. At the time of its distribution, the collection was judged to be worth well in excess of \$100 million.

Another important aspect of the five-and dime stores was the social phenomenon that the stores created. Even the store advertised "Meet Your Friends at Kress." Going to downtown to the five-and-ten to browse, buy or see other people was a form of entertainment. The lunch counter, soda fountain and candy counter were very popular and profitable departments for Kress. Kress even patented his design for the candy counter which always took pride of place against the wall near the entrance to the store. The stores became an architectural background for a collective social experience.

When the Kress annex building of limestone was constructed on Fannin and Capitol in 1951 behind the 1913 building on Main, it was an exception for Kress in downtown expansion after World War II. Designed by the Kress in-house architectural division, the annex also included a parking garage. The construction of the garage and additional retail space is indicative of the Kress philosophy to applaud the growth of the automobile and fine motorways, especially in Houston which was experiencing phenomenal growth. However, it was the greater numbers of people and automobiles that were the eventual undoing of downtown areas and of Main Streets, when sprawl pulled shopping and people away from downtown to outlying areas.

Samuel H. Kress was descended from German and Irish immigrants of the 1750s. Kress was the second son of seven children of a modestly prosperous family in Cherryville, Pennsylvania. At age 33 Kress opened his first S. H. Kress & Co. in Memphis, Tennessee in 1896. The instant success was based on two shrewd calculations: the viability of purchasing in bulk quantities and then selling quality merchandise and responsive services at the lowest possible prices (cutting out the middlemen--a significant refinement of

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

Woolworth's pioneering scheme), and the economic future of the under-served South. In 1910 Kress owned twelve stores in four southern states and in Texas. Kress was leasing space in a fashionable three-story, masonry building in Houston. The company reserved the right to do extensive alterations to make the rented spaces look like and function as Kress stores and most likely renovated the first Houston location to meet their high standards. The building was located at 606-608 Main Street. By 1907 Kress took the ambitious step of moving the company headquarters to New York City, where the company was incorporated. In the same year, Kress established a second company headquarters in Texas. By 1916 the two headquarters had been combined. The company had annual sales of \$3 million and 51 stores. Personally supervising his growing empire, Kress spent the days in his stores and the nights in a Pullman sleeping car traveling to the next store.

Kress achieved a substantial financial return for himself, his company, and the communities where Kress stores were located by operating the business conservatively and establishing his chain of stores as an efficient retail-distribution system. Kress also prospered through its careful and consistent attention to the architectural design of its stores. By creating well-designed and constructed store environments, Kress encouraged his customers to come back often. Fundamental to Kress' success was the creation of an architectural division within the company, which operated from around 1905 until 1944. Kress architects were responsible for designing the exteriors, interiors, and structural systems of over 200 Kress stores and for supervising other designers who oversaw renovations. Kress architects designed their stores to give the chain a distinctive yet tasteful presence on Main Street America. The stores' stylistic variety was at once national in identity and regional in iconography. The architect's attention to the scale and style of other buildings on the street as well as their own architectural detail and quality of construction established Kress stores as integral components of their downtown locations. In designing the company's stores, Kress's architectural division created thousands of drawings, many of them artistic as well as practical. Kress also used photography extensively to plan, monitor, and record the construction and maintenance of its stores.

The Kress logo was a perpetually distinctive element, prominently displayed high upon the building and over its doors and windows. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Kress architectural division employed proximately 100 people to create store facades whose context and scale fit their streetscapes. The high quality building materials used rivaled those of fine department stores of the era. Curved glass entrances invited people inside. While the architectural character of the exteriors was rich and varied, Kress interiors featured systematic floor plans that efficiently displayed goods and directed customer circulation. From Kress's earliest renovated structures to the elaborate revival style buildings of the 1920s and 1930s, attention to quality and detail established Kress stores as integral parts of their downtown commercial districts. Once the company was well established as a major force in its field, enormous additional sums were spent on new buildings, each of individual design and far more elaborate than competing variety stores and the remodeling of existing stores. Kress Company extensively remodeled the Houston store in December, 1925. A contract in the amount of \$140,000 was let to E. S. Newcome, Ft. Worth, to complete most likely an interior remodeling of the first and second floors and basement.

The practice of spending enormous sums for new construction or remodeling continued even during the Depression, when most retailers, even the most financially successful ones, were cutting back on expansion, if they were expanding at all. Throughout the 1930s Kress erected emporiums with elegant external appointments more suggestive of the finest clothing or furniture stores built in a sizable city during the heady 1920s than a five-and-dime opening in hard times. Much like the traditional church or palace façade, these storefronts can be understood as expressions of faith in the system they represented. At a time when the underlying premise of capitalism was in greater doubt than ever before, Kress stores were beacons of faith in

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

free enterprise as a beneficent as well as economically rewarding endeavor. Kress stores were more than pretty designs. They were commitments to a better everyday world, to civic pride and to the bounties of democratic society.

After World War II, Kress extended its retail operations into the suburbs. The company stopped building stores designed by company architects in downtown areas and concentrated its new construction in outlying shopping centers. A building division replaced the company's architectural division in 1944, and the company's period of architectural distinction was over. What remains is a huge architectural legacy in America's downtowns, representative of a bygone era.

When Samuel Kress died in 1955, S. H. Kress & Co. owned 264 stores with an annual gross income of \$167.9 million. Genesco, Inc. took over Kress in 1964, began closing unprofitable stores, and liquidated the company in 1980. As main street preservation programs took hold, determined activists who recognized the value of protecting early commercial architecture saved Kress buildings, along with other older structures vulnerable to demolition. Many of the stores have been reused as offices, restaurants, retail shops, and in the case of 705 Main, as apartments, furthering the purposes of downtown revitalization. Because of these efforts, the architectural heritage of S. H. Kress & Co. can still be seen today on main streets across America.

After radio and the automobile shattered the isolation of American communities, like so much else in the Kress story, we can no longer recapture the adventure of "going to Kress" in the early decades of this century. Few commercial buildings were as architecturally imposing – or as beloved – as the main street "Dime Store," an emporium of assorted merchandise at inexpensive prices that met all needs, from the practical (shelf paper and bobby pins) to the social (the soda fountain), to the celestial (rhinestone earrings). Well stocked, well priced and well run, the popular Kress chain expanded during the founder's lifetime throughout the South and the West. Crowds of people crossed the store thresholds, particularly in Saturday afternoons. They became meeting places as well as places to buy necessities and modest luxury items. Going to the downtown five-and dimes to browse, buy or see other people was a form of entertainment.

The largest number of stores were located in California with Texas as a runner-up. Although he had turned over the daily responsibilities of company operation in the 1920s to his younger brothers, Claude and Rush Kress, Samuel Kress retained the chairmanship. Concern for his health led him to European spas and specialists, and perhaps to the discovery of European museums. Sometime in his mid-sixties, the American retailer began to turn his leisure, his vast resources and his formidable business acumen to the collecting of Italian art. As a result, he assembled one of the most important collections of Italian art in American history. More importantly, however, is how he shared the collection with America.

An especially appealing feature of the Kress story is the imagination and generosity with which, virtually from the beginning, Samuel Kress shared his collection with the American people. Held in thrall of his new passion for "old art" he appears to have felt almost a moral obligation to extend this pleasure to a larger audience well beyond the sophisticated East Coast art establishment. After all, the Kress fortune had been made from the people of the United States, and the fruits of that fortune would be returned to them, for their education and personal enrichment, in artistic treasures from Europe – something that had never been done before. Throughout the 1930s paintings were loaned to civic museums, art associations and educational institutions in cities across America as the gift of Samuel H. Kress.

To celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Samuel Kress donated to the museum its first Italian masterpiece, Lorenzo Lotto's *Holy Family with Saint Catherine*. When the painting

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

was placed on public view on Founders Day, April 12, 1930, the president of Rice Institute, Dr. Edgar Odell Lovett, delivered an acceptance speech entitled, "The Significance of the Gift." His remarks ranged from the relevance of history and the classical ages to the appearance of Halley's Comet exactly twenty years previously, then looped back again with the comet to Renaissance Venice and Florence, the life and art of Lorenzo Lotto, the artist's works in European museums, his personality, and the full text of Roberto Longhi's authentication of the picture donated to Houston. Dr. Lovett congratulated the founders of the museum on their achievements and on meriting the Kress gift, noting that "Houston is one of 200 cities on this continent in all of which Mr. Kress holds citizenship." By his "noble gift ... the donor has in this fine deed carried the faith of the founders of this institution to further fulfillment. And what was that faith? That Houston should be as great as Athens, Florence, and Venice were great ... These celebrated cities of commerce became also conspicuous centers of vigorous intellectual activity, irradiating the life of the spirit of man in letters, in science, in art. I honor the donor of this gift because into that great company he has lifted himself and Houston."

Eventually Kress and his foundation were to donate the entire collection to the people of the United States. Viewed together, these donations constitute the single most important gift of art in the nation's history. Eighteen regional museums were selected for large donations of works. One thousand eight hundred works of art were donated to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. All of the rest – another one thousand three hundred pieces – was distributed across the continent. Kress regional collections of twenty to sixty old masters brought the first Italian paintings to communities where Kress five-and-ten-cent stores served the public, and the Kress study collections introduced European art to institutions of higher learning. Each of the prospective 18 Regional Gallery Museums selected for the collection distributions were forced to consider such issues as available space, technical equipment, exiting collections and eventual plans for expansion, as well as staffing, education, fund-raising, and long-term community support. Local residents rallied, trustees opened their checkbooks, bond issues passed. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (currently the sixth largest museum in the nation) was designated a Kress Regional Gallery and received a gift of 30 paintings. Smaller gifts of one to three works spread the pleasure of art even further. Initiated by Samuel Kress in the early 1930s, the distribution of art was completed, under the guidance of his brother, Rush H. Kress, and the Kress Foundation between 1947 and 1961. Over the past sixty-six years, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation has established a record of philanthropy that is without equal in three related areas: the collection and distribution of works of art from the great European traditions, the preservation of significant European monuments of art and architecture, and the nurturing of professional expertise in art history and art conservation.

Currently traveling the country is an exhibition sponsored by the National Building Museum, Washington, D. C., and funded by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation entitled "Main Street Five-and Dimes: The Architectural Heritage of S. H. Kress & Co." The exhibition consists of original drawings, architectural elements, and stylized exhibition cases containing contemporary merchandise, photomurals and over 100 vintage photographs. The exhibition traces the history of the Kress company's architecturally significant stores since the early 1900s and shows how they fit into main streets from New York to Honolulu, and Seattle to Miami. The exhibit is a sampling of the vast Kress archives, a gift made to the museum in 1989 by Genesco, Inc., the successor to S. H. Kress & Co. The collection, consisting of 6,000 architectural plans, 7,000 photographs and 50 linear feet of documents, is not only an extensive record of the design and layout of the Kress stores, but also documents the changing role architecture has played in retailing during the twentieth century. The Samuel H. Kress Foundation has also funded the conservation of the materials and supported research in the Kress archives. The Kress commitment to architectural excellency dovetails with the National Building Museum's mission of celebrating American achievements in building.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION

The Kress Company occupied the building at 705 Main until the company was liquidated in 1980. After the building was vacated by the Kress Company, it has had a succession of tenants. The Kress Building has lost its ornate cornice and parapet which was supported by decorative corbels. In the center of the parapet wall was the standard “Kress” emblematic name. The elaborate storefront with its recessed entries and bent plate glass show windows on curved bases have been removed. These rounded show windows were gently directional, encouraging the pedestrian shopper to make the transition from the sidewalk to the doors. Also removed were the segmented transom windows above the storefront. These transom windows were vital for allowing light to penetrate the interior and the mezzanine space. According to the *T.G.C.A. Bulletin* (Texas General Contractors Association Monthly Bulletin), the Kress Company in New York engaged E. S. Newcome, Ft. Worth, to complete extensive remodeling to the first and second floors and basement of the Houston building. The contract was let in December, 1925 in the amount of \$140,000. The contract may have applied primarily to an interior renovation.

According to Stephen Fox, the historic storefront has been replaced by a spirited postmodern storefront, part of a rehabilitation of the building carried out in 1983 by Ray Bailey Architects. Fox, an architectural historian, states that this storefront rehabilitation brings the architecture of the upper floors back down to the sidewalk. The building was purchased by the current owner in 1998. It has been adaptively used as retail space on the first floor and apartments on the upper floors and annex building. At the HAHC public hearing on February 17, 2000, the applicant requested and was granted a certificate of appropriateness for the following work: install signage for “St. Germaine Lofts” at corner of Main and Capitol; signage includes a rectangular sign of metal and neon letters (approximately 3 ½’ X 25’) which will be cantilevered from the edge of the building in similar fashion as the original “Kress” sign in a photograph furnished by the applicant. Applicant plans no other alterations to the exterior of the building.

The information and sources for this application were researched and compiled by Randy Pace, Historic Preservation Officer, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston, 713/837-7796 or Randy.Pace@cityofhouston.net.

THE FOLLOWING SOURCES WERE USED BY PLANNING STAFF TO SUPPLEMENT THE LANDMARK APPLICATION SUBMITTED BY THE APPLICANT:

Fox, Stephen, *Houston Architectural Guide*, Houston: American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990.

Ishikawa, Chiyo, et al.; *A Gift to America, Masterpieces of European Painting from the Samuel H. Kress Collection*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with the North Carolina Museum of Art; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Seattle Art Museum; and The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1994.

National Building Museum Exhibition, Washington, D.C.: *Main Street Five-and Dime: The Architectural Heritage of S. H. Kress & Co.* – May 9, 1997 – January 4, 1998.

Samuel H. Kress Foundation Website – <http://www.shkf.org/>

Texas General Contractors Association, *T.G.C.A. Bulletin*, Houston, Texas, December, 1925.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

Thomas, Bernice L. *America's 5 & 10 Cent Stores: the Kress Legacy*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

S N S - satisfies N - not applicable

- (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;
- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;
- (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;
- (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;
- (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
- (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

That the Houston Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends landmark designation of the S. H. Kress & Co. Building at 705 Main Street to City Council.

**SITE LOCATION MAP
S. H. KRESS & CO. BUILDING
705 MAIN STREET
NOT TO SCALE**