

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: Post-Dispatch Building

Owner: Holtze Houston, LLLP

APPLICANT: William G. MacRostie (Agent for the Owner)

LOCATION: 609 Fannin Street

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: Aug-6-99

AGENDA ITEM: III

MEETING DATE: Sep-9-99

HPO FILE NO.: 99L78

DATE ACCEPTED: Jul-10-99

HEARING DATE: Sep-9-99

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 6 & 7, Block 70, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas, and located on the southeast corner of Fannin Street and Texas Avenue. The structure on the site is a vacant 22-story commercial building containing 257,000 square feet gross floor area.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Post-Dispatch Building, conceived by the State's premier skyscraper design firm exhibits the size, scale, massing, and materials characteristic of the American skyscraper, and is emblematic of Houston's growing importance as a commercial center of the State and the Gulf Coast. Built by a Texas oilman and entrepreneur, the building illustrates the mark that new wealth made on the city's skyline during the boom years of the 1920s.

The Post-Dispatch building exhibits the leading form, ornamentation, and structural design of early twentieth century Texas skyscrapers. Designed by Carl Staats, the building was one of the last built by the firm of Sanguinet, Staats, Hedrick, and Gottlieb, which at the time was acknowledged as Texas's leader in skyscraper design. The exterior reflects Staat's prevailing use of classical revival decoration and reliance on a tripartite design over structural steel framing. The Houston Post-Dispatch Building was completed in 1926 for entrepreneur and future Texas Governor Ross S. Sterling. Sterling made his first fortune as a founder of the Humble Oil Company. Using his profits from Humble, Sterling started the Houston National Bank. As the result of a bad bank loan, two struggling Houston newspapers were combined under Sterling to create the successful Houston Post-Dispatch. Additionally, Sterling created Houston's first radio station, KPRC. Over the years the building housed a variety of tenants including the business and advertising offices of the Houston Post-Dispatch, Houston's first radio station, the U.S. Weather Bureau, and the Shell Oil Company. Despite alterations to the ground level façade and the interior spaces, the building retains a sufficient degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association to remain recognizable to its period of significance.

The Post-Dispatch Building was big news in the summer of 1925. It was the "largest and most expensive structure in the City of Houston," according to the *Post-Dispatch* (August 9, 1925). In addition, the building went up in record speed: it was ready to be occupied in 11 months. Don Hall, the general contractor, told the paper that "more than 1,000 carloads of material will be used in the construction... and when completed the structure will be an example of permanent, fireproof, and the most efficient type of construction" (Houston *Post-Dispatch* August 2, 1925).

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The designers of the Post-Dispatch Building, Sanguinet and Staats had been in business since 1903. Sanguinet had practiced in Fort Worth since 1883, and Staats had worked for James Riley Gordon until being hired by Sanguinet in 1898. Sanguinet and Staats quickly built a statewide practice and soon became known as “the state’s foremost skyscraper architects.” Staats was generally the designer in the firm, and Sanguinet was the businessman. They worked throughout Texas, building the tallest structures in Fort Worth, Midland, San Antonio, and Houston. In 1911, the firm completed the 22-story Amicable Life Insurance Building in Waco, the tallest building in the Southwest until 1922. The firm also ushered in a new era of architectural practice. Rather than the typical small office, they established branches in cities throughout the state and aggressively marketed their firm. They were among the first in Texas to gather large office teams consisting of architects, engineers, and support people, creating a professional staff ideally suited for the complicated business of building skyscrapers (Lofgren 1987).

Sanguinet and Staats set up their Houston office in 1903 with a commission for the First National Bank Building. They were in an ideal situation to take advantage of the city’s growth between 1909 and 1913 and designed eight multi-story buildings in the downtown area (Fox 1983). Sanguinet and Staats’s first tall building, by turn-of-the-century standards, was Houston’s eight-story First National Bank Building built in 1905. Steel-framed, it was probably the earliest “skyscraper” in Texas (Lofgren 1987).

Sanguinet and Staats took in Richard D. Gottlieb as managing partner in 1913. Additionally, in 1921, the parent company in Fort Worth acquired another named partner, Wyatt C. Hendrick. Hendrick, a native of Virginia, was an architect and engineer with his own practice in Fort Worth from 1914, until he joined Sanguinet and Staats in 1921. The Houston office became known as Sanguinet, Staats, Hendrick, and Gottlieb. Between 1921 and 1926, the firm designed and built five tall office buildings in Houston and made substantial additions to earlier ones. These included the Federal Reserve Branch (1921-1922), Houston Cotton Exchange (1922-1924), Sam Houston Hotel (1924), Medical Arts Building (1925-1926), and the Post-Dispatch Building.

Following Staats’s earlier designs in Houston, Fort Worth, and Dallas, the 22-story Post-Dispatch Building rose in three parts on a steel skeleton. The first four floors form the base; fourteen floors comprise the main shaft; and four floors cap-off the structure. Faced with Bedford “Indiana” Limestone, the Post-Dispatch Building was one of the firm’s last skyscrapers to emphasize a horizontal look, through the use of narrow molded bands between each tier of windows. Cornices separating the three parts of the building’s façade added to the horizontal effect. The configuration of the windows at the corner bays of the building are treated differently, seeming to anchor the building to the ground. Emphasizing the corner bays in this manner was to become common among tall office buildings in the late 1920s (Fox 1983:).

Classical styling in the ornamentation was evident on all levels of the building. The main entrance, on Fannin, was a grand two-story classical portico surmounted by an elaborately carved stone pediment. Large display windows dominated the ground level with entrances at diagonal corners on Fannin Street and Texas Avenue. Wall-hung striped awnings sheltered the large fixed-glass display windows. The first two floors support a colonnade of paired classical pilasters framing the windows of the third and fourth floors. A similar colonnade encompasses the nineteenth through twenty-first floors. The twenty-second floor is the attic story and forms the cornice of the building. Greek keys and dentils line secondary cornices. Only the Fannin Street and Texas Avenue facades were ornamented. The other two facades, facing an alley and a party wall, are clad with brick that matches the limestone in color. Unfortunately, an attempt to modernize the building in 1971 resulted in the destruction of the building’s ornamental detail on the first two floors. However, the upper levels of the building have retained their original classical detailing.

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Ross Sterling, the builder of the Post-Dispatch Building, made his first fortune as a founder of the Humble Oil Company. According to the company's biographer, Sterling was "the chief promoter and unquestioned leader of the Humble Oil Company" (Larson 1999). His oil wealth, like many of Houston's businessmen, was the foundation for future entrepreneurial endeavors. For Sterling, this included the Houston National Bank and Houston Post-Dispatch. Sterling loaned money to friends in 1923 to start the Houston *Dispatch* as a competitor to the Houston *Post*. After advancing more than \$20,000, Sterling took over the troubled newspaper in November of the same year. The first Dispatch offices were located in the Humble Oil Building, and printing was done off site. Aggressively competing with the *Houston Post*, the *Dispatch* continued to lose money, but not as much as the *Post*. In 1924, Sterling bought the venerable *Post* and put out the first issue of the Houston *Post-Dispatch* on August 1, 1924.

During Houston's mid 1920's building boom, Sterling commissioned the firm of Sanguinet, Staats, Hendrick, and Gottlieb to build an office building on the corner of Fannin and Texas streets to house the paper's business offices and other Sterling ventures. The Sterling and Baker Brokerage firm was located on the ground floor and R. S. Sterling Investments was on the 22nd floor (Morrison & Fourmy 1926). Sterling also owned the first radio station in Houston, KPRC. Studios were located on the top floor of the Post-Dispatch Building. Though from a different location, KPRC is still broadcasting in Houston today.

Sterling successfully ran for governor of Texas in 1930 and was inaugurated in January of 1931. The Great Depression hit Texas in the early 1930's, and Sterling's own assets were depleted. He had extended his resources with the construction of several more office buildings and his bank had made other bad investments. In 1932, Sterling liquidated his holdings, including the newspaper and the Post-Dispatch Building. By 1932, the Post-Dispatch Building had become known as the Shell Building. In that year Shell occupied floors 17 through 22 (Morrison & Fourmy 1932-33). The lower floors of the building were occupied by doctors, attorneys, and oil-related businesses. The building continued to be Shell's Texas headquarters until 1970 when Shell moved into new quarters at Shell Plaza. Thereafter, the Post-Dispatch Building was known as 609 Fannin and has had a succession of tenants. There are currently plans to rehabilitate the building for use as a 300-room hotel along with an unspecified number of residential units.

Despite modifications to the first and second floors, this 22-story building is still a significant example of early skyscraper design.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION:

The Post-Dispatch Building at 609 Fannin retains most of its original neoclassical detailing. However, in 1971, an effort to "modernize" the building resulted in the complete destruction of the façades on the first two floors facing Texas and Fannin Streets. There is absolutely no remaining evidence of the original two-story classical portico, which once marked the main entrance into the building. Additionally, the large telephone microwave tower placed on the roof is visible from all angles.

The original interior of the building's lobby had floors and walls clad in Hauteville and Tavertine marble. The baseboards and door trim were comprised of black marble. Marble columns and pilasters supported the highly decorated ceilings on the ground floor. Office suites were fitted out to order. The L-shaped floor plan ensured that each office suite along the double-loaded corridor had natural light. During the 1971 remodeling, the interior was gutted. With no other changes to the exterior, the building continued to serve as an office building through the mid-1990s. The Post-Dispatch Building is currently vacant.

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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 type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" 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.	

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

That the Houston Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends to City Council the designation of the Post-Dispatch Building as a landmark since the application complies with the applicable criteria.

SITE LOCATION MAP
POST-DISPATCH BUILDING
609 FANNIN STREET
NOT TO SCALE