

HOUSTON CHRONICLE



Parking peril for the Penguin Arms?

Plans for Houston's gooniest historic building



Lisa Gray



The Penguin Arms.

Photo: James Nielsen

Last week, while I was on vacation, I got a scary email about the Penguin Arms.

I have always loved that wacko midcentury fourplex at 2902 Revere, near the Whole Foods at Kirby and Alabama. It's fun to describe: It looks like a giant accordion standing on its side, or a spaceship encrusted in river rocks, or like something Frank Lloyd Wright designed for George Jetson. It's a giddy '50s dream, that building, a vision of the future left over from a time when everyone was sure -- utterly sure! -- that the future would be ring-a-ding fab-u-lous. Just driving past it makes me laugh.

But it's also a piece of serious architectural history. Not surprisingly, it was designed by a very young, very expansive man, architectural engineer Arthur Moss, freshly graduated from Texas A&M and determined to make his mark on the world. Which he, um, most certainly did.

In 1952 the building's photo appeared in the magazine article that gave the Googie style of architecture its name. Googie was the flashy, swoopy stuff of gas stations, motels, coffee shops and other crass, car-loving commerce. Of course it flourished in places like Houston and Los Angeles. And of course architectural purists hated it.

But then styles changed. **These days, L.A. prides itself on its vintage Googie.**

But Houston? Nobody did crass and car-loving like we did, but nobody tore down buildings as fast as we did, either. Hardly any of our Googie survives. Besides the Penguin Arms, the marvelous Dot Coffee Shop (at Gulfgate Center) remains a time-warp joy. But otherwise, there's not much else: a forgotten basketball pavilion here, a remodeled-into-blandness carwash there, or maybe a bowling alley long since denuded of its neon glory. We have squandered our goofball riches.

Could the Penguin Arms disappear too? A couple of years ago, I felt sure it was safe: It had lucked into the perfect owners, Dan Linscomb and Pam Kuhl-Linscomb, the design-sensitive couple who own the **Kuhl-Linscomb, the most interesting department store in Houston.** The store's little complex happened to be adjacent to the Penguin Arms, and the couple closed on the building the same day that they saw the for sale sign. They plan to redo the fourplex as a furniture showroom. (Swamplot has [a detailed report on those plans.](#))

The hitch? It's parking -- always a sticky issue these days, as Houston changes, patchily, from a sprawling place to a dense one. To get a city permit for its plans, Kuhl-Linscomb needs a variance that would allow a smaller-than-usual parking lot, adding only 25 new spaces.

"To save the Penguin Arms, we must get this variance," Dan wrote in a recent email to the store's customers and neighbors.

Yes, neighbors. Normally, surrounding homeowners dislike any change that could possibly cause more cars to park on the streets in front of their houses. But **Kuhl-Linscomb has an unusually good relationship with its neighbors** -- in part because it's a great-looking part of the neighborhood, and in part because it generates only a tiny fraction of the parking congestion of that nearby Whole Foods.



The store will make its case to the Planning Commission at 2:30 p.m. tomorrow (Thursday). For the occasion, Dan has arranged for a mini-bus to haul his supporters from the store to the hearing.

That, it's safe to say, is unusual for a parking-variance hearing. But things are never business as usual when it comes to the Penguin Arms.

Update, Friday, Aug. 22: On Thursday, the Planning Commission approved the parking variance.



Lisa Gray

Follow Lisa on:  

Lisa Gray is the Houston Chronicle's acting op-ed editor. Previously, she's held many of the Chronicle's most interesting jobs: Senior editor for digital, features enterprise editor, member of the editorial board, columnist--and, most fun of all, founding editor of Gray Matters, the Chronicle site named "Best Blog" in Texas three years in a row. Email her at lisa.gray@chron.com. Or follow her on Facebook, where she spends way too much time.