

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** 1940 Houston Municipal Air Terminal

**OWNER:** City of Houston

**APPLICANT:** City of Houston Aviation Department

**LOCATION:** 8401 Travelair Road (aka 8325 Travelair)

**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** N/A

**AGENDA ITEM:** II

**HPO FILE NO.:** 06PL15

**DATE ACCEPTED:** Jan-18-2006

**HAHC HEARING:** Jan-26-2006

**PC HEARING DATE:** Feb-02-2006

### SITE INFORMATION

1940 Houston Municipal Air Terminal, whose site has been set aside and dedicated for the museum, City of Houston, whose improvements only are located on Tract 3, Abstract 562, P. Mahan Survey, Harris County, Texas.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Protected Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The 1940 Houston Municipal Air Terminal, located at 8401 Travelair Road, plays a vital role in flight history for both the City of Houston and the United States. Throughout the years the building has stood serving its community not only through aviation, but also as a reminder of the city's past. Its rich history and unique art deco architectural design provides an excellent material example of the golden age of flight in our country. On August 3, 2001 the Texas Historical Commission determined that the building was eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Aviation in Houston began in November of 1917 when Ellington Field opened to train pilots for World War I and has never ceased its operation. Although the airfield was closed in 1920, mail continued to travel to Houston by air when a small airport was opened on Telephone Road. As soldiers began returning from war and a tax on bus transportation initiated the need for more efficient travel; Temple Bowen rose to the challenge and created the very first airline for passengers, which included the City of Houston as one of its two routes in 1930. When air transportation quickly became an accepted means of travel, it became obvious that Houston needed an air terminal to establish itself as a major city in the United States. In 1937 the City of Houston purchased W.T. Carter Field on Telephone Road, renamed it the Houston Municipal Airport, and hired Joseph Finger to design the city of Houston's air terminal.

In 1938 Howard Hughes flew into Houston after setting a new speed record for flying around the world, and the city announced that the airport would be renamed, the Howard Hughes Municipal Airport, thanks to his generous donation enabling the construction of the first control tower. However, the city learned that they would be disqualified for federal grant money if they named their air terminal after a living person; consequently the name was changed back a few months later. Opening in September of 1940, the Houston Municipal Air Terminal began to attract a plethora of airlines, including Trans-Texas Airlines, now known as Continental Airlines which still operates out of Houston today.

World War II greatly expanded air travel throughout the world as well as to Latin America which began the era of neo-colonialism for the United States. With the need for more direct routes to South and Central America to aid in the development of American business, Braniff Airways flew the first international flight to Latin America in November of 1946. Pioneer Airways followed not long thereafter in 1948. Routes were established between Houston and Panama, Colombia, Cuba, Equator, Brazil, Venezuela, Peru, and Mexico by 1950; it was these routes that established Houston as a major

# CITY OF HOUSTON

## Archaeological & Historical Commission

## Planning and Development Department

city in air travel. By 1949 commercial aviation from the Houston Municipal Air Terminal was cited as one of the cities biggest industries, and Houston was forced to add a fourth floor to the original terminal as well as a new control tower. The exponential growth of the aviation industry forced the city to consider building a larger air terminal. In 1954 the William P. Hobby Airport (originally known as Houston International Airport) was opened on the west side of the airport property. For many years the original 1940 Municipal Air Terminal was used for smaller flights and private flight instruction companies. It was not completely abandoned until the 1970s when the city evicted all current tenants and used it for storage. The 1940 Municipal Air Terminal became known for being the longest utilized art deco air terminal as well as being one of the last remaining art deco air terminals in the United States.

The 1940 Municipal Air Terminal was designed by Joseph Finger (1887-1953), one of Houston's most successful proponents of the Moderne Style. Throughout his career, Joseph Finger successfully provided his clients an effectual blending of the latest architectural styles, and he excelled in the expression of the Art Deco and the Streamline Moderne. Finger designed many of Houston's finest commercial and institutional buildings, built between 1920 and 1945. Born and trained in Austria, he came to the United States in 1905, and after a short stay in New Orleans, he moved to Houston in 1908. He worked in partnership with several architects, including L. S. Green, James Ruskin Bailey and Lamar Q. Cato, before opening his own Houston practice in 1914. Practicing for over forty years, Joseph Finger is considered one of Houston's most successful architects. During his first few years in practice, he designed the Panama Hotel (1912-13), the American National Insurance Building (1912, demolished) and the Model Laundry Building (1913, Galveston Central Business District, N.R. Listed 1984), all located in Galveston. During the 1920s his practice rapidly expanded, and he was commissioned to design numerous hotels, office buildings, retail facilities, industrial plants, institutional structures and residences in Texas and Louisiana. Finger was one of the first architects in Houston to incorporate into his designs the stark, abstracted and stylized forms of modernistic architecture. He designed residences in many of Houston's finest neighborhoods including, the Joe Weingarten House, the Abe Weingarten House and the Abe Battlestein House in Houston's Riverside Terrace, the Tennison House in Montrose, the Edel House in Braeswood and the Wade and Mamie Irvin House at Morgan's Point. The James and Jessie West Mansion (1929, N.R. Listed), which is located on the north bend of Clear Lake, is considered one of the most substantial, well crafted and opulent dwellings constructed in Texas in the 1920s. Its richly detailed interior furnishings and fittings are considered to be "one of the finest Art Deco interiors to be executed in Houston" (Stephen Fox Houston Architectural Survey).

Many of Finger's buildings have been recognized as paragons of the Moderne style. They are distinguished not only for their design, but also for the quality and methods of construction, which often accommodated state-of-the-art equipment and technology. Many of his buildings have been determined as architecturally significant by their listings to the National Register of Historic Places. Finger's major works in Houston include, the Temple Beth Israel (1924, NR 1984), the Houston Turnverein (1929, NR 1978, demolished 1993), the Clarke and Courts Building (1936, NR 1994), Houston City Hall (1939, NR 1990), and the Houston Municipal Airport Terminal and Hanger (1940). By the 1930s Finger had turned to the "Streamline" Moderne and his affinity for modernistic detail can be seen in his preference for low relief, sculptural detailing expressing uniform surface treatments which are accented with stylized geometrical and floral elements, continuous horizontal banding, rounded end bays and thematically consistent decorative graphics.

The original three-story portion of the building was built under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, while a fourth floor and new control tower were added in 1949. The walls are made of

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

---

ceramic brick for fire retardation with stuccoed masonry walls. The entrance is located between two immense piers with a series of three friezes depicting the past, present and future of flight while the two larger friezes represent the “Spirit of Flight” guarding both the street and the runway. The interior was constructed using Texas stone, and the lobby is a two-story atrium with art deco motif marble flooring, including two ticket counters. The north wing acted as air terminals for specific airlines, including Braniff and Pioneer airlines while the south wing was utilized for airline offices, a barber shop, a sandwich shop and Trans-Texas air terminals. The second floor included a lounge, a ballroom and some offices while the wings were observation decks. The third floor housed the United States Weather Bureau and the Civil Aeronautics Authority as well as separate resting rooms for pilots and flight attendants. The fourth floor became home to more offices when it was expanded.

The Texas Historical Commission has determined that the 1940 Municipal Air Terminal is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under criterion A and criterion C: transportation and architecture. Important advances in air transportation originated and grew at the air terminal, including one of the country’s oldest flight schools, important travel routes between the United States and Latin America during the era of neo-colonialism, and some of the first commercial, non-mail carrier flights.

When the last tenants of the air terminal vacated in 1978, the City of Houston was unable to find an alternate use for the building and began to make plans to demolish it to make room for potential ramp tenants. Many people were opposed to this plan of action, and in 1986, Continental Airlines pledged to restore the building by donating 2 dollars from every ticket sold. Although they were only able to raise enough money only to repaint the outside of the building, in 1988 the city undertook a preservation program to halt any further deterioration of the building. Although the city pledged to preserve the previous glory of the air terminal, there were no funds available so there was a strong inclination to demolish it. However, in 1998 the Houston Aeronautical Heritage Society was formed to save and preserve the building. This non-profit organization procured a 20-year lease with two five year extensions from the City of Houston to restore and operate a civil aviation museum in the air terminal. A large collection of aviation equipment has been acquired, and the north wing has been opened to the public since December, 2003 as the first phase of the 1940 Municipal Air Terminal Museum.

The first floor will be utilized as a gift shop, offices and museum, while the second floor and observation deck will be utilized as a restaurant. The third and fourth floors will be used primarily for museum displays. The newly opened observation deck will provide the closest access anyone can get to airport and flight observation for the whole area. Also small passenger jets will embark from the museum’s area. All land from the terminal to Telephone Road is being reclaimed by the city, and the tree lined boulevard, shown in Finger’s original plans, will finally be created. The only one remaining house, which existed on the site in 1940 when the Air Terminal was first opened, will be restored and become part of the museum. The Aeronautical Society also plans to work closely with schools to educate youth about the history and importance of aviation in Houston throughout the decades.

The preservation of the Houston Municipal Air Terminal is important not only to Houston, but to the entire country, because it is one of the few remaining 1940s art deco air terminals remaining. The terminal will serve also as a vital educational venue for the general public, aviation enthusiasts and local youth for years to come. It is the aim of the museum to demonstrate how proud our nation should be of its aviation history, and since the Art Deco styled building exemplifies an architectural accomplishment, the building too will avidly promote the historical and architectural significance of the terminal while demonstrating the importance of the preservation of these important sites associated with aviation history, such as the 1940 Houston Municipal Air Terminal in Houston.



# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Archaeological & Historical Commission**

**Planning and Development Department**

- The property was listed “PENDING” individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places;

**OR**

- The property was designated as a State of Texas Recorded Texas Historical Landmark.

**HAHC PUBLIC HEARING:** No opposition.

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Protected Landmark Designation of the 1940 Houston Municipal Air Terminal at 8401 Travelair Road.

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

SITE LOCATION MAP  
1940 HOUSTON MUNICIPAL AIR TERMINAL  
8401 (AKA 8325) TRAVELAIR ROAD  
NOT TO SCALE

