

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Commercial National Bank
OWNER: Old Commercial National Investors, L.P.
APPLICANT: Brent Friedman
LOCATION: 917 Franklin
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: Mar-12-2000

AGENDA ITEM: Ic
HPO FILE NO.: 00L088
DATE ACCEPTED: Mar-03-2000
HAHC HEARING: Apr-13-2000
PC HEARING: May-04-2000

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 1 and Tracts 2A and 12A, Block 15, SSBB, Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is a six-story neo-classical commercial building.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Commercial National Bank Building is one of the largest neo-classical commercial buildings remaining in what was the center of Houston's financial district from the turn-of-the-century through the Great Depression. Completed in 1904, this was the first skyscraper built in the financial district. The building has load-bearing masonry walls enveloping an internal steel frame, referred to as "cage construction." The building's curved corner bay, limestone ornamentation, and large-scaled ranges of bay windows make it a dominant element of the lower downtown streetscape. This one of a kind building has been kept in excellent condition and retains a high degree of architectural integrity. The Commercial National Bank Building is a contributing structure of the Main Street Market Square Historic District, listed in the National Register of Historic Places on July 18, 1983 (Reference No. 83004471). The District was designated by City Council as an Historic District of the City of Houston on March 5, 1997. The Main Street Market Square Historic District constitutes Houston's largest, most nearly intact accumulation of physical resources representing the City's civic and commercial past.

The Commercial National Bank was chartered July 1, 1886, with a capital of \$500,000 making it one of the largest banks in Houston at the time. The Commercial National Bank moved into this building in November of 1904 and remained until March 1912 when the bank merged with the South Texas Commercial National Bank. In July 1912, the National Bank of Commerce organized and occupied the quarters left vacant by the Commercial National Bank. The National Bank of Commerce remained in the building until 1915, at which time Western Union became the principal tenant until 1970. The upper floors were occupied by oil companies, civil engineers, and other similar tenants. William Marsh Rice maintained offices on the third floor, and after his death, the first offices of the Rice Institute occupied part of the sixth floor until 1926.

The Commercial National Bank Building was designed by the architectural firm of Green and Svarz. Gerhard C. Svarz apparently left Houston in 1904 after this partnership dissolved. Lewis Sterling Green remained in Houston and practiced architecture both alone and in partnership with Joseph Finger and Birdsall Briscoe. The only other Green and Svarz building still standing in Houston is the Dorrance Building at 114 Main Street.

Following the classical design format, the exterior of the building is vertically divided into three zones: a base, shaft, and attic. The base consists of the first two levels. The ground floor façade is rusticated with deeply-grooved smooth-cut limestone, which gives way to alternating bands of brick and limestone at the second floor level. The shaft is composed of floors three through five. The central feature of the Main Street and Franklin Avenue facades of the shaft are three centrally placed contiguous arched apertures upheld by colossal Ionic pilasters. Each aperture contains two tiers of bay-windows surmounted by a thermal window. The attic, or sixth floor, is separated from the shaft by a belt course and is topped by a limestone cornice and balustrade. The current owners plan to rehabilitate the building and market it as high-end office space.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION

With the exception of minor alterations to the ground floor, the Commercial National Bank Building retains a high level of architectural integrity. The storefront was altered in the 1970s and the limestone door-surround on the curved corner bay has been removed. Additionally, a modern veneer finish had been applied to the ground floor exterior (now removed). On January 20, 2000 the building owner applied for and was granted a certificate of appropriateness to restore the ground floor façade. The work includes the reconstruction of the curved corner door surround, replacement of modern steel-framed windows with wood, and restoration of the limestone façade on the ground floor. Once complete, the owner intends to continue the original use of the building and market it as high-end office space with commercial retail on the ground floor.

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

Field, William Scott, *The Last of the Past, Houston Architecture: 1847 to 1915*, The Cultural Arts Council of Houston, 1981

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 I, 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 NA

S - satisfies 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:

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

SITE LOCATION MAP
THE COMMERCIAL NATIONAL BANK BUILDING
917 FRANKLIN
NOT TO SCALE