

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Houston National Bank Building

OWNER: Islamic Da'wah Center

APPLICANT: Same as Owner

LOCATION: 201 Travis Street (aka 202 Main Street) –
Main Street Market Square Historic District

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: II.c

HPO FILE NO: 08L201

DATE ACCEPTED: Apr-28-08

HAHC HEARING: May-15-08

PC HEARING: May-22-08

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 4, 5, 9, 10, & 11, and Tracts 3A & 9A, Block 20, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a three-story commercial building.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Houston National Bank Building, located at the corner of Main and Franklin, was one of Houston's most impressive buildings at the time of its construction in 1928. The three-story Neoclassical building was designed by architects Hedrick & Gottlieb and built by Ross Sterling, then chairman of the Houston National Bank. Sterling was founder and president of Humble Oil and Refining Company, which eventually became Exxon Mobile, as well as a newspaper publisher, real estate investor, and Texas governor from 1931-33.

The most striking feature of the limestone and granite clad building is the four fluted Doric columns on each street facade. Each column is five feet in diameter and thirty-five feet tall. The interior of the building features the extensive use of marble, such as carved marble railings, seven-foot-tall marble light standards, a black marble and Roman travertine floor, and marble wall paneling. The main banking hall features an elaborate vaulted ceiling finished with mosaic tile. The height from floor to ceiling is 56-feet – the equivalent of five stories. Now housing the Islamic Da'wah Center, much of the original bank interior is intact, and the exterior has been altered only slightly.

The Houston National Bank Building was individually listed in the National Register on July 17, 1975, and is a contributing building to Main Street Market Square National Register Historic District established in 1983, and the Main Street Market Square City of Houston Historic District, designated by City Council in 1998. The Houston National Bank Building qualifies for Landmark Designation under Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

In the midst of an historic section of downtown Houston, the Houston National Bank Building dominates the corner of Main and Franklin Streets. The Houston National Bank Building, designed by Hedrick and Gottlieb and constructed in 1928, is an excellent example of the Neoclassical style and was perhaps the most impressive bank building in Houston at the time. The lavish structure reflected the banking wealth in Houston prior to the stock market crash of 1929.

The Houston National Bank was first chartered as a national bank in 1889, as successor to the Fox Bank, a private bank organized in 1876. The name was changed to the Houston National Exchange Bank in 1909, and to the Houston National Bank in 1923. In late 1926, the bank was acquired by Ross S.

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Sterling and Associates as a result of a bank merger, and the Houston National Bank became one of the largest banks in Houston.

Ross Shaw Sterling - oilman, newspaper publisher, real estate investor, and future Texas governor - was born near Anahuac, Texas, in February 1875. He opened a feed store at Sour Lake in 1903, and during the next several years he entered the banking business by purchasing a number of banks in small towns. In 1903, he became an oil operator and in 1910 bought two wells, which developed into the Humble Oil and Refining Company. The company was officially organized in 1911, with Sterling as president. In 1925 he sold his Humble interests and started developing real estate in the vicinity of Houston. He bought the Houston Dispatch and the Houston Post in 1925 and 1926 and subsequently combined them as the Houston Post-Dispatch, which later became the Houston Post. During the 1920s, Sterling and Jesse H. Jones, who would become Secretary of Commerce during the Roosevelt administration, were friendly rivals in real estate, building, publishing, banking, and political developments in Houston.

Sterling was chairman of the Texas Highway Commission in 1930 and became governor of Texas in 1931. In 1933, after being defeated for a second term as governor, Sterling returned to Houston, where he built another fortune in oil in a few years. He also was president of the Sterling Oil and Refining Company from 1933 to 1946. He was president of the American Maid Flour Mills and the R. S. Sterling Investment Company and was chairman of the Houston National Bank and the Houston-Harris County Channel Navigation Board. Sterling and his wife Maud had five children. Sterling died in Fort Worth on March 25, 1949, and was buried in Glenwood Cemetery in Houston.

Under Sterling's leadership, the bank decided that its facilities were inadequate and made plans for a new bank building in Houston's financial center. Architects Wyatt C. Hedrick of Fort Worth, Sterling's son-in-law, and his Houston partner, Richard D. Gottlieb, were hired to design the new building. Hedrick's firm was the successor to Sanguinet and Staats, which had been dissolved in 1926. Other Houston buildings that Hedrick & Gottlieb designed, or consulted on, include the Federal Land Bank, Gulf Publishing Company, Merchants & Manufacturers Building, and with Sanguinet and Staats, the Cotton Exchange Building, the Post Dispatch Building, Medical Arts Building, and South Main Baptist Church.

In September 1928, the Houston National Bank moved into its new building at 202 Main. Although not the tallest new bank building to be built in the financial district, the Houston National Bank Building was its most impressive work of architecture. At one time, bank buildings sat on all four corners of Main and Franklin. Today, three of the four remain. The two other corner banks still standing are the First National Bank Building at 201 Main Street (1905, 1909, 1925, Sanguinet & Staats), and the Commercial National Bank Building at 116-120 Main Street (1904, Green & Svarz). Located on the fourth corner is a new University of Houston-Downtown building.

Houston National Bank remained in the building at 202 Main until 1964, when it merged with Tennessee Bank and Trust Company and moved to the Tenneco Building at 1010 Milam. The Downtown Bank, a new banking institution, moved into the 202 Main building a few months later on February 25, 1965. In 1970, the bank restored the interior and renamed the institution the Franklin Bank. In March 1975, however, the Franklin Bank went into receivership and the building became vacant.

In 1994, planning began to turn the building into an Islamic center. After years of extensive renovations, the center opened to the public in 2002 and took the name of Islamic Da'wah Center. The first prayer was held on the last Friday of Ramadan, November 29, 2002. The Islamic Da'wah Center is the first mosque in downtown, and the first center dedicated for 'Da'wah' (education) in Houston.

The Houston National Bank Building is a contributing structure to both the Main Street Market Square National Register and City of Houston Historic Districts. The National Register district was established in 1983, and the City of Houston district was designated by City Council in 1998. The Main Street Market Square Historic District is located on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou between Milam and San Jacinto Streets, and encompasses the area surrounding Market Square as well as the Main Street Business District between Buffalo Bayou and Texas Avenue. The buildings within the district range from modest, mid-nineteenth-century brick commercial buildings to a number of small but ornately detailed High Victorian commercial buildings, as well as a fine selection of multi-story public, bank, and office buildings.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

Clad in limestone and resting on a polished black granite base, the Houston National Bank Building is an excellent example of the Neoclassical style. The most striking feature of the three-story building are the fluted Doric columns found on the Main and Franklin street elevations, four on each facade, which support the cornice and the third story attic. Each column is five feet in diameter and thirty-five feet tall. The columns are flanked by heavy, rusticated stone corners, which add a sense of strength and stability to the building.

Above the colonnade is an architrave once studded with solid cast-bronze discs representing Greek heroes. According to the Da'wah Center, the discs are currently stored safely off-site. Five windows span each facade of the third floor attic level, which is crowned by a richly carved, festooned frieze and cheneaux. Visible from the rear, on Travis Street, is a miniature rooftop temple built to frame the bank's original proto-air-conditioning equipment.

Located in an inset area behind the columns are steel and plate glass windows, ten feet wide and twenty-eight feet high, that extend from the banking room floor to the main cornice. The bottom portions of the windows are protected by a six-inch bronze grille nine feet high. The spandrels between the bank and mezzanine windows are of cast iron with marble panels that blend with the stone and bronze work.

The original main entrance is located on the Main Street facade, although the Da'wah Center today primarily uses a newer rear entrance facing the parking lot on Travis. The pedimented Main Street entrance, eleven feet wide and twenty-four feet tall, is framed in carved and polished black granite.

Like the exterior, the interior is bold in scale and rich in detail. The main banking hall is 90-feet by 108-feet, and features a single vault ceiling finished with mosaic tile murals. Eight columns support a central rotunda that is forty-six feet wide, seventy-three feet long, and fifty-six feet high. The height from floor to apex of the rotunda is the equivalent of five stories. At the time it was built, the banking room was second in height only to one bank in New York.

The mezzanine is similar in design and material to that of the main banking hall. The mezzanine railing is of carved marble, with rotunda lighting concealed in the bowls of the elaborately carved seven-foot-tall marble light standards. The wainscoting, columns, and arches supporting the rotunda are in richly toned Sienna marbles. Above the wainscoting, the walls are lined with Travertine marble to the ceiling.

The floor of the banking hall, now covered by Persian rugs, is of Roman Travertine and black Belgian marble. A marble stairway in the center of the banking hall once led to the safety deposit vault on the lower level, but was removed in order to provide more floor space on the first level. The original bank vault is intact, however, and now houses a gift shop.

The 40,000 square foot building is now used as an Islamic mosque and educational center. The main banking hall has been converted into the main prayer hall of the center, and can easily accommodate

1,200 people for prayers. In the basement level are a gathering area, meeting rooms, classrooms, guest suit, offices, recreational facility, kitchen, and a library of Islamic literature. At some point in the future, the Da'wah Center plans to install a gallery of Islamic architecture on the mezzanine. Although some interior features were modified or removed in adapting the building to its current use, much of the ornate interior detailing remains intact.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Handbook of Texas Online, 'Ross Shaw Sterling',
<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/SS/fst42.html>

Houston Architectural Survey, Vol VI, Pg 1434, 1984.

Information provided by the Islamic Da'wah Center.

National Register Nomination, Main Street Market Square, 1983.

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

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC and the Planning 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	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input 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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);
<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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(2);
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input 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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(3);
<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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(4);
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input 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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(5);
<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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(6);

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- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7));
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride (Sec. 33-224(a)(8)).
- (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of the Houston National Bank Building at 201 Travis, aka 202 Main Street.



SITE LOCATION MAP
HOUSTON NATIONAL BANK BUILDING
201 TRAVIS STREET (AKA 202 MAIN STREET)
NOT TO SCALE

