



New Life to Carytown

Cary Court's facelift stylishly preserves 20th-century history.

by Edwin Slipek Jr.

I recently gave a sophisticated Philadelphian the nickel tour. Capitol Square, Monument Avenue and Hollywood Cemetery duly impressed him. Carytown elicited a "Wow!"

I'd included the stretch on our drive-about because it compares favorably with trendy retail strips he'd probably known in larger cities such as Los Angeles' Melrose Avenue and Lincoln Road in Miami.

Carytown exudes theatricality and unrelenting visual energy from its hodgepodge of building types and how they have been gussied up — facades painted in gelati colors and festooned with inventive signage and striped awnings.

This corridor, stretching from the Boulevard to the beltway, is pedestrian in scale as well as pedestrian in reality. People-watching is as much fun as shopping. Habitués' dress ranges from unapologetically preppy to militantly funky. Shoppers and merchandising meld to create

never-disappointing elements of surprise. And don't forget the ongoing dog show. Carytown is Richmond's most-realized town square, albeit a seven-block thread of cityscape.

In recent months, the district has been the talk of the town because of the removal of the voluptuous Bradford pear trees that lined West Cary Street (and blocked the buildings) and the astute renovation that has considerably brightened Cary Court shopping center in the 3100 block.

The city of Richmond's replacement of the top-heavy, broad-branched pear trees with svelte, Pyramidal European Hombeam trees makes Carytown look exposed, even a little raw. One is now aware of the irregular mix of buildings: Modest-sized, early-20th-century brick townhouses (that morphed into shops) sit cheek-to-jowl with newer, sleek retail structures. McDonald's and 7-Eleven add their own discordant notes. Some of the curbside sidewalks

are paved in smooth concrete, while others are rougher — bricks laid in a herringbone pattern with weeds for mortar.

So now that the leafy pear trees are gone, the patriotic, red, white and blue banners that hang from lamp posts are the most prominent unifying element along a street that looks suddenly naked and disjointed. But it's all good; Carytown just looks a little more urban now.

With its recent renovation, Cary Court joins the Byrd Theater as Carytown's *piece de resistance*. What was once a timeworn strip center now sparkles after a top-notch renovation overseen by Commonwealth Architects and the landscape firm of Higgins & Gerstenmaier.

Although the designers took a light brush to the project, their deft touch is evident. The once grimy, limestone-facaded, one- and two-story buildings are clean. The horizontally prominent, aluminum-clad canopies that run the

With new signs, bright limestone and striped awnings, a revived Cary Court sparkles.

entire length of the center now glisten after restoration (under the guidance of Steven M. Applegate Consulting Structural Engineers).

The shopping center's concrete sidewalks have been replaced with a design that includes rose-hued granite. It's definitely fancier than anything Depression-era shoppers ever trod. These overly decorative walkways are the only questionable note in the rehab.

A new metal fence runs along the city sidewalk to soften the parking lot.

Cary Court was constructed in 1938. Its architect was Henry Carl Messerschmidt, who also designed some of Richmond's sweetest art deco downtown commercial buildings (including Perly's Restaurant on East Grace Street). But compared to Messerschmidt's ebullient, highly ornamental art deco buildings downtown, U-shaped Cary Court is restrained, more streamlined.

This basic architectural simplicity has been considerably enlivened with the addition of red-and-white-striped awnings that now hem the aluminum canopy.

But what really brightens Cary Court is the addition of new electrified and neon signs that denote each of the center's retailers. While some of the respective logos lend themselves better than others to being rendered in bright lights, the overall effect is, well, fun.

Too often, developers of upscale shopping centers opt for delineating all retail operations in signage using a single typeface (in the name of good taste, of course). What the Cary Court treatment generates is a polite version of what architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steve Izenour called the "messy vitality" of retail culture in their seminal, 1972 book, "Learning from Las Vegas." If Carytown possesses a collection of distinctive shops and restaurants, no Cary Court tenants had to relinquish their retail identities. Bohannon, Staley and Associates were involved in sign design and production.

And if God is in the details, the identifying signage for Cary Court itself, designed by Commonwealth, is handsome and understated. A pylon slab set perpendicularly to Cary Street bears the aluminum lettering: "Cary Court Park and Shop." It's art deco in spirit, but not cloyingly so.

The historic preservation of 20th-century buildings is relatively new to Richmond. Reworking historic 20th-century commercial sites is unusual nationally. Too often retail buildings are considered outmoded, uneconomical and unworthy of a second life (witness the mid-20th-century Atlantic Life and GC Murphy buildings downtown that are slated for imminent demolition to make way for surface parking lots). But Cary Court has received a restrained, but stylish facelift that should serve as a model for how to acknowledge architectural history while making sure the cash registers continue to ring. **S**

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