

Prudential Building

1100 Holcombe Blvd.

The end has come for the Prudential Insurance Co. Building, an iconic landmark constructed in 1952 as the first high-rise corporate office building outside downtown. Its owner, M. D. Anderson Hospital, chose to raze the structure and replace it with a new one.

Designed by Kenneth Franzheim, Houston's foremost corporate architect of the 1950s, and sited across South Main Street from the Shamrock Hotel (also long gone), the Prudential Building exemplified the robust growth experienced in the city at mid-century. Constructed of Indiana limestone and natural Texas granite, the 18-story tower employed curving walls in the main lobby, a two-story rotunda in the center of the building, and the use of rare woods and chicaró marble throughout the interior. Not only was the structure an impressive one, but its site was the city's first corporate campus. It provided such amenities for its employees as tennis courts, an outdoor swimming pool, and covered parking.

Houston's prominent landscape architect, C. C. Pat Fleming, designed the twenty-seven acre site to contain lush plantings that could be viewed from windows in the elevator waiting areas. In a move unusual at the time in Houston, Franzheim included public art in the Prudential project. "The Family," a bronze sculpture by internationally known Wheeler Williams, adorned a fountain in the center of an azalea-filled forecourt at the entrance to the building. Southwestern artist Peter Hurd created a gigantic mural, "The Future Belongs to Those Who Prepare for It," to fill a curved wall in the building's lobby. Hopefully, the sculptural piece will be retained in the site's redevelopment. Hurd's mural was offered to anyone who would remove it. When no one rescued it locally, the mural was sent to a West Texas party who has plans for it.

The loss of the Prudential Building is mourned not only for its architectural distinction, but also because it represented a new era in Houston's march toward becoming a dominant city in both the United States and on the international stage.