

Palm Center:

The original Palms Center sign as it appeared in 1965 served as a beacon to shoppers in Southeast Houston. The mall was home to Walgreens and J.C. Penney's, as well as popular local favorites Oshman's Sporting Goods and Walter Pye's, among others.

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A Window into Southeast Houston

By Zachary Smith

With the recent addition of the Southeast line to the METRORail network, Southeast Houston is geared for revitalizing changes. The new line extends from downtown to Palm Center,* a former shopping center located at the intersection of Griggs Road and Martin Luther King Boulevard. Created to meet the needs of middle-class white suburbanites, Palm Center has adapted to the racial and economic transformations of the surrounding neighborhoods over a span of sixty years, and today it serves a very different purpose than it did in the past. Understanding the history of Palm Center is vital to understanding the struggle to combat community deterioration and the importance of revitalization in Southeast Houston.

Houston expanded rapidly in the post-World War II economic boom. The Houston Ship Channel invited economic growth in the form of new refineries, petrochemical plants, and other industrial businesses. In 1949, the Houston area encompassed roughly 160 square miles; and from 1950 to 1960, Houston's population grew from approximately 596,000 to just over 938,000.¹ As more and more land was annexed to accommodate outward growth, many Houstonians moved into newly constructed neighborhoods outside of the city center. Following the influx of wealth along Brays Bayou, white middle-class neighborhoods developed in the areas south of Texas Southern University (TSU) and the University of Houston (UH) and several blocks past Griggs Road and 610 South Loop. Some of these neighborhoods, including MacGregor Terrace,

* The name changed from Palms Center to Palm Center in 1993. This article uses the correct name for the time period discussed.



MacGregor Palms, MacGregor Place, MacGregor Park Estates, Southern Village, Grand Park, and South Park, were developed either before or shortly after Palms Center opened.² Developers had set their eyes on Southeast Houston in response to this outward expansion of middle-class white Houstonians. Former mayor Oscar Holcombe and developer Sterling T. Hogan saw a potential for profit in the area and envisioned a shopping center that would service the needs of the many new white residents of Southeast Houston who lived far from downtown stores. According to Hogan, they chose the location at Griggs and South Park Boulevard (now Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard) based on market surveys that predicted continued growth for the area at a rate unmatched by any other area in Houston.³

In 1954 Holcombe and Hogan appointed the architecture firm of Irving R. Klein & Associates to design and build Palms Center. Klein, who had opened his Houston practice in 1935 and was known for his work on retail spaces and offices around the city, worked together with design and project architects Stanley Krenek and James Bishop. The structural framework for the center, com-

The Houston Chronicle featured numerous articles that celebrated the center and drummed up excitement. On September 1, 1955, Palms Center opened to the public after much anticipation, and it was quite the spectacle for many weeks afterwards. U.S. Representative Albert Thomas cut the ribbon at the grand opening event, and festivities included balloons containing gift certificates being released from the roof of the center, a trolley, a merry-go-round, and a drawing for three automobiles and \$1,000 cash.⁵ With forty-one stores opening, including many established national retailers, it became a major attraction to Houstonians. Two bus lines running from downtown and a total of 2,000 parking spaces made Palms Center accessible to thousands of customers.⁶

At this time, Southeast Houston was thriving, and it was profitable to open up businesses in the area. Holcombe and Hogan were proud of what they had created, and the future looked very bright.⁷ By investing in Palms Center and thus the surrounding area, they created lasting memories for Houstonians and touched many people's lives. Many residents of Southeast Houston during the 1950s and up until 1970 fondly recall the

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41 Stores Open Tomorrow In Palms Center
5-Week Celebration Planned At One-Stop Shopping District

Houston's newest regional shopping city, Palms Center, opens Thursday with 41 stores ready for business after the 1:30 a. m. ribbon-cutting ceremony.

The opening celebration will actually last through Oct. 7, while area residents become acquainted with the giant center at Griggs Rd. and South Park Blvd.

Sterling T. Hogan and Oscar F. Holcombe, builders of the center, will be among the dignitaries present for the opening. Rep. Albert Thomas will cut the ribbon.

Hogan, president of Palms Center Corp., said the center's one-stop shopping service is being provided after extensive research and planning.

Five-Week Opening

The five-week opening brings to an end the year-long construction project started last summer.

Special events planned to welcome visitors the first

PALMS SHOPPING CENTER PERSPECTIVE
 AT GRIGGS ROAD AND SOUTH PARK BOULEVARD

The August 31, 1955, issue of The Houston Chronicle featured an entire section dedicated to celebrating the opening of Palms Center.

pleted by the Fisher Construction Company of Houston, followed Bishop and Krenek's plans for a conventional open-air shopping center with "typical retail spacing of about 25 feet center to center." Gulfgate shopping center, located along the Gulf Freeway at Woodridge and what is now 610 South Loop, was also under construction at this time and work on it had actually begun prior to Palms Center.⁴

Despite its later start, Palms Center opened a year before Gulfgate, and in the weeks preceding its opening,

vibrant community surrounding Palms Center.⁸ With a Lewis & Coker supermarket, a nearby Montgomery Ward department store, Oshman's Sporting Goods, Walter Pye's clothing store, J.C. Penney's department store, Woolworth's discount store, the Alice McKean Young Library, and many more establishments, Palms Center served as the focal point of the community. Houstonians could truly find everything they needed in just one stop, with no need to travel downtown or to Gulfgate. Holcombe and Hogan eventually sold Palms Center to



A crowd of shoppers at Palms Center during its heyday, circa 1967.

a New York real estate firm, Collins Tuttle & Co., which then resold it to Helmsley-Spear, the real estate firm owned by Leona and Harry Helmsley, in 1969.⁹

The surrounding area was safe, and parents could let their children walk to the nearby Baskin-Robbins, the library, or the various stores. The neighborhoods seemed sustainable, and they only strengthened as families seeking permanent housing continued to invest in the area. No one had any reason to believe that the community would deteriorate soon afterwards. Local resident Vivian Vincent would not give anything for the years she spent living near Palms Center. She wishes that children now could understand why their parents invested in the area.¹⁰ Vivian's cherished memories of Palms Center have motivated her to work hard at building up the area to some version of its former glory.

At first, not much seemed to change in the 1950s and 1960s when wealthy black families began to move out of the inner city and into the suburbs near Palms Center—the one exception being the bombing of the home of Riverside Terrace's first black resident, Jack Caesar. It was only after the number of black households reached a tipping point that more white residents began to flee the area.¹¹ As more black residents moved into nearby neighborhoods, block-busting real estate agencies took advantage of the remaining white residents' fears by creating an illusion of instability and broke apart the communities.¹²

By 1970, Southeast Houston had nearly completely transitioned from mostly white to mostly black.¹³ Instead of bringing in permanent residents and reinforcing the local economy, the real estate agencies drained all of the money out of the neighborhoods and thus erased the key to keeping the area sustainable. Soon, buyers were more interested in reselling rather than committing to a life-long home, and when no one wanted to buy the homes, the owners began to rent them out. The neighborhood

broke down, deed restrictions expired, and the area around Palms Center began to visibly deteriorate.

Lower income levels in the surrounding community translated to decreased sales for businesses in Palms Center, and many tenants began to close up shop. By 1978, as stores were starting to leave in favor of air-conditioned malls and with the death of long-time manager John Trimble, things were going downhill. The declining Palms Center became a less attractive option for Houstonians as more modern shopping malls were constructed throughout the city. Most notable of these was the Galleria, which had opened in 1970 soon after the completion of the 610 West Loop. As rates fell during the economic bust of the 1980s, more low-income residents moved into Southeast Houston and occupied apartment complexes that were created to meet demand during the oil boom of the 1970s.¹⁴

The deterioration of the area around the center was heartbreaking to residents who intended to raise their families there for many years to come. They were forced to watch as everything that they loved about their community faded away into disrepair. Newer and younger residents did not see the value in the neighborhoods surrounding Palms Center in the same way that older residents did, and thus efforts to maintain the community diminished. Older residents have fought to restore the neighborhoods, and through their repeated efforts the spirit of the community inspired rejuvenation.

By 1984, Palms Center's last tenant, J.C. Penney, had left. In 1987 the City of Houston collaborated with private sector developers, the Tillman Trotter Foundation and Palms Center Management Company, to repurpose and revitalize the center. By forming a public/private partnership and funding the redevelopment effort with federal HUD Community Development Block Grant Funds and private sector capital, the city planned to



Two years before its last store left, Palms Center was nearly vacant and noticeably in decline, circa 1982.

redevelop Palms Center and revitalize and further strengthen the surrounding community. These early efforts were slow in developing, and ultimately, as a result of ongoing management and federal compliance issues, the city severed ties with the private developers in 1991.¹⁷

In an effort to continue the redevelopment of Palms Center, in 1992 the city executed a memorandum of understanding with a nonprofit corporation, The City of Houston Small Business Development Corporation, now known as Houston Business Development, Inc. (HBDi). Under the agreement, HBDi, which was created by the city in 1986 to stimulate economic growth and revitalize underserved neighborhoods, was charged with the added responsibility for redeveloping and managing the Palms Center project. In 1993, after conducting a feasibility study to determine the best use of the project, HBDi began to manage the renamed Palm Center, and they remain there today. Marlon Mitchell, CEO of HBDi, first came to Palm Center in 1992, and the center has clearly improved since that time. Comparing the Palm Center area in 1993 to today, Mitchell says, “In 1993, there was literally nothing taking place, but now there’s a buzz about what potentially could happen in this community.

The Village at Palm Center will be comprised of 154 apartments, 68 townhomes, and 14,500 square feet of retail and commercial space. The diverse building configuration will create a vibrant streetscape.

It’s exciting to see the transformation from what was a deteriorating community to what will be a vibrant, revitalized community in a relatively short period of time.”¹⁸

According to Mitchell, an increasing number of Latinos are now moving into the Greater Third Ward, and income levels are generally higher. Census data shows that the share of black residents, who make up just over half of the area’s population, has decreased by about four percent to 32,924, while the share of Latinos has increased by about three percent to 25,962 or forty percent of the total. Black residents of Southeast Houston mostly belong to older age groups; by contrast incoming Latinos are generally young, which means this demographic change will significantly reshape the ethnic makeup of the area in as little as ten years.¹⁹ Since the growth of the Latino population is expected to continue, Latinos’ engagement in efforts to revitalize Southeast Houston will become more important as time goes on.²⁰

Today, Palm Center serves the community with a 160,000-square-foot mixed-use complex comprised of government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and office suites for small businesses. The center is home to the Harris County Precinct 7 justice of the peace and con-

Photo courtesy of the Village at Palm Center.





The frame of the original Palms Center sign as it appeared in 1990. The vacant building and overgrown lot were eventually razed, and the site is now home to the Texans YMCA.

stables, the Young Neighborhood Library, Houston Area Urban League, U.S. Post Office, Neighborhood Centers Inc., a dental clinic, and over forty small businesses. The center regularly offers workshops, seminars, and educational programs and has meeting rooms available for events and organizations in the community. Due to new developments such as a park at Palm Center, the METRORail Line, a new Houston Public Library branch, a YMCA, the Oasis InTown townhomes, and the Villages at Palm Center apartment and townhome complex, Mitchell sees the future of the center as a destination area. “The new developments will serve as a stimulus for even further development in the area,” he says.²¹

There have also been recent efforts to recognize the historical and cultural importance of Palm Center. In 2011, through funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), UH research professor Carroll Parrott Blue directed the Southeast Houston Arts Initiative. Her project included a historical report on Palms Center in order to raise awareness of its importance for future revitalization efforts.²²

Neighborhoods of the Greater Third Ward have taken a beating in the past, but the community itself



On the side of King's Best Market, formerly the home of the Montgomery Ward department store, the faded silhouette of the "Wards" sign remains visible. This building is slated to be replaced with the Village at Palm Center townhomes and apartments.

Photo courtesy of Zack Smith.

has breathed new life into Southeast Houston. Through dedicated efforts by various individuals and organizations, it seems inevitable that Southeast Houston will bounce back to a very healthy state and prove itself to be resilient in the long run. With nearby destinations such as MacGregor Park, UH, TSU, the Texans YMCA, and the upcoming Southeast METRORail line, the Greater Third Ward is in a period of transition that looks very promising. New investments in infrastructure will help to sustain the surrounding neighborhoods and will enhance the economic strength of Southeast Houston.

Palm Center is like a window through which we can view the shifting economic status and history of its surrounding communities. When the center opened in the 1950s as Houston's first open-air shopping mall, it was a trendsetter. Today the future looks bright for a revitalized Palm Center, which continues to be a valuable Southeast Houston asset thanks to those who have dedicated their efforts to strengthening this community.

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