

## Metro Deco: Then & Again

By Jerry A. McCoy

Sixty plus years ago, a motorist in need of gas while traveling through the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road in downtown Silver Spring, MD would have had three service stations to choose from. Today only one of those stations survives, the Silver Spring Crown at 8600 Georgia (originally Betholine-Richfield). Due to currently escalating land values in this, the epicenter of the "revitalized" Downtown Silver Spring, this Crown service station's days are numbered. Perhaps a similar reason resulted in the eventual demise of the Gulf Oil service station, seen here in the "Metro Deco: Then" image.



Photo: Silver Spring Historical Society

Constructed as part of architect John Eberson's 1938 Silver Spring Shopping Center and Silver Theatre complex, Gulf Oil was designed to match the rest of the Eberson's complex. A base of dark brick, estimated to be about three feet high, reproduced the look of the dark composition stone base used on the shopping center façade. The four remaining five-course sections of light brick, separated by three single-courses of dark brick, emulated the appearance of the shopping center's limestone façade with inset granite bands. The bricks utilized in the construction of the service station were probably the same as those used to construct the exterior auditorium walls

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of the Silver Theatre and its distinctive "skyscraper" chimney; wide courses of a pale yellow brick separated by narrow courses of black glazed brick.

A metal canopy with streamlined fascia wrapped around all four sides of the service station, appearing to be identical to the canopy that ran the full length of the shopping center. This fascia on the shopping center has been recreated in its original color bands of gray, rust, lime green, and turquoise, separated by a background of yellow. The only shopping center feature that the service station appears to have lacked was the retractable canvas shades that hung down from the canopy (two of the shades can be seen in the background to the left of the service station).

When the Silver Spring Shopping Center and Silver Theatre opened on October 27, 1938, a special twelve-page section of The Washington Post provided a sneak peak as to what lay in store for customers. The complex's motto "Park and Shop" said it all. Unlike earlier commercial areas, where businesses were laid out in a linear fashion facing street frontage, the massing of the Silver Spring Shopping Center was pulled back from Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road to create...drum roll please...parking! Parking was available not only in the front but also behind the center. An underpass was located under the south "bend" of the center so motorists could get from one parking lot to the other, eliminating the need to "go around the block." Until renovation on the shopping center began the rear ramp, leading down to the underpass but ending in a cinderblock wall, was still visible.

Once motorists parked their vehicles they were within a few short steps of twenty-one different businesses...everything from "toothpicks to radios" as the Post proclaimed. The original 1938 businesses that one would have passed while walking from the Colesville Road side of the shopping center to the Georgia Avenue and Ellsworth Road corner (with current tenants being noted who occupy the same space today) were:

- Silver Barber Shop, Warner Brothers' Silver Theatre, and Alexander Jewelry and Gift Store (American Film Institute).
- Peoples' Drug Store, Silver Shop, Lee's Tea Garden, and Ethel's Millinery and Bags (Panera Bread).

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- Barker Bakery, Irene's Ladies Apparel and Accessory Shop, and Peggy's Hall of Beauty (vacant).
- Venerable Prime Meats-Vegetables and Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. (Red Lobster).
- Sanitary Grocery Co. and Haas Brothers Hardware (Romano's Macaroni Grill).
- Georges Furniture Exchange, Frazee-Potomac Laundry Agency, Lilyans Ladies Specialty Shop, and Robinson's Men's Wear (recently occupied by the American Film Institute's SILVER-DOCS Lounge, but now vacant).
- Modern Radio Co. (My Eye Dr.).
- Kresge's 5 and 10 (vacant).

Sometime between November of 1954 and June of 1959, based on aerial photographs in the collection of the Silver Spring Historical Society, the Gulf Oil service station was demolished. The reason is unknown...perhaps it was due to competition from the two other service stations across the street or simply because the shopping center needed additional parking space.

Today, as seen in the "Metro Deco: Again" image, the Silver Spring Shopping Center façade has undergone an admirable combination of restoration and renovation (down to those retractable canvas shades), returning it to nearly its 1938 opening day appearance. The original Peoples' Drug Store sign "DRUGS", spelled out in reflective chrome art deco letters over the entrance, now spells



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"PANERA BREAD" in a similar style. The original "RADIO" sign at the opposite end of the shopping center, marking the entrance to the Modern Radio Co., now reads "MY EYE DR." in art deco letters.

The original clock set into the central façade of the shopping center has been recreated, down to the art deco numbers (a nice reminder of a pre-digital age). Dark maroon panels have been recreated and placed back over the curving display windows where Kresge's was located, a color that those old enough to remember will fondly associate with "five and dimes." A second floor addition has been designed and set back from the original structure as to not overpower it. Even the hovering illuminated multi-colored "DOWNTOWN SILVER SPRING" logo sign, located between the two halves of the upper addition, is a nice touch.

It is unfortunate that uniform neon signage indicating current tenants could not have been implemented, such as like that seen on the 1948 Woodmoor Shopping Center (corner of Colesville Road and University Blvd.). Undoubtedly the current corporate chains insisted upon having their own "unique" signage.

The footprint occupied for only two short decades by the Gulf Oil service station now features an elongated elliptical landscaped park. A five ft. high expanse of wall, faced in rough cut stone, has attached to it metal letters that spell "SILVER SPRING". A shimmering sheet of water falls across the face of the wall behind these letters, providing a subtle visual and aural reminder of the connection to our community's namesake. But do we really need those four ft. high, HOLLYWOOD sign-styled fluorescent letters that sit on top of the wall and spell "DOWNTOWN"?

If you can share with the Silver Spring Historical Society any photographs or memorabilia from any of the original Silver Spring Shopping Center businesses, please contact SSHS at [sshistory@yahoo.com](mailto:sshistory@yahoo.com), phone 301.565.2519, or write SSHS, PO Box 1160, Silver Spring, MD 20910-1160. Our web site is [www.sshistory.org](http://www.sshistory.org). Future historians will thank you!