

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Sterne Building

OWNERS: FKM Partnership

APPLICANTS: Same

LOCATION: 300 Main Street – Main Street Market Square

AGENDA ITEM: IIIc

HPO FILE NO: 11PL102

DATE ACCEPTED: Mar-21-2011

HAHC HEARING: May-19-2011

SITE INFORMATION: Lot 5, Tract 4A, Block 33, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a three-story commercial brick building.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Sterne Building at 300 Main Street was designed by architects Joseph Finger and James Ruskin Bailey and built in 1916. Joseph Finger is one of Houston's most historically significant architects, designing scores of buildings in Houston, including Houston's 1939 City Hall. The Sterne Building was built by Pauline Sterne Wolff to replace an earlier building constructed on the site in 1884 by her father Sam Sterne that had been destroyed by fire. The first retail occupant of the new Sterne Building was Krupp & Tuffly, a clothing and shoe store, that soon relocated down Main Street. Cockrell's Drug Store moved in in 1917 and occupied the building for many years.

In 1999, the Sterne Building was purchased by the Meyer family. Joseph Meyer was founder of the Joseph F. Meyer Hardware Company; president of the Houston National Exchange Bank; served two terms as alderman of the Third Ward; served one year as county commissioner of Harris County and was chief of the Houston Volunteer Fire Department. In 1885, Meyer began acquiring land in the southwest part of Houston and by 1893 he owned more than 6,000 acres. In 1955, one of his sons, George Meyer, developed the Meyerland subdivision, located in southwest Houston, on a portion of this land. The Meyer family descendants today own numerous historic building in Main Street Market Square.

The three-story masonry Sterne Building is contributing to both the Main Street Market Square National Register and City of Houston Historic Districts, which encompass the area of Houston's earliest commercial development. The building anchors the north corner of the 300 block of Main Street, one of the most intact historic blocks in downtown Houston. The Sterne Building meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 for Landmark and Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

In 1884, Sam Sterne commissioned George Dickey, Houston's first professional architect, to design a building for this site at Main and Congress Avenue. This small commercial building, also known as the Sterne Building, stood until it was destroyed by fire shortly before the extant structure was constructed to replace it. After the original building was destroyed, Pauline Sterne Wolff, daughter of Sam Sterne, commissioned architects Joseph Finger and James Ruskin Bailey to design a new building, (the one now standing) in honor of her father. The design commenced in 1914 and the

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

building's construction was completed in 1916. While the size and number of stories of the two buildings is exactly the same, the architects did not reference anything from the old structure.

The ground floor of the 1916 building was designed for Krupp & Tuffly, a clothing and shoe store. They moved out of the building in 1917 and Cockrell's Drug Store moved in and remained for many years. The second and third floors were occupied by the Thalian Club, a fraternal organization for prominent men of Houston. When the club moved, most of the upper floor space was leased out for an assortment of offices.

The Sterne Building anchors the north corner of the 300 block of Main Street, one of the most intact historic blocks in downtown Houston. The small-scale commercial building is significant for its contextual value, adding to the adjoining 1880 Stuart Building and the other buildings in the block including the Kiam Building on the corner of Main and Preston. All of the buildings in the 300 block of Main are late 19th or early 20th century design and construction, although some have been altered in more recent decades.

The Sterne Building is situated within the old commercial district of historic Houston. The property is a contributing building in the Main Street Market Square Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 and within the City of Houston Historic District designated by City Council on March 5, 1997. The Main Street Market Square Historic District constitutes Houston's largest, most intact concentration of physical resources representing the City's civic and commercial past. The surviving architecture documents the episodes of development that occurred between 1859 and the building and real estate boom of the 1920s, the half-century when Houston emerged from relative obscurity to become the largest city in the southern United States.

Early Houston

The town of Houston was platted in the fall of 1836 by surveyors Gail Borden (1801-1874), Thomas H. Borden (1804-1877), and Moses Lapham (1808-1838), for Augustus C. (1806 1864) and John K. Allen (1819-1838). The town consisted of sixty-two numbered blocks, most of them two-hundred fifty square feet, located near a shallow bend on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou opposite its confluence with White Oak Bayou. During the ensuing two decades, Houston would continue to expand as a market town and as the state's first railroad center. A wave of prosperity in the late 1850s encouraged the replacement of wooden commercial buildings in Houston with more substantial masonry ones.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, Houston's growth as a regional center of trade and finance resumed. Long overdue public improvements began: a brick courthouse for Harris County, begun in 1860, was completed; a permanent City Hall and Market House were built in Market Square in 1873; and during the late 1860s and early 1870s, the wooden buildings on the block fronts surrounding Market Square were replaced with two-story masonry buildings housing grocers, bakers, butchers, confectioners, liquor dealers, and other businesses benefitting from proximity to the public market.

After the turn of the 20th century, Houston experienced another episode of intensive growth and development, with expansion of the railroads, discovery of oil, and the completion of the Houston Ship Channel. Architecturally, this growth was reflected in a new surge of construction in the lower

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

downtown area. Following World War I, the building boom of the 1920s eclipsed all previous episodes of growth and expansion in Houston. During that decade Houston moved from the position of third largest city in Texas to that of the largest city in the South as its population more than doubled in size.

Main Street/Market Square

The Main Street Market Square Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in July 1983 and designated as a City of Houston historic district in 1997. The Sterne Building is classified as "contributing" to both historic districts. The Main Street Market Square Historic District is located on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou between Milam and San Jacinto streets. The buildings within this district range from modest, mid-nineteenth-century brick commercial buildings to a number of small but ornately detailed High Victorian commercial buildings, and include a fine selection of multistory public, bank, and office buildings. Completing this architectural array are several modernistically-detailed commercial buildings of the early 1930s. Most of these buildings continue in use as either office or retail establishments.

Fifty-two buildings and one structure (Main Street Viaduct) contribute to the architectural and historical significance of this district. Allen's Landing and Market Square are two of the most historic sites in Houston. Twenty-four of the fifty-two buildings were constructed between 1858 and 1900. The remaining buildings date from 1901 to 1935. Thirty-two buildings were constructed to serve primarily as stores, eleven to serve primarily as office buildings, four to serve as warehouses or large wholesale stores, and two each to serve as banks and motion picture theaters. The Main Street Market Square Historic District constitutes Houston's largest, most intact concentration of commercial structures from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Joseph Finger

Joseph Finger, an Austrian immigrant who began his Houston architectural practice in 1911, is best known for such large public buildings as Temple Beth Israel, the Houston Turn-Verein, and Houston's City Hall. He also designed a number of large houses in Riverside Terrace and River Oaks. In Boulevard Oaks, Finger designed the Echols and Minchen houses at 1753 North and 1740 South. The Minchen House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a City Protected Landmark.

Joseph Finger was born on March 7, 1887, in Bielitz, Austria, where he received his primary, secondary, and technical education. Immigrating to the United States in 1905, Finger settled initially in New Orleans. He moved to Houston in 1908, where he worked in the branch office of the Dallas architect C. D. Hill and Company. In 1912 Finger became the junior partner of Houston architect Lewis Sterling Green. Between 1914 and 1919, he was in partnership with James Ruskin Bailey, and from 1920 to 1923, with Lamar Q. Cato. From 1923 to 1944, Finger practiced under his own name. From 1944 until his death, he was in partnership with George W. Rustay. From the beginning of his first partnership, Finger was identified with the design of office, hotel, retail, and industrial buildings. He was responsible for the American National Insurance Company Building in Galveston (1913, demolished); the Ricou-Brewster Building in Shreveport, Louisiana (1924, with Seymour Van Os); the De George (1913), Plaza (1925), Ben Milam (1925), Auditorium (1926), and Texas State hotels in Houston (1929); the Vaughn Hotel, Port Arthur (1929); the Charlton Hotel,

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

Lake Charles, Louisiana (1929); and the McCartney Hotel, Texarkana (1930). Finger designed retail stores for Everitt-Buelow (1926, altered), Levy's (1930, altered), and Battelstein's (1923, 1936, 1950) in Houston, and numerous auto showrooms in Houston during the 1920s. He was architect of the Model Laundry, Galveston (ca. 1913); and the Cheek-Neal Coffee Company (1917), Texas Packing Company (1924), H. M. Tennon Manufacturing Company (1925), and Truscon Steel Company (1941) buildings in Houston.

As the city's foremost Jewish architect from the 1910s through the 1940s, Finger designed many Jewish institutional buildings, as well as buildings for individual Jewish clients. Among these were Congregation Beth Israel Temple (1925), Congregation Beth Israel Mausoleum (1935), and Congregation Beth Yeshurun Synagogue (1949), as well as the Concordia Club (1915, demolished) and the Wolff Memorial Home (1930, demolished). During the 1930s, Finger was responsible for such major public buildings as the Montgomery County Courthouse, Conroe (1935, altered); Jefferson Davis Hospital (1937, with Alfred C. Finn); Houston City Hall (1939); and the Houston Municipal Airport Terminal and Hangar (1940). At the time of his death, Finger and Rustay's Harris County Courthouse (1953) was under construction in Houston. Finger was best known for his exuberant modernistic designs. These included the Art Deco-style Houston Turn-Verein (1929, demolished), the A. C. Burton Company auto showroom (1929, demolished), and the Barker Brothers Studio (1930). Finger's office produced the Clarke and Courts printing plant (1936) and the Carnation Company creamery (1946-47, demolished) in the streamlined modernistic style. Finger's public buildings of the 1930s and 1940s were also designed in the modernistic style. Among the prominent clients for whom Finger designed multiple buildings, for both personal and business use, were the industrialist Henry M. Tennon, the confectioner W. H. Irvin, the merchant Philip Battelstein and his sons, the grocer Joseph Weingarten and his brothers, and the oil operator James M. West and his sons and business associates.

Finger married Gertrude Levy of Houston on June 18, 1913. They were the parents of one son, Joseph Seifter Finger, a landscape architect and golf course designer. Finger was a member of the American Institute of Architects. He was also a member of Congregation Beth Israel, the Independent Order of B'nai Brith, the Houston Turn-Verein, the Westwood Country Club, Chamber of Commerce, and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. Joseph Finger died on February 6, 1953, in Houston. He is buried in Beth Israel Mausoleum in Beth Israel Cemetery, Houston.”

According to Stephen Fox, additional Joseph Finger works include:

- J. A. Platt House, 3311 Del Monte at River Oaks Boulevard.
- J. M. West, Jr., House, 1909 River Oaks Boulevard (demolished).
- Cohen Building, 2935-2925 Main Street (1925).
- Citizens State Bank Building (now Rockefellers), 3620 Washington Avenue (1925).
- Lancaster Hotel (then Auditorium Hotel), 701 Texas Avenue (1926).
- Joseph Finger duplex, 120 Portland (1926).
- W.H. Irvin Home, 431 Bay Ridge Road (1928).
- Texas State Hotel, 720 Fannin Street (1929).
- Jim West country home, 3303 NASA Road 1 (1929).
- 2221 Rosedale Avenue (1929).
- Stephen F. Austin High School 1700 Dumble Street (1937) (with Briscoe, Sullivan and Sam Dixon, Jr.).

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

- 3612 Parkwood Drive (1938)
- Weingarten Home, 4000 South McGregor Way (1939).
- Parker Bros. & Co. Building, 5303 Navigation Boulevard (1939).
- Kelley Manufacturing Co. Building, Japhet Street (1939).
- 3615 Parkwood Drive (1940).
- Republic Steel Corporation Building, 501 North Greenwood Street (1941).

James Ruskin Bailey

Bailey, born in Philadelphia and educated at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, came to the Houston area as a draftsman for the Texas Company in 1908. Although Bailey designed such buildings as the Parks Building (1929-1930), the Public National Bank (1924-1925) and a large house for John Henry Kirby (1926), it was Joseph Finger who went on to become an important architect identified with the Moderne Style.

Joseph F. Meyer, Sr.

Joseph F. Meyer, Sr., was prominent in business circles in Houston and Harris County and widely known as a successful financier. He began in the business world when he was sixteen years old, as the proprietor of an independent business. His earlier operations were on a small scale and expanded with the passage of time, so that within a few short years he became well-known among more established and powerful businessmen of the city.

Born in Germany in 1851, Joseph F. Meyer was the son of Frank and Josephine Meyer. Josephine died when Joseph was three years old, and Frank brought him to America in 1855, settling first in Memphis, Tennessee, and moving to Houston in 1867. At the age of 16 years he established the Joseph F. Meyer Hardware Company at 802 Franklin at Milam Street. The company sold heavy hardware, wagon makers' supplies, farm implements, railroad contractors' supplies, iron, and steel, and was one of the largest of its kind in the city or Harris County. From then on, Meyer became identified with the financial and commercial activities of Texas.

In 1885 Joseph F. Meyer began acquiring land in the southwest part of Houston between Buffalo and Brays Bayous. By 1893 he owned more than 6,000 acres which were leased to rice farmers and small cattle ranches. In 1892 he purchased 415 acres near what would become Houston Intercontinental Airport from a New York firm for \$780. In 1915 he donated a 69 acre tract of land to the Bayland Orphan Home.

Meyer was an Independent Democrat and was twice elected alderman in the city of Houston, representing the third ward in the City Council from 1888 to 1892. He also served one year as county commissioner of Harris County and enjoys the distinction of having been chief of the Houston Volunteer Fire Department as long ago as 1880. In 1892, Meyer was one of the organizers of the Houston National Exchange Bank, of which he was vice president until 1912, when he became president.

Rebecca and Joseph Meyer married in 1884 and had three children – George B., Joseph F. Jr., and Frank K. Joseph died in 1935; his land was divided among his three sons.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Meyerland

Three generations of the Meyer family were instrumental in the development of the Meyerland subdivision, located in southwest Houston west of Post Oak Road and south of the City of Bellaire. In 1953 Joseph Meyer's son, George, decided to develop the 1,200 acres that we call Meyerland. Tom Robinson, Jr., president of First Mortgage Company, was selected to plan the subdivision and head up the Meyerland Company. In the spring of 1955 the former rice fields became a subdivision for single-family dwellings. Vice President Richard Nixon cut the ribbon for the grand opening that featured a Parade of Homes in the 5100 block of Jackwood. Development of Meyerland was done in stages and each new section was given a number and set of deed restrictions. There were several years of Medallion Showcases of Homes in Meyerland. *Look* magazine devoted four pages to Meyerland in 1957. *House and Home* magazine covered the area as the "ideal plan" for a subdivision in 1958.

A key element of Meyerland was the Meyerland Plaza Shopping Center. It opened in October 1957 with a celebration of "Around the Shopping World in 80 Acres." There was a hot air balloon that took riders to the Shamrock Hotel. Leota Meyer Hess, daughter of George Meyer, managed the shopping center from the late 1950s to 1994. The third generation of the Meyer family sold the Meyerland Plaza Shopping Center on January 9, 1984. The center was sold again in 1993 and was remodeled by Ed Wulfe in 1994. It was sold to Ronus Properties in 1998.

Today there are 2,315 homes in Meyerland. The property continues to increase in value and the name Meyerland is one that brings to mind a beautiful residential neighborhood with strong deed restrictions. Today, new and younger families are moving in. Many are second and third generation Meyerlanders who are moving back. Many older homes are now being razed and new, larger homes are being built.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Sterne Building is three bays wide on Main Street and seven bays on Congress Avenue. Ornamentation is minimal and the ground floor has been refaced covering any distinctive detail that might have been present around the entrances. Two entrances on Main Street are now architecturally unremarkable. One, the vestibule entry, gives access to the upper floors. The other is an entrance to the first floor space. The brick piers between each bay and at the corners rise slightly above the roof line. Stylized pendants designed as terminal devices on the piers in lieu of capitals or cornice still remain. Brickwork and plaster panels alternate in a double row pattern above the ground floor, demarcating what was formerly a zone of transoms. On the upper floors, each bay contains a pair of wood framed double sash windows with concrete sills.

In February 1999, HAHC granted the applicant a Certificate of Appropriateness for the following work:

- Remove the existing storefront (a later, inappropriate alteration) and replace it with a series of paired, wood storefront doors
- Install a series of plateglass storefront windows to match the new doors;
- Repair and rebuild existing divided light transom windows above new windows and doors;

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

- Restore cantilevered canopy to the original condition featuring decorative metal and deco keystones;
- Repair and rebuild upper floor, original windows;
- Repoint mortar between brick.

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Handbook of Texas Online.

Johnston, Marguerite, Houston: The Unknown City 1836-1946, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1991.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee, Field Guide to American Houses, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984.

National Register of Historic Places.

Sanborn Fire Insurance map for Houston.

Texas Historical Commission Atlas Neighborhood Survey Report.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Diana DuCroz and Courtney Spillane, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

S NA

S - satisfies NA - not applicable

Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1)):

- (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;
- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

- (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;
- (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;
- (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
- (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

AND

- (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

OR

- The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2));

OR

- The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3));

OR

- The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Sterne Building at 300 Main Street.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT A
STERNE BUILDING
300 MAIN STREET



CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT B SITE LOCATION MAP STERNE BUILDING 300 MAIN STREET NOT TO SCALE

