

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Cook Paint and Varnish Company Building    **AGENDA ITEM:** IId  
**OWNERS:** David Adickes    **HPO FILE NO:** LM238  
**APPLICANTS:** Lawrence Chapman, Next Generation Advisors    **DATE ACCEPTED:** Feb-18-2011  
**LOCATION:** 2500 Summer Street    **HAHC HEARING:** May-16-2011  
**SITE INFORMATION:** Tracts 7 & 9, (001\*Tracts 28 - 1B & 1C ), Abstract 1 John Austin Survey, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, cast concrete, commercial building.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Cook Paint and Varnish Company Building was constructed in 1948. The 78,000 square-foot complex is representative of the southwest expansion of the Cook Paint and Varnish Company in Texas. The company was the primary paint suppliers to the American automotive industry; Cook received the “E” Award for Excellence during World War II for its service to both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. At its peak, Cook had captured more than one-third of the entire paint market. The Houston facility at 2500 Summer Street became the only Cook plant to serve all of Texas. The plant was said to be the finest and most modern facility in the Southwest. In 1991, Cook was sold and split up amongst Sherwin-Williams, Valspar and Davis Paints. Some paints are still sold under the Cook brand by Davis Paints in Kansas City. Cook Composites and Polymers (CCP), established in 1990, is a world leader in the industry. It is currently the number one producer of gel coats in the world, and has the largest composites network in North America.

In 1995, the property the property was acquired by Houston-based artist David Adickes. Adickes is most famous in Texas for his larger-than-life works: a sixty-seven-foot tall statue of Sam Houston which stands on Interstate Highway 45 near Huntsville. Dedicated on October 22, 1994, it is the world's tallest statue of an American hero. Adickes has also sculpted the busts of 43 American presidents, and the four-story tall Beatles sculpture.

The Cook Paint and Varnish Company Building meets Criteria 1, 4, and 6 for Landmark designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Cook Paint and Varnish Company Building stands a half mile from a historically significant street in Houston’s history, Washington Avenue, in an area that has long offered immigrants, and others, places to make their homes and build their businesses. According to Anne Sloan in her essay, “Washington Avenue: The Soul of Houston, Texas,” this thoroughfare has long been an important connector of the city to its surrounding hinterland and beyond. Possibly it was so named because legislators supposedly moved the Texas capital from Washington-on-the-Brazos to Houston along this road in 1836. Farmers carried their produce to Market Square along the road. Eventually, Houston’s original rail terminal, the Grand Central Station, was located on Washington Avenue, where the street met the sprawling town. Architectural historian Stephen Fox states that, by

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the end of the 1830s, Washington Avenue was one of eight historic roads that fanned out from Houston to neighboring towns, creating for the growing city a hub for commerce and other travels. Washington Avenue appears on Houston maps as early as 1839.

As Houston's population increased, rural farmland was subdivided for residential and other uses. As elsewhere, this process of suburbanization occurred along Washington Avenue. Neighborhoods such as Houston Heights (1892) and Brunner (1888), both separate communities from Houston until 1913 and 1918, respectively, developed in this fashion. The Cook Paint and Varnish Company Building is situated within the John Austin Survey, A-1, which is, according to Neal Parker in his history of the West End (on the Rice Military website), "the first, largest, and best known of the Harris County land grants." John Austin was one of the original 300 settlers that came to Texas with Stephen F. Austin (no relation) in the 1820s. Two leagues of land were granted to John Austin by the Mexican government in 1824. The southern league was purchased in 1836 by John K. and Augustus C. Allen, which along with other land grants they acquired at the same time, became the location of a new town they named Houston.

Today the ever popular Washington Avenue retains much of its urban fabric, and the railroad industry still connects to many warehouses and plants to the south, east and west, but commercial development has started to push out the historic aspects of the neighborhood. To the north, a retail area anchored by Target and Staples has been built in the last 5 years, across Crockett Street from the Cook building. The area has become an arts district, and the Cook building offers studio space to a number of artists and photographers.

## *Cook Paint and Varnish Company*

Cook Paint and Varnish Company (Cook) was founded in 1913 in Kansas City, Missouri, by native Missourian Charles R. Cook (1884-1949), a 1907 engineering graduate of Cornell University. Having purchased a failing paint company, sales increased 110% in 1914 under Mr. Cook's leadership.

According to the chapter titled "The Story of Cook's" from the 1950 Book, *The Kansas City Centennial*, in 1919 Cook opened in Fort Worth, Texas, its first factory and sales branch outside of its Kansas City headquarters. Cook opened its second Texas factory, in Houston, in 1927, occupying an existing three-story brick building that had housed American Cottonseed Oil since the early 1900s. Cook's occupancy was confirmed in the 1927 Harris County Tax Building Assessment form. In about 1930, Cook expanded its Houston plant, with part of the expansion being a two-story brick building contiguous with the older three-story building. In time, the Houston facility became the only Cook plant to serve all of Texas; the Fort Worth factory became a warehouse.

By 1930, Cook had established factories in Kansas City, St. Louis, Ft. Worth, Houston, Cincinnati and Detroit, according to a 1930 Advertisement. By 1930, Cook researchers had developed durable automotive finishes, necessitating the opening of the Detroit factory. This resulted in Cook being one of the primary paint suppliers to the American automotive industry when it was in its prime.

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To meet the United States military's need for paint during World War I, Cook developed an industrial department which enabled the creation of "made to order" paints. This made it possible for the company to provide the military with much needed specialty paints during both World Wars. Cook received the "E" Award for Excellence during World War II for its service to both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army, according to an article from the October 1947 edition of "Swing Magazine."

In 1948, the Houston facility added a multi level, 48,000 square foot state-of-the art warehouse with offices. This building is Contributing and the main reason for our request for eligibility. According to the Sanborn Map (1925-1951) the building was constructed of cast concrete walls on a heavy-duty concrete slab designed to handle extra heavy equipment. The plant was said to be the finest and most modern facility in the Southwest, according to the same 1950 book, The Kansas City Centennial. According to the same book, a 1947 survey conducted by one of the largest newspapers in the Midwest, Cook had captured more than one-third of the entire paint market.

In an unusual move by a paint and varnish company, Cook purchased WHB Radio in Kansas City in 1930; WHB also operated as television station KMBC. Cook and Midland Broadcasting Co. in 1954 bought KMBZ TV, a Kansas City VHS Station. The next year Cook sold its radio station, and in 1961 Cook sold the TV station. These transactions were confirmed in the same 1950 book.

In 1991, Cook was sold and split up amongst Sherwin-Williams, Valspar and Davis Paints. Some paints are still sold under the Cook brand by Davis Paints in Kansas City. Cook Composites and Polymers (CCP), established in 1990, is a world leader in the industry. It is currently the number one producer of gel coats in the world, and has the largest composites network in North America.

In 1995, acclaimed Texas artist David Adickes moved his SculptrWorx Studio into the subject building, occupying it under a lease/purchase agreement until he closed on the property in 2001. Mr. Adickes' art is featured in numerous museums and many corporate and private collections. He is most famous in Texas for his larger-than-life works: a sixty-seven-foot tall statue of Sam Houston which stands on Interstate Highway 45 near Huntsville. Mr. Adickes continues to occupy a part of the building.

### **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY**

The 1907 Map shows a three-story brick building occupied by American Cottonseed Oil on the site of the Cook Paint and Varnish Company Building. Today, only one wall of this building still stands. The largest existing Cook structures were constructed in 1948 and 1965. They each make a statement about Cook's needs at that time; their types and styles are distinctly different. The architects and contractors for the described buildings are unfortunately unknown, even after viewing many sources, including the Texas General Contractors Bulletin.

The property was strategically located on a spur of the Southern Union rail line that ran within 10 feet of the west side of the structure. The area was known as the Sixth Ward. It was shaped by the railroad and the people that supported it. Today, the main rail line still runs along the southernmost boundary of what is now described as a 2.92 acre site, but the spur has long since been

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discontinued. According to Harris County Archives, dated 1937, it was known as 2.88 acres out of the 2 League John Austin Survey, A-1.

The 1948 addition, according the April 1948 Houston (Chamber of Commerce) magazine, cost \$313,000 and comprised approximately 48,000 square feet of factory and office space. According to the Sanborn Map, the building contained air conditioning and fire sprinkler systems throughout. This was a true state-of-the-art factory, perhaps designed to put their workers in the safest, most efficient environment.

This two-story structure faces Crockett Street to the north, and contains 5,000 square feet. The brick load bearing walls sit on concrete floors. The roof is constructed of wood beams covered by temporary corrugated plastic roofing material. The north wall originally contained sixteen arched windows, of which four were filled in with bricks many years ago. The east and west walls contain concrete fascia with operable steel industrial sash windows, thought to be installed in 1948, to match the larger existing structure's Institutional style.

As mentioned above, only one wall of the original three-story brick building remains from the first few years of Cook's existence in Houston. The original structure was razed circa 1990, following the factory closing in the late 1970s. Only the wall remains as a façade to the circa 1930 building. This building is contiguous with the north wall of the 1948 building.

The first floor of this addition has a footprint of approximately 20,000 square feet. Stacked to the far west are the other two floors, each containing about 14,000 square feet. The concrete structure has a veneer made of cast concrete sections with floor and ceilings made of concrete, as well. A tar and gravel roof is supported by champagne-glass shaped columns spaced about twenty feet from each other on all three floors. According to Harris County Tax Building Assessment reports, the flooring was made of extra strong concrete designed to support heavy equipment used in paint making. Completing the 20,000-square foot first floor is a 6,000 square-foot-steel-bar-joist constructed office space. Both the north and south exposures have the same cast concrete wall systems and steel windows. The east and west walls are made of clay blocks, indicative of the time period. The tar and gravel roof was no doubt designed to carry an extra heavy load with the close spacing of the bar joists.

The evolution of buildings making up the Cook Paint and Varnish campus was a direct result of the expansion and success of Cook and its various interests. Cook had become progressive and somewhat flamboyant for a paint company, and its Houston facility reflected this somewhat.

In 1995, when David Adickes moved in he found the structures gutted for the most part, and in very bad shape. According to Mr. Adickes he replaced over 1,000 panes of glass in the industrial window systems, throughout the late 1990s. In many areas the entire steel framing was removed and new framing was fabricated. In addition to exterior and interior painting, Adickes removed the inoperable sprinkler system. The main capital improvement has been the addition of partition walls with corridors.

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*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.*



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## EXHIBIT A

Cook Paint and Varnish Company Building  
2500 Summer Street



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## EXHIBIT B

### SITE LOCATION MAP

Cook Paint and Varnish Company Building  
2500 Summer Street

NOT TO SCALE

