Joseph Habshey, the man behind the vision for Old Town Helena

If you live in Helena, you've seen the huge amount of growth and development in Old Town that has occurred over the past 20 years. You probably know the old service station in front of HES with the Habshey Properties sign out front. What you may not know is that inside is businessman Joseph Habshey, who has put a lot of time and dedication into creating his vision for Old Town.
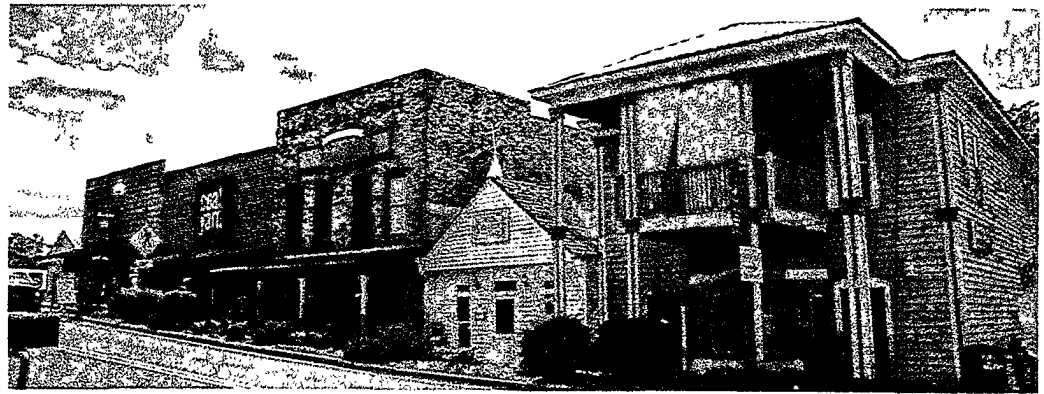
In fact, the Habshey Properties building itself was a restoration job, with Joseph bringing back the original design of the old service station and its stylistic elements to decorate the outside of his office. The antique gas pump adds a great authentic touch to the building, and he is looking for an old Firestone sign to replicate the one it used to have and complete the picture.

A man by the name of Ronnie Morton had begun doing restoration work in Helena in the mid-90s, starting with a new roof for Bertha's House at 3871 Helena Road. Joseph bought property south of the railroad on Helena Road in 1996 and paired up with Ronnie, who held property north of the tracks, to help restore this area of the city.

"Ronnie and myself met with a group of design engineers at The Brickyard to look over their designs for Old Town—which looked a lot like how Papa Saia's looks now," Joseph said. A few booths away, up on the wall of the restaurant, was a picture of Old Town in the 1890s that Joseph pulled down and took back to the table. "I said, 'Look, I know y'all are the greatest design engineers in the south, but what's wrong with this?'"

"I want Old Town to look just like this old picture of Helena from the 1890s," Joseph told them. "It's real, and shows what life was really like back then."

Since then, Joseph's dream for Old Town has stayed consistent—make it look as much like it did in the 1890s as possible. The biggest issue with Joseph's vision was the 1933 tornado that destroyed much of the town, displacing residents and thwarting the city's growth. Many of Helena's historical buildings were partially or totally destroyed.

For example, the original wooden roof of the Coal Yard building was torn off by that tornado and had to be replaced, but now, if you look up at the rafters in the back, you can still see the nail holes from the original roof. Cracks in the front wall that occurred after the tornado were covered by a wooden façade with only two windows.

"When the wooden façade of that building fell off, it gave us the opportunity to rebrick it and add back in the original four windows," Joseph said. "And we crafted the metal building next door to look like the old building that was once there."

The Depot is the oldest building in Helena, and when it was functional as a freight depot, it actually sat behind the property where it is now. In its place was the historic Mrs. Francis' House, covered in vines. Both were mercifully spared from the tornado of 1933. Ronnie moved The Depot to its current spot along the riverbank and made it a restaurant. Today, it's the *Depot Grill*, one of Helena's great draws to Old Town.

In the early 2000s, Joseph and Ronnie's project included fixing and rebuilding many houses on Helena Road and around the area. "I wasn't the typical developer—it wasn't the money that motivated me. I could have gone somewhere else to make more money. I could have torn the houses down and built them new, but I spent more to keep and preserve what Helena was."

Joseph moved the Nunnally House that once sat at the corner of Highway 52 and 261, next to Habshey Properties, to 2nd Street in Old Town, now inhabited by Arcara Realty. He bought the white house at 771 2nd Street and fixed it to fit the original house plans. The second floor of the house at 773 2nd Street had to be rebuilt, as it was lost to the '33 tornado. He even bought the oldest house in Alabaster, cut it in half, moved the two pieces from next to Thompson High School to 767 2nd Street, and added a brick porch.

The old Helena Police Station in Old Town was built in the 1950s, but the look wasn't old enough for Joseph. "The buildings on the west side of the street, to me, are old. The other side was built in the 1950s, in my lifetime, the 20th Century," he said. "I wanted to bring back the older 1890s look."

Although there are no existing pictures of the buildings on that side of the street from before the station was built, Joseph did a great job recreating the façade to make the building look older and match the design of Old Town. Also on that side of the street is the stone building that hosts Buck Creek Glass. Prior to the partners starting work, back when one of the old railroad trestles was broken down, rocks from its construction were used to form that building. Joseph liked that even though it isn't technically a historical building, it still matched the older style he envisioned.

Several years ago, when Joseph was preparing to replace the last building in the picture (between Oh My Sole and the Coal Yard), the city council at the time began imposing rules on what kind of businesses could move into Old Town. He didn't agree with the new rules, so he pulled out of the project. But just like everything else in Helena, leadership has changed since then.

"We now have a city council who diligently works with us—and if I weren't so old, I'd finish the town out," Joseph said, with a smile. "I may do it anyway, because the council wants to work with us rather than hindering us."

"Old Town is definitely a plus for Helena," Joseph continued. "It's starting to flourish, and in fact, most businesses down there want more space." As more Helena businesses start up and more residents and visitors frequent the area, Old Town will continue to grow and reflect the sensibilities and charm of the people of Helena. Thank to Joseph Habshey for his diligence in making his Old Town vision a reality.

There are things I wanted to do that did not get done. There is vacant land that could be built on and finished out that could potentially double revenue.

In the building that has addresses 4040, 4044, 4048 and 4085; there where steel beams put in that could support a second story. The plain was to build 4 apartments above with ground level entrance from above. Also on the opposite side of the street about on third of the block was left undone. Buildings there would be about 8000 sg feet . If you got $17.00 per foot that would be about $136,000.00 per year.