LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Alabama Theatre and Alabama Community Shopping Center
OWNER: Weingarten Realty
APPLICANT: Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission
LOCATION: 2900 to 2946 South Shepherd Drive
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: 05-09-07

AGENDA ITEM: III.a

HPO FILE NO.: 07L182
DATE ACCEPTED: 05-23-07
HAHC HEARING DATE: 06-13-07
PC HEARING DATE: 06-21-07

SITE INFORMATION

East 2.7625 acres known as Tract 1, Abstract 696, O. Smith Survey, located at the northwest corner of S. Shepherd and W. Alabama, and also Lots 1-7 and Tract 8A, Block 5, Lanier Place Addition, located at the southwest corner of Kipling and S. Shepherd (formerly part of the original Lot 48, O. Smith Survey), Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site includes a former movie theatre adjacent and attached to a one-story, stucco clad commercial building on either side.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Alabama Theatre and Shopping Center is a rare Houston example of an early "suburban" Modernistic shopping center and entertainment complex designed to meet the needs of the burgeoning automobile culture which began in earnest in America during the 1920s and 30s. The Alabama Theatre and Alabama Community Shopping Center were determined by the Texas Historical Commission on September 5, 2006 as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. On April 25, 2007, the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission (HAHC) instructed the Planning Official to prepare a Landmark Designation application for the Alabama Shopping Center and Alabama Theatre to be considered at the HAHC public hearing on June 13, 2007.

The Modernistic buildings are located at 2900-2946 South Shepherd Drive. The Alabama Theatre was constructed in 1938-1939 by Interstate Theatre Company, and opened on November 2, 1939. Interstate, a large national company, at one time operated 10 movie houses in Houston, including the Garden Oaks, Majestic, Metropolitan, River Oaks, and Village Theatres. They also operated more than 150 theatres located throughout the country. Interstate Theatre Company hired Dallas architect, W. Scott Dunne, to design the Alabama Theatre. Dunne also designed other notable theatres, such as Houston's Tower Theatre and Dallas' Texas Theatre.

The Alabama Theatre is notable for its imposing façade which forms both the physical and visual axis of the Alabama Shopping Center. The 800-seat theater's most distinguishing exterior feature is its prominent fluted center bay/canopy. The shopping wings flanking the theater were constructed by the Clayton Foundation in 1940 to service the surrounding River Oaks, Winlow Place, Montrose, and the Museum District neighborhoods. The Clayton Foundation, whose trustees were prominent Houstonians Benjamin, Julia, and William Clayton, commissioned well-known architect, Kenneth Franzheim, to design the wings.

The Alabama Theatre ceased functioning as a theater in 1983. It was extensively restored and sympathetically converted to a retail bookstore in 1984-1985, which received award-winning recognition. The conversion maintained and restored much of the significant elements of the historic building's ornate interiors as well as the exterior, while simultaneously meeting the changing needs of future tenants. The Alabama Theatre and

Shopping Center, which have been determined as eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, meet Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 for Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Alabama Theatre and Shopping Center at 2900-2946 South Shepherd Drive, were constructed between 1938 (theatre) and 1940 (the shopping center) in the "Modernistic" style which is characterized by its use of curved exterior surfaces and generally streamlined appearance. This early example of an automobile-oriented shopping center was designed specifically for patrons with automobiles which was a style departure from earlier pedestrian-oriented retail centers, which relied on storefronts located close to the street adjacent to sidewalks. This new type of design would set the course for later commercial development in Houston.

The Alabama Theatre was constructed and operated by the Interstate Theatre Corporation. Interstate ran a number of theatres in the South and was the brain child of Karl Hoblitzelle (1879-1967), an internationally acclaimed, early cinematic director, producer, and Oscar winner.

The Alabama Shopping Center is located within the Obedience Smith Land survey. The physical location for the Alabama Theatre, at the corner of West Alabama and Shepherd Drive, was just inside the Houston city limits of the mid 1930s. The development followed the trend of Houston's western expansion as many Houstonians began to migrate in a westward direction from older inner city neighborhoods. The shopping center was one of the earliest in Houston to be designed with prominently placed automobile parking lots in front and to the rear of the complex in order to cater to the new "suburbanites."

As late as 1925, the 2.48 acre block on which the Alabama Theatre and Shopping Center were later built, was vacant land owned by the family of real estate developer and philanthropist, Henry F. Macgregor. The Macgregors were instrumental in the development of the Southmore Addition, located near the Houston Museum District. The Macgregor family is most well-known for their donation of the land on which MacGregor Park is now located

A number of residential additions were developed in and around the future location of the Alabama Theatre and Shopping Center. Among the residential neighborhoods located in the near vicinity were Alabama Place (1930), Avalon Place (1931), Colquitt Court (1941), Westlawn Terrace (1928), and Winlow Place (1923). Melrose Place subdivision was also platted nearby. Several residential structures were located along the northern border of the block facing Kipling Street. These would later be demolished to make room for the expansion of the Alabama Shopping Center in 1940.

The Interstate Theatre Company entered into a ground lease agreement with the owners of the land on which the Alabama Theatre would be built. This agreement allowed the tenant, Interstate Theatres, to construct a theater and provide all subsequent maintenance while paying rent to the owners of the land. Interstate hired Dallas architect, W. Scott Dunne, to design the theater. Dunne also designed other notable theaters, such as Houston's Tower Theatre and Dallas' Texas Theatre, which became infamous as the location where Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested by Dallas police on November 22, 1963.

According to Stephen Fox, the list of projects by Dunne include many theatres as follows: R & R Theatres in San Angelo, Oak Cliff (Dallas), Laredo, Dallas, Mesquite, and Corpus Christi; Del Rio Amusement, Del Rio, Texas; Charles Mangold Hotel (Dallas); Oak Cliff Theatre and Hotel (Dallas); the Martini Theatre (Galveston); and other theaters in Jefferson, Amarillo, and Longview, Texas. Dunne also designed Astin Memorial Parish House, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Bryan, Texas as well as the Physics Building (now Psychology Building), Texas A & M University, Bryan, Texas. Dunne taught architecture at Texas A & M University just after World War I. By 1928, he was in Dallas already specializing in the design of theatres.

Interstate Theatres had been formed in 1906 by several business partners, including Karl Hoblitzell, who eventually went on to become president of the company. The company originally operated vaudeville theatres, which were in vogue during the period shortly after the turn of the 20th century until the early 1930s. Vaudeville entertainment was centered around the theatrical stage and provided a wide array of live "talent" acts, like dancers, musicians, and side show acts. Vaudeville acts had been extremely popular throughout the United States, but struggled in the southern states. Interstate Theatres worked diligently in the South to establish themselves as a reputable and wholesome business in states where popular opinion of Vaudeville entertainment was not very favorable. Interstate eventually prevailed in their public relations endeavors and established their brand name as one to be reckoned with.

As vaudeville acts began to wane in popularity across the U.S., Interstate Theatres was forced to adapt to the changing trends in entertainment. The company began to feature cinematic works alongside its vaudeville performances. This would eventually give way to the full time screenings of cinematic works and the eventual abandonment of the vaudeville acts which had been so profitable to the company. Interstate Theatres sold most of its interest to RKO Pictures in 1930. RKO, which has operated continuously since 1929, produced many of the blockbuster films of the1930s and 1940s.

The 1930s saw turbulent times for the Interstate Theatre Company as well as others in the movie industry as the result of the Great Depression which began with the stock market crash of 1929. While RKO was the parent company of Interstate Theatres after 1930, Interstate maintained its ownership of the major Texas theatres. RKO filed for bankruptcy in 1932 and ownership of its Interstate Theatres interest reverted back to Karl Hoblitzell. Paramount Pictures, which had also filed for bankruptcy during this time period, eventually entered into an agreement with Karl Hoblitzell of Interstate Theatres, as well as the RKO Company, to run one of its subsidiaries. The new conglomerate meant market dominance in the southern United States, which in the next decade would lead to more than 150 locations in Texas alone. This alliance was later dismantled by the Federal Courts under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The Federal Government argued that the movie industry was in violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act because of the conglomerations which were formed in the industry during the 1930s and 1940s, and because these conglomerates were not only producing films, but also distributing the films to their own movie houses. The dissolution of the Interstate-Paramount conglomerate was finalized in 1951. Karl Hoblitzelle maintained ownership of the now independent Interstate Theatre Company until his death in 1967.

The Interstate Theatre Company is currently owned by the Starplex Cinema Corporation. Starplex operates theatres in small towns and cities in California, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Nebraska, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, and the District of Columbia. The chain does not currently operate any theatres in Houston.

According to the *Houston Post* article of July 21, 1940, "Foundation will erect $100,000 Community Center" stating further that the Clayton Foundation, whose trustees Benjamin and Julia S. Clayton, and William Clayton, had commissioned Kenneth Franzheim to design the wings flanking the Alabama Theatre. A rendering of the community center is included in the article. The Claytons were prominent Houstonians in both business and as philanthropists.

According to the *Handbook of Texas*:

"Anderson, Clayton and Company, cotton merchants, was founded by brothers-in-law Frank E. Anderson and William Lockhart Clayton, cotton merchants, and Monroe D. Anderson, a banker. The partnership was established in Oklahoma City on August 1, 1904. In 1905 Benjamin Clayton, Will's younger brother and an expert in rail and steamship transportation, joined the firm. Company headquarters moved to Houston in 1916 to be nearer the deep-water port facilities of the Houston Ship Channel.

"World War I demands for cotton enhanced the company's fortunes. As its buying and distributing organization expanded, the firm acquired storage and compressors for American cotton handling and improved its finance and insurance arrangements. As United States exports and banking accommodations grew, Anderson, Clayton set up overseas distributing agents. By the mid-1920s company trading firms were operating in Europe, Egypt, India, and China.

"The company was incorporated in 1929 and remained private until 1945. At that time it went public and was listed on the New York Stock Exchange. By 1945, with 223 gins, 33 cottonseed oil plants, and 123 warehouses worldwide, Anderson, Clayton and Company was called the largest buyer, seller, storer, and shipper of raw cotton in the world by Fortune Magazine. Its subsidiaries included a marine insurance company, the barge line, bagging and cotton-blanket mills, a Mexican loan bank, and the machine works. After 1950 sales in the international market reached 3½ percent of all the world's production, and the multimillion-dollar corporation came to be known as ACCO, or the Big Store.

"When rayon threatened the cotton market after the war, ACCO further diversified, reducing its cotton interests by half and adding industrials, government warehousing services, and other interests. A Foods Division was organized after the purchase of Mrs. Tucker's Foods of Sherman, Texas, in 1952 and by 1954 ACCO sold Chiffon margarine and Seven Seas dressing and owned some of the first consumer-product franchises in Mexico. By 1965 the company handled approximately 15 percent of Brazilian coffee exports and a substantial quantity from other countries, as well as cocoa exports and soybean processing.

"By 1977 Anderson, Clayton and Company maintained firms or exclusive agents for cotton in over forty nations; had expanded its Ranger trademark insurance ventures, founded in 1923, with acquisition of Pan Am Insurance in 1968 and American Founders Life in 1977; and had acquired Igloo Corporation, a producer of thermoplastic beverage containers and ice chests. The company climaxed its shipping investments as cooperator of the first nuclear-powered merchant ship, the Savannah.

"Pruning of operations began in the 1960s, and by 1973 the firm had withdrawn from cotton merchandising everywhere except in Brazil and Mexico and considered itself chiefly a producer of food products. Anderson, Clayton and Company became a wholly owned subsidiary of the Quaker Oats Company in 1986, when Quaker Oats purchased the Anderson Clayton stock. Some food products, notably Gaines dog food, continued to be marketed under the name Anderson Clayton, but the company's Houston headquarters was closed and the stock was delisted."

According to the article by Stephen Fox in the *Handbook of Texas*:

"Kenneth Franzheim, architect, was born on October 28, 1890, in Wheeling, West Virginia. He graduated from Lawrenceville School and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (B. A. 1913), then worked from 1913 until 1917 for the Boston architect Welles Bosworth. He subsequently served for two years at Ellington Field outside Houston, Texas, as a first flight lieutenant in the United States Army Air Corps. On May 12, 1919, he married Elizabeth Frances Simms; they had three children, one of whom, Kenneth Franzheim II, served as ambassador to New Zealand, Western Samoa, Fiji, and Tonga during President Richard M. Nixon's administration.

"Franzheim became a partner of the Detroit architect C. Howard Crane in 1920. He worked for Crane in Chicago, then in Boston. In 1925 he began independent practice in New York, where he specialized in the design of large commercial buildings and airports. He was retained in 1928 by Jesse H. Jones to collaborate with Alfred C. Finn on the design of the thirty-seven-story Gulf Building, Houston (1929), and to design a temporary coliseum for the Democratic national convention in Houston. Also for Jones, Franzheim designed a forty-two-story office building (1930) and a twenty-story apartment building (1931) in midtown Manhattan. A second round of major projects in Houston, undertaken with John F. Staub, led Franzheim to move his practice from New York to Houston in 1937, although he maintained a New York office until 1940. From 1941 until 1944

Franzheim worked in Washington, D.C. Upon returning to Houston he established himself as the foremost commercial architect in the city, a position he held until his death. Most of the buildings that he produced in Houston were examples of modernistic architecture. Ben A. Dore, another former partner of C. Howard Crane, was his chief designer.

"Franzheim's major buildings in Houston were the seventeen-story Humble Tower (1936, with Staub- City of Houston Landmark); the second Hermann Hospital and the Hermann Professional Building (1949, with Hedrick and Lindsley); the eighteen-story Prudential Building (1952); the twenty-one-story Texas National Bank building (1955); and the twenty-four-story Bank of the Southwest building (1956). Franzheim was also responsible for the twenty-one-story National Bank of Commerce building in San Antonio (1957, with Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres). Franzheim's best known Houston building was Foley's Department Store (1947, 1957), for which he won an Award of Merit from the American Institute of Architects in 1950.

"Franzheim was particularly interested in incorporating works of art in his architecture, and this led to collaboration with the artists Wheeler Williams, Peter Hurd, Leo Friedlander, and Rufino Tamayo. Franzheim was the first chairman of the board of the Allied Arts Association of Houston and was an honorary member of the National Sculpture Society. In 1949 he was elected to fellowship in the American Institute of Architects, the same year that he served as chairman of the institute's annual convention, which was held in Houston, and as president of the Houston Chapter of the AIA. Franzheim also was an honorary member of the Mexican Society of Architects; after 1945 he maintained a second home in Mexico City. He was a member and deacon of the First Presbyterian Church of Houston. He belonged to the Bayou Club, the Houston Country Club, the Coronado Club, and the Ramada Club. Franzheim died in Mexico on March 13, 1959, and is buried in Glenwood Cemetery, Houston."

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The Alabama Theatre and Shopping Center were designed in the "Modernistic" Style. This style enjoyed sizeable popularity in America during the mid to late 1930s. The style is often associated with Art Deco or Art Nouveau, which also flourished in America during the 1920s and early 1930s, but which is stylistically different. The Modernistic style is noted for its use of rounded corners, horizontal bands of windows, and smooth surfaces.

The Alabama Theatre is a historic two-story steel and plastered surfaced theater building which is flanked on the north and south sides by conjoined one-story retail buildings. The Alabama Theatre, constructed in 1938 and completed in 1939, is notable for its imposing façade which forms both the physical and visual axis of the Alabama Shopping Center. The theater's most distinguishing exterior feature is its prominent fluted center bay/canopy. The center bay projects forward towards the street, and beyond the stepped-back massing which characterizes the remainder of the building. The central projecting bay/canopy features large half-round, vertical fluting of smooth enameled steel which lend verticality to the building. The forward projection of the building is also repeated in the marquee which is affixed horizontally to the front of the building and which comes to a point facing South Shepherd Drive. An historic tall, slender enameled steel sign, which advertises the Alabama Theatre and Shopping Center, is located between the theater's projecting canopy and the street. The Alabama Theatre ceased functioning as a theater in 1983. It was extensively restored and sympathetically converted to a retail bookstore in 1984-1985, which received award-winning recognition. The conversion maintained and restored much of the significant elements of the historic building's ornate interiors as well as the exterior while simultaneously meeting the changing needs of future tenants.

A row of one-story buildings adjacent to the south side of the historic theatre building was built during the same construction phase as the theatre (1935-1939). Although this row of buildings was originally separated from the theatre building by a narrow, open-air pedestrian alley, it is now attached as the result of a sympathetic 1988

remodeling which connected the one-story buildings with the two-story theatre. The one-story wing is designed with glass storefronts which span the entire length of the buildings' eastern (front) facade. The interconnected buildings of the south wing of the Alabama Shopping Center were serviced by a covered mezzanine located to the rear. The original mezzanines have been incorporated into additional retail space for the businesses which face South Shepherd Drive. The entire south wing features whitewashed stucco exterior finishes with a continuous band of black and alternating black and white glazed porcelain tiles, which run along the base of all of the buildings facing the front (east) side of the center.

A similar one-story wing exists to the north of the Alabama Theatre. The north wing was originally comprised of a single one-story building attached to the theater's north wall. The first building to be located on the north side of the theatre was constructed during the initial phase of construction (1935-1939). Later phases of construction added additional retail space to the north wing of the shopping center until the wing eventually stretched north to Kipling Street. The subsequent additions are also one-story buildings with similar detailing and massing. The north wing exterior is also clad in a smooth textured, stucco finish which is whitewashed like other buildings of the complex.

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

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Anderson, Thomas D., Handbook of Texas, "Anderson, Clayton and Company."

Fox, Stephen, Handbook of Texas, "Kenneth Franzheim."

Harry Ransom Center; University of Texas at Austin, "The Hoblitzelle and Interstate Theatres Collection".

Houston Architectural Survey, vol.4, "Alabama Theatre".

Harris County Appraisal District Real Property Records.

Houston Chronicle, "A page of history in danger at the Alabama Theatre.", August 7, 2006.

Houston Chronicle, "Mrs. J.C. Bering is Erecting a $35,000 River Oaks Home", April 17, 1938.

Houston Chronicle, "City Panel Urges Weingarten to Spare Landmarks.

The New York Times, "Fighting the Wrecking Ball to Save Houston Landmarks", August 12, 2006.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company 1924-1951, Addtl. Sheet 1935.

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 D - does not satisfy NA - not applicable
☑	☐	(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;

☑ ☐ (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;

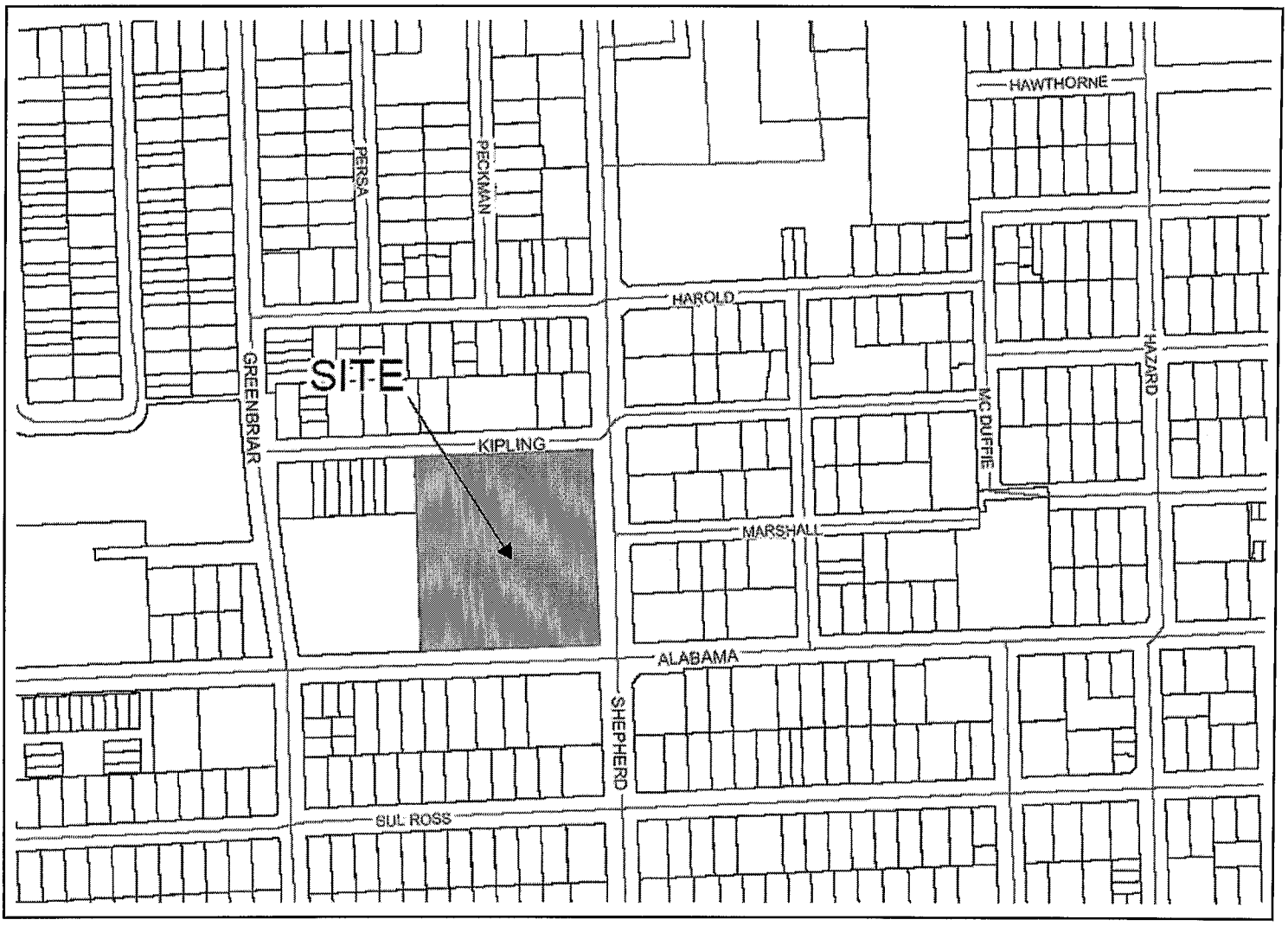
☑ ☐ (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;

☑ ☐ (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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of the Alabama Theatre and Alabama Community Shopping Center at 2900 – 2946 South Shepherd Drive.

SITE LOCATION MAP
RIVER OAKS COMMUNITY SHOPPING CENTER AND THEATER
1952-2050 W GRAY, INCL 2009 W GRAY
NOT TO SCALE