The current renaissance of downtown Houston has illuminated the faces of numerous historic buildings that—until recently—had not seen the light of day for years. Downtown’s Main Street, the focus of much of the recent development in the central business district, is a great laboratory for the study of “slipcovered” buildings—those structures whose facades have been sheathed in a newer material which partially or completely masks the original.

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Building slipcovering was a national phenomenon from the mid-1940s through 1960s. In postwar America, the architectural styles popular at the beginning of the twentieth century were considered passé and not representative of the aspirations of the forward-thinking generation. An obsession with the new and modern lead to the alteration of countless Victorian, Classical Revival, Art Deco, and other early twentieth-century American commercial styles. These alterations included the partial or complete masking or obliteration of the building's original character, composition, detail, and ornament. When total reconstruction of a pre-war structure was not practical, the cosmetic alteration of an older façade gave the appearance of a new building at a more modest cost.

Standing at the corner of Main and McKinney looking north one can compare the view to a c.1920 photo taken from the same vantage point. The interesting thing is that almost all of the buildings seen in each view are the same. They have been altered so much in the past eighty plus years, however, that the casual observer would likely not recognize but a few.

A fire at the West Building at the corner of Main and Walker in 2000 revealed what had been a secret for years. Behind the gold grille work encasing the top three-quarters of the building resided a 1912 façade of brick and stone that had been hidden for decades. The current owner of the building has since removed the remaining panels to expose the entire façade and plans a restoration of the building in the near future.

The slipcovers in Houston run the gamut from small two and three story Victorian structures near Market Square to high rise office buildings on Main Street. The slipcover materials vary as much as the buildings they cover. Plaster and marble were popular materials and their installation often resulted in extensive damage to the original façade beneath. Grille work, like that encasing the West Building, were typically more lightweight, hung out further away from the original face of the building.