

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: Gulf Building and Annexes
(now known as JPMorgan Chase Bank)

OWNER: JPMorgan Chase Bank (formerly Chase Manhattan Bank)

APPLICANT: JPMorgan Chase Bank, Marc Vecchio

LOCATION: 712 Main Street

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: Sept-15-2002

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 12, and Tracts 3A, 4, 11 and 13, Block 81, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The buildings on the site include a 36-story, 13-story annex and 16-story annex commercial, steel frame buildings bounded by Main, Rusk, Travis and Capitol Streets.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation for the 36-story Gulf Building fronting Main and Rusk; the 13-story annex fronting Travis and Rusk; and the 16-story annex fronting Capitol and Travis.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

At the March 13, 1997 public hearing of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission (HAHC), the HAHC discussed the expiration of the two-year temporary designation of all landmarks that City Council had previously designated when the Historic Preservation Ordinance was adopted on March 1, 1995. Since the designation had expired, the HAHC requested that the planning staff contact the owners of these landmarks to determine their interest in the HAHC initiating an application for permanent designation. The Greater Houston Preservation Alliance has also assisted in contacting owners to determine interest in landmark designation of their properties, including the Gulf Building. The HAHC instructed the planning staff previously that if any landmark had been designated either by the National Register program (N.R.), as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark (RTHL), a State Archaeological Site (SAL), or a temporary landmark of the City of Houston, then the application would be considered for permanent landmark designation on that merit alone because all of the required information has been filed to obtain status. Therefore, regarding the preparation of the application, HAHC agreed to consider the application with minimal information provided to them. However, only the 36-story Gulf Building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on August 30, 1983. The Gulf Building has also been designated as a National Historical Civil Engineering Landmark in 1997. Since the Landmark application for the City of Houston also includes the two adjacent annex towers, a complete application is presented for consideration by the HAHC.

Located at the corner of Main Street and Rusk Avenue, in the heart of Houston's downtown financial district, the Gulf Building is one of the premier examples of 1920s Manhattan-style, setback skyscrapers in the Southwest. Completed in 1929, the 36-story, Gulf Building's level of excellence exhibited in the Gothic design of the structure, coupled with the extensive interior and exterior Art Deco detailing, evokes a feeling of confidence and stability. Two annexes, one of 13 stories built in 1946, and the other of 16 built in 1949, were added in a compatible style at Travis Street and Rusk Avenue shortly after World War II. All three buildings were the work of Alfred C. Finn, one of Houston's most prominent architects. The remodeling of all three buildings in 1959-60, and again in 1969-70, retained the basic character and style of the structure. While this impressive structure no longer dominates the Houston skyline as it once did, the Gulf Building remains one of the most important early twentieth century buildings in the city and state.

The Gulf Building comprises a 6-story rectangular base above which rises a rectangular, 30-story tower progressively diminishing in size at the 25th, 28th, and 32nd-floor levels. The Main Street (east) elevation of the building is seven bays long at base level. The tower above is five bays long above the base, diminishing to three bays at its summit. The Rusk Avenue (south) elevation is eight bays wide at base level, six bays wide at the bottom of the tower, and four bays wide at the tower's top. The north and west elevations of the tower duplicate those of the south and east, respectively. The base contains a chamfered bay at the Main-Rusk intersection. A six-story extension of the base, three bays wide and seven bays long, cuts westward through the middle of the block to provide access from Travis Street. A series of additions shortly after World War II resulted in the absorption of this extension by 13 and 16-story annexes to either side, as well as above it.

AGENDA ITEM: IV

P.C.MEETING DATE: 10-31-02

HPO FILE NO.: 02L97

DATE ACCEPTED: Aug-10-01

HAHC HEARING DATE: 10-24-02

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The Gulf Building is of steel-frame construction and is supported by a concrete mat approximately 120-by-124 ft., and 4-ft. thick. All other footings surrounding the tower are dug footings of exact sizes to fit the loading of the central tower. The lower six stories of the structure are faced with limestone. It appears that this stone was abraded with a mechanical grinder after having been set in place. The abrasions form irregular horizontal bands around the base of the structure, and could be taken as a stylized representation of waves or layers of strata undulating across the surface of the building. The surface of the tower is faced with brick laid in Flemish bond. Roof surfaces are flat and covered with cement tile. The building is 430 ft. high.

There are three principal entrances to the Gulf Building, two from Main Street and one from Travis Street, all similarly treated. The Main Street entries are located in the last bay but one at either side of the east elevation. Each is set into a three-story portal outlined by scalloped molding. The southernmost portal (originally opening into a retail space) was filled in with detailed window frames and arches similar to those on the second story of the building, which have been replaced by a curtain wall of anodized aluminum and bronze tinted glass set back behind ornamental metalwork to form a two-story arcade. The northernmost entrance still contains a three bay bronze screen. This deeply inset portal is spanned by a shouldered arch whose header panel is covered with abstractly patterned, angular and scroll-like elements. The jambs of the portal are faced with spiky, stalk-like piers which gradually emerge from the surface at half portal height. The bronze screen inside the portal commences above ranks of glazed doors (modern replacements). Its open-work ornamentation frames three arched windows. A third-story bank of windows, located beneath the arch, is treated quite simply. Depending from the top of the portal vault is a giant, octagonal, bronze and glass lantern. In external configuration, the Travis Street entrance is similar to the two Main Street entrances. The aperture above the entry doors is filled with stained glass. A secondary entry now opens off Rusk Avenue.

Windows in the Gulf Building are grouped in vertical channels. On each elevation (the two street faces of the base and all four faces of the tower), single-width bays occur at the ends of the facades, while intervening bays contain two windows each. The second-story windows are faced with a projecting cast-iron frame consisting of elaborately detailed spandrel and header panels linked by tapered piers. In the spandrels, an angular shield-like motif in high relief is centered within a field of scrollwork in low relief. The header panels are crenellated and decorated in low relief, while each merlon is crowned with triple pinnacles.

Huge, three-story bays enclose the windows of the third, fourth, and fifth floors. Spandrels below fourth floor windows contain sunburst patterns while those below fifth-floor windows contain variations of the design used on the window frames of the second floor. A broad, projecting belt course below the sixth-floor windows is inscribed with flowing, wavelike ornaments. This ornamentation is extended at the same level from the original building to the two annexes, and creates an element of unity visually linking the older section with the annexes. Above most of the sixth-floor windows are stone panels of projecting, triangulated prisms. These alternate with framed openings above the Main Street portals, and are headed with flowing scrolls and outlined by molding frames.

Most of the window units are metal-framed, one-plus-one bifolds grouped in double pairs in the tower apertures. Windows in the end bays on the 23rd floor, in the intermediate bay on the 25th floor, and all windows on the 35th floor display curved arches instead of straight headers. All of the windows were designed by the office of the principal architect, Alfred C. Finn, to fit the specific requirements of the Gulf Building. Spandrels in the end bays of the tower facades are of flush brick; those in the intermediate bays are of a darker brick laid in a prismatic pattern.

The Gulf Building is characteristic of American skyscrapers of the late 1920s in both its overall configuration and in detail. The stepped profile of the building, rising to a vertically attenuated crown, seems, at a distance, almost Gothic in appearance. But it is Gotham and not medieval Europe which the architects of the Gulf Building sought to invoke. Upon inspection, the ornament is Art Deco in character, although obviously derived from Gothic detail. The contrast between rounded, scroll like ornament and angular, prismatic zigzags, as well as the use of symmetrically flowing tendrils, chamfers, incisions, and distressed waves on the limestone cladding--all bespeak 1920s modern detail.

The great height of the building necessitates a concentration of sculptural ornament near ground level, where it can be seen most easily. Beyond eye level, the skin of the building appears abstractly sculptured. The alignment of windows in three-story bays suppresses the importance of both individual openings and of the repetitive stacking of floors. The thickest brick piers, rising near the corners of the building, become more exposed at each higher setback until they become the corner piers of the topmost level. The piers of the intermediate bays are thinner.

The setbacks provide sculptural possibilities for the massing of the building. Above the 20th floor, the corner salient on all four sides of the tower is progressively splayed, becoming a full, chamfered bay at the level of the second setback, between floors 25 and 27. At the second setback, a reentrant right angle is deeply gouged into the corners of the tower.

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This alignment continues upward vertically to the third and final setback, where it is resolved in a prominent, deeply revealed salient. At the first and second setbacks, piers terminate above the parapets in blunted pinnacles. At the third and fourth setbacks, the piers are layered in depth and project far beyond the plane of the wall. They enhance the abstract, sculptural quality of the building's crown and recall the finials of Gothic structures. In the highest setback, large brick piers frame three, three-story bays of paired windows which are separated by less massive piers. The largest piers extend beyond the parapet like spires, and the smaller, intermediate piers soar even higher. The piers are joined together by diagonal, open-work fins which are quite striking. Applied ornament on the tower tends to occur at the parapet levels, and in the spandrels of the floors below each setback.

The ground-floor plan of the Gulf Building originally reflected its division into office building, bank, and retail establishment. The northernmost of the two Main Street entries gives access to a lobby which is one bay wide, and runs four bays westward from the point of entry. Opening from the south side of the two middle bays are two elevator vestibules. The lobby leads to the banking hall, which is seven bays long and three bays wide, with its own access to Travis Street in the central bay of the west wall. The southernmost entrance from Main Street originally opened onto a retail store which occupied all the floors of the base south of the elevator core. This space has now been consolidated with the bank. A cross circulation route, served by a new entrance from Rusk Avenue, intersects the main lobby between the elevator core and the banking hall. The banking hall itself now opens into annexes to both sides constructed in the late 1940's and early 1950s. Floors two through 35 of the Gulf Building contain office space.

Atop the 37th level was a viewing platform which housed the Jesse H. Jones Aeronautical Beacon. This beacon was described as two searchlights, one pointed in a vertical position emitting 15,000 candlepower and another pointed in a horizontal position emitting 8,000 candlepower. It was touted as an aid to flyers in delivering the United States Air Mail. In actual fact, it most likely served as a beacon to alert flyers to the exact location of the Gulf Building tower, preventing collisions. A city guidebook at the time recalls that visitors could ride up express elevators, then climb a metal-and-marble staircase to reach its observation deck tower, some 430 feet above the ground. Mounted on the roof, the observation deck was equipped with a telescope, and it is said that on a clear day Galveston was easily visible through the telescope. Neither of these elements remains on the roof of the Gulf Building today, and the date of their removal has not been learned. It was certainly prior to 1965, when the Gulf Oil Company installed a rotating sign on the summit. The enormous disk with the company insignia was 53 feet high, with 4,700 square feet of display area. It was geared to rotate at approximately 1.5 rpm, and was illuminated with 7,350 lineal feet of neon tubing. It was removed in 1974.

The most elaborately detailed public spaces in the building are the principal lobby and the banking hall. The lobby is two stories high and the ceiling exhibits four vaulted bays supported on piers. Along the crosswalks of the lobby, within the lunettes beneath the vaults, are eight frescoes illustrating historic Texas scenes. The walls, piers, and arches are faced with Sienna travertine imported from Italy. Benedict nickel is used as a surface material for doors and over-doors, elevator doors, for the tablet frame of the building directory, and for fascias. Elaborate letterboxes are located on the west side of each elevator vestibule. Set within these surfaces are decorative panels of raised ornament composed of symmetrically disposed rays, chevrons, arcs, and scrolls. The four handkerchief vaults of the lobby are completely covered by molded plaster ornament, the dominant element being a stylized sunburst surrounded by border panels of stylized foliage. The vaults are painted in a metallic paint to harmonize with the nickel used for the doors in the lobby. The only change made to the lobby area since 1927 is the removal of the original light fixtures which hung from the center of each of the four vaults. The current fixtures, while not original, are compatible with the interior detailing of the lobby.

The elevator vestibules on each of the 35 floors had marble walls and parquet flooring. These original elements remain on many floors, although some have been paneled and or carpeted during remodeling. Message banks from a system of pneumatic tubes are found on the 17th and 19th floors. Long, rectangular, leather pouches once used with the system remain in associated storage shelves.

The banking hall is three stories high. Fluted pilasters terminating in stylized capitals demark the wall bays. The wall is sheathed in limestone. The ceiling is surfaced with ornament similar to that found in the lobby vaults, which is finished to resemble gold leaf. This decoration frames a rectangular central skylight. A network of diffuser panels of art glass conceals the source of artificial illumination within the skylight. As a result of several remodeling efforts, the banking hall is not in its original form. A stair which once descended from the center of the hall to the safety deposit department has been removed, and counters no longer run the entire length of the room along the side walls. The patterned terrazzo floor has been carpeted. On the north and south walls, balconies have been added between bays at the second and third floor levels. These are faced with high rails of a stylized Greek design, and duplicate those in the original balconies above the entrance from the lobby. The original ceiling lights were also removed and replaced by hanging fixtures which are mildly obtrusive. The recessed ceiling coffers now contain flush light fixtures. The great window above the Travis Street entry,

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with its swirling, stained-glass depiction of the Battle of San Jacinto, was installed in 1960. It replaced clear glass panels in the same metal framework.

The Gulf Building was designed in 1927, and built between 1927 and 1929. One local newspaper reported a cost of \$6,550,000 while during 1927 another reported a cost of \$4,500,000; A. C. Finn, Jr., the principal architect's son, estimates the cost approximately \$3,500,000. A thorough search of the extensive files of Alfred C. Finn on the Gulf Building could possibly reconstruct the financial statement and resolve this discrepancy. For the purposes of this report, however, such a detailed search is not feasible.

The principal architect of the Gulf Building was Alfred C. Finn of Houston. Kenneth Franzheim and J. E. R. Carpenter were listed on all drawings and documents as consulting architects, while Earl R. Gilbert was the supervising architect in Finn's office. The W. E. Simpson Company of San Antonio provided the structural engineering. Reginald Taylor of Houston was the mechanical engineer, while Robert J. Cummins of Houston was the consulting engineer. The initial general contractor was the Hewitt Construction Company of Houston, whereas the American Construction Company took over as general contractor during the pouring of concrete slabs in 1927, and completed the project. Vincent Margarita of New York executed the lobby frescoes. A central air-conditioning system was installed between 1938 and 1939.

Between 1946 and 1949, the 13-story Annex I was added to the Gulf Building at Travis Street and Rusk Avenue south of, and above, the banking hall. Alfred C. Finn was the architect and Manhattan Construction Company the general contractor. Immediately following its completion, the 16 story Annex II (also called the Bank of Commerce Building) was constructed at Travis Street and Capitol Avenue. This structure was also designed by Finn, with the Manhattan Construction Company acting as general contractors. Stylistically, Annex I and Annex II were adaptations of the base of the Gulf Building. The office towers of these two buildings do not touch the tower of the Gulf Building which remains free standing and retains its original integrity. The banking hall was altered in 1959-1960 by Kenneth Franzheim to permit expansion of banking operations into the Back of Commerce Building. Galleries were opened in the north wall of the banking hall, a new system of counters was installed, escalators inserted in 1949 were taken out, the central stair was removed, the terrazzo floor carpeted, and the stained-glass window over the Travis Street entrance was added. A further extension of banking operations in 1969-70 entailed expansion into what had formerly been retail space at the Main Street-Rusk Avenue intersection. With the exception of the main lobby and the elevator vestibules, the entire ground floor of the Gulf Building is now occupied by banking facilities. Caudill Rowlett & Scott were architects for the 1969-70 remodeling, which entailed sealing up the Main Street shop windows at street level, or replacing them (as well as those along Rusk Avenue and the architectural detail of the southernmost Main Street entrance) with anodized aluminum-framed panels of bronze glass. All additions to the Gulf Building have been done with great sympathy to the original design, and contribute to the integrity of the structure. They are thus included in the present nomination. The Gulf Building is in good condition and well maintained. Despite competition from newer office buildings, it remains a prestigious downtown office structure.

The Gulf Building is one of the foremost Art Deco skyscraper office buildings in the Southwest. It was built by a prominent real estate developer, entrepreneur, and political activist, Jesse H. Jones, to serve as the flagship of his real estate empire. It was the tallest building west of the Mississippi River until 1931, and dominated the Houston skyline as the tallest building until 1963. Since its construction, the Gulf Building has housed the prominent industries shaping the growth and development of Houston: banking and oil. The principal architect, Alfred C. Finn, and the consulting architect, Kenneth Franzheim, were both prolific during the second quarter of the 20th century.

The Gulf Building was constructed between 1927 and 1929 by the Jesse H. Jones Interests, to provide space for the National Bank of Commerce, the Gulf Oil companies, and the Sakowitz Brothers specialty store. The developer of the building, Jesse Holman Jones (1874-1956), came to Houston from Tennessee in 1898 to manage the estate of his uncle, a successful lumber dealer. Jones became involved in real estate development in the early 1900s. In 1908, he undertook his first multistory downtown building, an hotel, following it the next year with a ten-story office building in the middle of the 700 block of Main Street, which was leased to the Texas Company. Across Main Street from the Texas Company Building, at the northeast corner of Main and Rusk, he built a ten-story office building in 1915-1916 to provide space for the Gulf Refining Company and the National Bank of Commerce, in which he had an interest. Jones real estate ventures included construction of the new Rice Hotel between 1911 and 1913, as well as office, apartment, hotel, and theater buildings in Houston, Fort Worth, Dallas, and New York. During the 1920s alone, Jones built five office buildings, one hotel, and three theaters along Houston's Main Street. In the same years he also consolidated his interests in the National Bank of Commerce, the Houston Chronicle, and the Bankers Mortgage Company. Moreover, Jones entered the arena of national Democratic politics. In 1924, he was selected finance chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and in 1928 he secured the Democratic National Convention for Houston. Because of his business acumen, Jones was made a

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member of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation when it was organized in 1932, and subsequently became chairman. In 1940, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed him Secretary of Commerce, a post he held until 1945.

According to his biographer, Bascom N. Timmons, Jesse H. Jones had obtained the site at the northwest corner of Main and Rusk--south of the Texas Company Building and across the street from the Gulf Refining Company Building--in the early 1900s. The house of Charlotte Baldwin Allen, wife of one of the founders of Houston, had originally been located on the site. But by the time of Mrs. Allen's death, in 1895, the neighborhood was in transition from residential to commercial use.

By the mid-1920s, the location of the Second National Bank Building on the southwest corner of the intersection and the newly completed Niels Esperson Building one block to the west, at Travis and Rusk, suggested the Main-Rusk intersection as the logical place for a major building. Moreover, Jones had remodeled and expanded the Texas Company Building into the Bankers Mortgage Building in 1923, so that it encompassed the north half of the 700 block of Main Street. Planning apparently began in 1926 for new quarters for the National Bank of Commerce and in early 1927, the Gulf Oil companies (Gulf Refining Company, Gulf Production Company, and Gulf Pipe Line Company) became involved because of their desire for more space. Press releases from the spring of 1927 indicate that the National Bank of Commerce and Sakowitz Brothers were to share frontage on Main Street at the base of the 35-story building, with the bank at the corner. The banking hall ended up, however, in a westward extension of the base of the building, which ran back through the block to Travis Street, while Sakowitz Brothers obtained the Main-Rusk corner. Jones retained three architects to contribute to the design of the building: Alfred C. Finn (1883-1964), Kenneth Franzheim (1890-1959) and J. E. R. Carpenter (1867-1932).

Alfred C. Finn, a native of Bellville, Texas, received his professional training in the offices of Sanguinet and Staats of Fort Worth, the foremost commercial architectural firm in the state during the early decades of the 20th century. In 1913, he was sent to work in the Houston office of Sanguinet and Staats. Two years later, upon opening his own office, Finn's first large commission was to design the Gulf Refining Company Building at Main and Rusk for Jesse H. Jones. During the early years of his practice he designed many large houses in Houston, but after the early 1920s, Finn came to concentrate on large commercial and institutional projects. Jesse H. Jones was his chief patron. Attributable to this sponsorship are St. Paul's Methodist Church, the Bankers Mortgage, Kirby and Democratic buildings, the Lamar Hotel (now demolished), the Metropolitan and State theaters in Houston (now demolished), the Fair Building in Fort Worth, and the Mayfair House in New York. Large institutional projects included Jefferson Davis Hospital, the Federal Building in Galveston, the Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall, San Jacinto Monument, and the Veterans Administration Hospital. After 1945, Finn designed the City National Bank and Sakowitz Brothers buildings in downtown Houston and Ben Taub Hospital in the Texas Medical Center.

Two other architects, who worked in Finn's office on the Gulf Building and the two annexes, included Earl R. Gilbert (born 1896) and Alfred C. Finn, Jr. (born 1911). Gilbert was the Supervising Architect on the original Gulf Building and several other Finn and/or Jones projects in Houston and in other Texas cities. Alfred C. Finn, Jr., was a student at Rice University during the construction of the Gulf Building, but participated in the construction of the two annexes.

Finn's commercial supremacy in Houston architecture was to be challenged only by Kenneth Franzheim, a West Virginian educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. During World War I, Franzheim was stationed in Houston. From 1920 until 1925, Franzheim practiced in Chicago and New York in association with C. Howard Crane, designing large commercial projects, among them a never built medical/professional building for Houston in 1923. After 1925, Franzheim practiced independently in New York. In 1928 he was retained by Jesse H. Jones to design a temporary coliseum in Houston for the Democratic National Convention. Franzheim also carried out the design of several of Jones' New York projects, including a multistory apartment building at 400 East 57th Street, a 42-story office building. In the early 1930s Franzheim became involved in several Houston projects as an associate of John F. Staub, and in 1937 he opened an office there. His work in Houston includes the Humble Tower and other additions to the Humble Building, Mirabeau B. Lamar Senior High School, the Oil and Gas Building (now demolished), Foley's Department Store, the Blaffer Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts, the South Texas National Bank Building, the Bank of the Southwest Building, Hermann Hospital and the Hermann Professional Building, the Texaco Building Annex and, in San Antonio, the National Bank of Commerce Building. After World War II Franzheim moved to Houston where he practiced until his death.

The third architect of the Gulf Building, J. Edwin R. Carpenter, was, like Jesse H. Jones, a Tennessean. Carpenter had been trained at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. His early professional experience was gained in the offices of H. H. Richardson and Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge in Boston. Carpenter designed a number of tall buildings in the South during the early 1900's, but he was best known for the many multistory apartment buildings he designed in the 1910s and 1920s along Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue in Manhattan.

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This probably accounts for his connection to Jones, for Jones' first New York real estate project had been a cooperative apartment building. In 1928, Carpenter was commissioned to collaborate with Kenneth Franzheim in designing the Democratic convention coliseum in Houston.

The division of responsibility among the three architects is somewhat unclear. An examination of Finn's correspondence files indicates that the supervision, construction, and daily affairs of the project were conducted from his office in the Bankers Mortgage Building, adjacent to the construction site. Finn's correspondence with Franzheim seems to indicate that Franzheim's office prepared design studies for exterior and interior spaces. References were made between the two men concerning marble types, grills, lamps, and other decorative or ornamental finishes. It would seem likely that Finn's office prepared the construction documents and executed the construction of the Gulf Building. Franzheim's office concentrated on the overall design of the structure as well as exterior and interior ornamentation as a consulting architect. No reference has been located to determine the role of J. E. R. Carpenter in the design or construction of the Gulf Building.

Jones apparently directed that the building, which was to exceed in height all buildings west of the Mississippi River, be of strikingly modern design. Franzheim later reproduced in his professional brochure a number of studies for the building. All display the basic organization: a six-story base from which a free-standing tower rises. But the exterior detailing was varied, especially the treatment of the summit of the building. The resolution finally chosen was derived from one of the most imitated precedents for American skyscraper design in the 1920s, Eliel Saarinen's second-prize entry to the Chicago Tribune's the design competition of 1922. Although Saarinen's design was never built, it inspired buildings from the East Coast to the West: John Head Howells' Panhellenic Hotel in New York, Raymond Hood's building at 333 North Michigan in Chicago, and George W. Kelham's Shell Building in San Francisco. The reason for the popularity of Saarinen's design was that it presented a compelling solution to a number of problems confronting skyscraper architects in the 1920s. Its gracefully stepped profile, diminishing in volume as it rose, responded to newly enacted zoning regulations in many American cities. The replication of historic architectural styles was eschewed in favor of a romantic, soaring treatment, suggestive of the Gothic in its verticality, but actually abstract, sculptural, and non-referential. Ornament was not banished, but it too sought modern expression. To satisfy this desire, American architects turned to the rich, exotic, highly stylized renditions of historic details popularized at the Decorative Arts Exhibition of 1925 in Paris and thereafter known as Art Deco.

The Gulf Building is most remarkable in profile. Some of the detail--particularly the ornamental frames of the second-floor windows--is obvious in its Gothic recall, and the distressed limestone finish of the base has a texture which is almost fabric-like in appearance. These details contrast with the massing of the tower, especially its terminus, and help make up an interesting whole. By layering, chamfering, and staggering the depths and heights of vertical piers on the uppermost setbacks, a romantic, soaring quality is achieved which both the builder and architect sought. This effect was once enhanced at night by banks of strategically placed floodlights and by the Jesse H. Jones Aeronautical Beacon, an airplane searchlight. The detailing in the lobby and in the banking hall is quite effective. These comprise one of the most memorable and urbane sequences of public spaces in downtown Houston.

The Great Depression curtailed Houston's skyscraper boom for several decades. Thus the Gulf Building was only one of two Art Deco skyscrapers erected in Houston. Although it retained its status as the tallest building west of the Mississippi for only two years (being surpassed by the Kansas City Power and Light and the Fidelity Trust Company buildings in Kansas City), the Gulf Building was unchallenged in Texas until the completion of the Humble Building in 1963. Despite remodeling, the Gulf Building remains one of the architecturally distinguished tall office buildings in downtown Houston. (Information from National Register nomination, Texas Historical Commission)

The Gulf Building, the 36-story tower, was designated as a National Historical Civil Engineering Landmark, an award of the American Society of Civil Engineers. The dedication of the honor was held on Saturday, April 12, 1997. The building's award stems principally from the then innovative, concrete-and-steel-mat, or floating slab, fashioned for its foundation. Before its construction, builders shored up large buildings set in this area's gumbo soil with concrete pilings penetrating deep into the ground, but doing that in the case of the Gulf Building, would have been too expensive. This pioneering foundation designed for it became the model for other large Houston buildings, and credit for its design and installation should go to Karl Terzacghi, renowned for research on the load-bearing capacity of soils, and the Willard E. Simpson Company of San Antonio. Another special feature of the Gulf Building was the special welding that had to be done to the steel frame so that four more stories could be added to the top of the building as it was in its final stages of completion. After construction began, Jesse H. Jones had heard that another building was going to be taller than the Gulf Building. Thus the additional stories were added to make it the tallest office building not only in Houston, but also west of the Mississippi River.

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The Gulf Building's Civil Engineering honor is shared only by two other Houston-area construction projects, the Houston Ship Channel and the San Jacinto Monument. When constructed in 1929, the Gulf Building housed the offices of the Gulf Building and the National Bank of Commerce. Later it was to become the Texas Commerce Bank, then Chase Manhattan Bank and now it is known as JPMorgan Chase Bank. (Houston Chronicle, April 7, 1997)

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION...:

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

- | S | NA | | S - satisfies | NA - not applicable |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|----------------------|----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event; | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present; | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride. | | |

PUBLIC COMMENTS: NONE

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends to City Council the landmark designation of the Gulf Building and annexes.

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SITE LOCATION MAP
GULF BUILDING AND ANNEXES
712 MAIN STREET
NOT TO SCALE