

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Union National Bank Building

OWNER: 220 Main Venture Partners, L. P.

APPLICANT: Mr. Randall Davis

LOCATION: 220 Main Street

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: Feb-15-2000

AGENDA ITEM: Ib

DATE ACCEPTED: Jan-24-2000

HPO FILE NO.: 00L087

HAHC HEARING: Apr-13-2000

PC HEARING: May-04-2000

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 1, 6, 7, 8, 12 and Tracts 2 and 9, Block 20, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site includes a 12-story commercial building at Main and Congress.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Union National Bank is one of the best examples of early twentieth century, neo-classical architecture in Houston. When it was completed in 1912, in what was then the city's financial center, it was more massive and elaborately ornamented than other commercial building of its time. Mauran, Russell & Crowell, a St. Louis architectural firm that was extremely active in Texas, designed the twelve-story building. They also designed other important buildings in Houston including: the Houston Chronicle Building, the City Auditorium, the first Texas Company Building, the second Majestic Theatre, the original section of the Rice Hotel and the third Depelchin Faith Home. Jesse H. Jones, a real estate entrepreneur and Secretary of Commerce under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, became known as "Mr. Houston" because of his extensive building practices in Houston and his philanthropy. Jones selected Mauran, Russell & Crowell in 1910 to design the new building for the Union National Bank, of which Jones was a director.

The Main Street base of the 12-story, reinforced concrete framed building is detailed like a Roman commemorative arch according to Stephen Fox, architectural historian. The building exhibits a tri-partite vertical composition. The Bedford limestone base is two stories in height. It is detailed with freestanding colossal Corinthian columns, which separate the bays of the base section, which are entirely filled with a large architrave. Carved stone heads of Mercury, Roman god of commerce (and trickery) are located in the keystones positioned above each arch. A balustrade at the top of the building crowns a massive cornice with modillions. The office floors above the two-story base are faced with brown brick and topped with screens of alternating piers and pilasters. On the Congress Avenue façade, the detail is flatter and more compressed.

The Union Bank & Trust Company was chartered in 1905, and in 1908, it absorbed the Merchant's National Bank and became known as the Union National Bank, one of Houston's largest, with capital of \$1 million. Jonas Shearn Rice, brother of Houston Mayor H. Baldwin Rice, and nephew of the Rice University benefactor, William March Rice, was president of the bank. Before moving into its new building at 220 Main, the bank had leased space at 202 Main, now the site of Houston National Bank, constructed in 1926. Jesse Jones, was not only a director of the Union National Bank, but a director also of many other banks. Not only was he involved in the many banking institutions in Houston, but he was a real estate entrepreneur as well. Moreover, Jones, a prominent figure in Houston, also played a prominent role in the political circles of Washington, D. C. Jones has been described as the most extraordinary administrator and statesman of his

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time. He was very instrumental in the growth of Houston that resulted in it being a key city in the U.S. When Jones came to Houston in 1898, it ranked 72nd among the nation's cities. By 1930, it had become 24th. In brief, Jones was responsible for most of Houston's major pre-war growth and building. At one point, from the observation tower of his Gulf Building, he could look out at more skyscrapers than any other man had ever owned in an American city. The Port of Houston, another project of Jesse Jones, was instrumental in Houston's development and its transformation into a major city in the U. S.

After Jones selected the architect for the Union National Bank Building in 1910, work began January 20, 1911, and was completed "forty days ahead of contract time" in late December 1911. However, the formal opening was not held until January 8, 1912. Built by Westlake Construction Company of Houston, the structure is of steel reinforced concrete, faced with stone and brick with terra cotta and stone trim. The lengths to which the builders went to assure the bank a grand structure were probably over-emphasized: "In ransacking the corners of the earth for materials rare, fitting and choice for the furnishings of the building, the marble quarries of old Greece and the rich mahogany from Honduras, was used lavishly in the building. The stone, which faces the first two stories, is not from the stone-producing regions of Texas but from New Bedford, Connecticut. Great care was taken to produce the most elegant bank building in Houston, and local praises and pride were considerable. This praise was not limited to the decoration, but included fascination for the mechanics of the building as well."

The building was independent of all utilities: "having its own heating and electric light plant and its own chilled air system for use in the summer." Explanation of what may have been the first large air conditioning system in Houston is interesting: "all air ... is draw through a shaft extending above the top of the building, insuring the purest air to be had in the city. Before it enters, it is cooled and washed by passing through a water cabinet." The building also contained three large elevators. There were 396 office rooms, 36 per floor and a basement. The offices were occupied by real estate firms and investment concerns. The building also housed some architects: Harrie T. Lindeberg (1921-1923), while in Houston to work on some of his great houses, and John Staub, one of Houston's most preeminent architects, who had his first office there. In 1970 after Continental American Bank moved out, the engineering firm of Brown and Root became the major tenants. In 1971 the Pan American National Bank bought the building, changed the name from Continental Building (known as such since 1955) to the Pan Am Building, which the bank had carved over the main entrance. The occupancy rate fell drastically until, by 1973, only five tenants remained above the second floor. By 1975, all of the upper floors were closed off, a situation, which exists even today. The applicant plans to renovate the building for use as luxury apartments.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION

The entrance to the banking room in the second bay was articulated with a pedimented doorway which originally surrounded heavy bronze sliding doors. Now in its place is a simple metal framed glass door. An updated version of the imposing wood framed entrance to a small elevator lobby in the fourth bay replaces the original grand entrance and the door in the fourth bay as well. The original curving grills of heavy iron that protected the lower windows as well as those in the first six bays on Congress have been removed. The second floor windows were originally double-hung, wood sash windows which have been replaced with glazed, dark tinted glass in anodized aluminum frames.

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THE FOLLOWING SOURCES WERE USED BY PLANNING STAFF TO SUPPLEMENT THE LANDMARK APPLICATION SUBMITTED BY THE APPLICANT

Fox, Stephen, *Houston Architectural Guide*, Houston: American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990.

Southwest Center for Urban Research and the School of Architecture, Rice University, et al., *Houston Architectural Survey, Volume 1, Downtown Houston*, 1980.

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 N S - satisfies N - 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

That the Houston Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends landmark designation of the Union National Bank Building to City Council since the application complies with the applicable criteria.

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SITE LOCATION MAP
UNION NATIONAL BANK BUILDING
220 MAIN STREET
NOT TO SCALE

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ARTIST'S RENDERING OF STOREFRONT AS REHABILITATED IN 1928

BARRINGER-NORTON COMPANY BUILDING

506 MAIN STREET

NOT TO SCALE