

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Western Electric Company Building

OWNER: Caspian Enterprises Inc.

APPLICANT: Same as Owner

LOCATION: 100 Jackson Street

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: II.b

HPO FILE NO: 08L208

DATE ACCEPTED: Jun-23-08

HAHC HEARING: Aug-13-08

PC HEARING: Aug-28-08

SITE INFORMATION:

Lots 3, 4, and 5, Block 106, Baker SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a three-story brick warehouse building with one-story side addition.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Western Electric Company Building at the corner of Jackson Street and Commerce Avenue is a three-story brick warehouse building built circa 1917. The building is located in Houston's Warehouse District on the east side of downtown south of Buffalo Bayou. The Warehouse District largely developed from 1890 through the 1930s to accommodate Houston's rapid economic expansion in those decades. With its proximity to rail and shipping, the area attracted numerous commercial and industrial businesses until the decline of the railroads and the ascension of trucking after World War II allowed industrial development to disperse throughout the city.

The building's namesake and original tenant, Western Electric, got its start in Chicago in the 1870s as a manufacturer of telegraph equipment for Western Union, and by 1882, had been acquired by Bell Telephone (later AT&T) as its manufacturing arm. By the early decades of the 20th century, Western Electric had become not only an international manufacturer of communication equipment but also one of the largest distributors of electrical household appliances in the United States. After Western Electric vacated the building in the mid-1920s, the warehouse was occupied by a variety of businesses such as International Harvester, Pee-Gee Paints, Wilson Stationery & Printing, and the Arling D. Smith Co., a local distributor of stainless steel and alloy products.

Today, the renovated building appears much as it did when built, and is home to architectural offices, art studios, and loft spaces. The Western Electric Company Building qualifies for Landmark Designation under Criteria 1, 3, 4, and 5.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Western Electric Company Building is an historic three-story brick warehouse building built circa 1917 in Houston's then-burgeoning warehouse area clustered along Buffalo Bayou east of Main Street. Often referred to as the 'Warehouse District,' this area of town developed rapidly between the 1890s and 1930s when Houston grew from a small town into a major American city. As Houston grew as a commercial center, demand for commercial, warehouse, and industrial space grew near areas of good transportation.

Shipping along Buffalo Bayou had served as Houston's original means of transport, and was joined by numerous railroad lines built nearby in the second half of the 19th century.

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The area between Congress and Buffalo Bayou on the east side of Main Street first developed with residences, but began to evolve at the end of the nineteenth century as a light industrial area due to its proximity to the rail lines and shipping along the bayou. The north side of Buffalo Bayou in the Fifth Ward became known at the turn of the century as the ‘factory district’, whereas areas east of Main and south of the bayou became known as the ‘wholesale district.’ However, this distinction was soon blurred, as wholesale companies located on north side, and factories, such as Eller Wagon Works, located on the south side.

At the turn of the century, many changes were occurring in Houston that affected industrial patterns and commercial development in the city. Population increased from 27,557 in 1890 to 44,633 in 1900. Electric street cars, introduced in Houston in 1891, came along with a significant expansion of electrical service, and a public sewer system, begun in 1892, was expanded to residential areas south and north of town during the 1890s. These utilities prompted the development of the city’s first electric power plant in 1898 and the first sewage treatment plant in 1901.

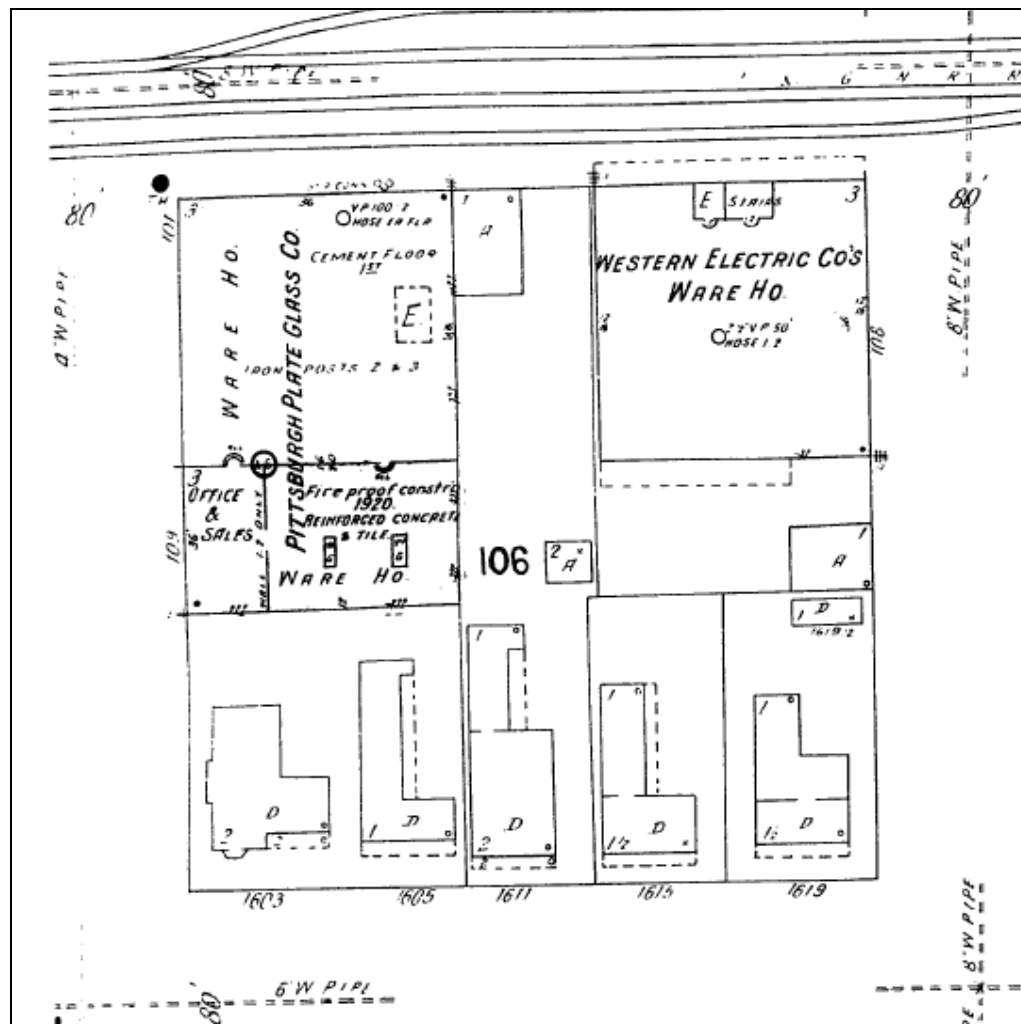
Two other events happened in the first two years of the 20th century that irrevocably altered the destiny of Houston. The storm of 1900 devastated Galveston, and left Houston without a rival in the transportation and industrial arenas. In January 1901, the discovery of oil at Spindletop radically altered Houston’s economy.

The first automobile arrived in Houston in 1901. Construction of new houses and businesses continued all over the city at a rapid pace, creating a demand for lumber, hardware, electrical and plumbing supplies, and new factories and warehouses to supply them. Despite the opening of the Houston Ship Channel in 1914 and a consequent shift eastward in industrial development, many companies still needed to be located near the rail depots and distribution points downtown, and most of the new transfer and storage companies continued to be built along railroad tracks in the Warehouse District. Trucking was also growing in importance, and large loading docks with ample parking room for trucks became an indispensable part of warehouse and industrial buildings.

Growth boomed throughout the 1920s when Houston became the largest city in the South. By 1930, Houston’s population was 292,352, almost seven times what it had been in 1900. Because of the oil industry, Houston was not as deeply affected by the Great Depression as other areas of the country, and construction of new buildings continued in the Warehouse District. After World War II, however, growth patterns changed as the railroads waned in importance, and industrial development dispersed through the city. Industrial architecture also changed, as industrial and warehouse buildings were more often constructed of pre-fabricated corrugated metal than of brick and concrete.

The Western Electric Company first appears in Houston in the 1913 City Directory, with a location at 1205 Commerce Ave, between San Jacinto and Austin streets, three blocks west of 100 Jackson. In the 1915 directory, Western Electric is listed at the ‘sw cor’ of Jackson and Commerce, although there is no listing yet for 100-104 Jackson. The Western Electric Company Building at 100-104 Jackson first appears in the Houston City Directory in 1917, the year it was likely constructed. According to the Directory, Western Electric sold electrical supplies and ‘apparatus’ and was listed as ‘wholesale electrical jobbers.’

1924 SANBORN



Founded in 1869, Western Electric grew to become one of the largest manufacturers and distributors of electrical equipment in the United States, and is responsible for countless technological advances we often take for granted today. Started in Cleveland, Ohio, by Enos Barton and Elisha Gray, Western Electric originally manufactured alarms and other electrical devices, and provided parts and models for inventors, such as co-founder Elisha Gray. Shortly after incorporating, the new company moved its base to Chicago and became the principal manufacturer for Western Union, the telegraph company. In 1882, Western Electric was acquired by Bell Telephone (which became AT&T in 1899), and became Bell's exclusive manufacturer of telephones. Bell Telephone's acquisition of Western Electric was crucial in the establishment of a nationwide phone system, a system characterized by its early, primary emphasis on the production and distribution of hardware. Western Electric subsequently manufactured communications equipment in every country with a significant telephone system until spinning off its international operations in 1925, and its Canadian manufacturing holdings after 1956. By the 1920s, Western Electric supplied roughly 90 percent of all the telephone equipment used in the United States.

In addition to manufacturing communications equipment and other electrical devices, Western Electric also managed a thriving electrical distribution business of non-telephone products made by other manufacturers. The company carried an extensive line of household appliances, and stocked items made by dozens of electrical manufacturers, including Sunbeam lamps, sewing machines, electric fans, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners. The company's catalogue grew to 1,300 pages, as the Western Electric name in electrical appliances rivaled those of General Electric and Westinghouse. In 1925, the electrical distribution business was spun off from Western Electric and organized into a separate company, Graybar Electric Company, Inc. (named after Western Electric founders Elisha Gray and Enos Barton).

Along the way, the company made tremendous technological breakthroughs. In 1913, Western Electric developed the high vacuum tube, thereby ushering in the electronic age. The company subsequently invented the loudspeaker, successfully brought sound to motion pictures, and introduced systems of mobile communications which culminated in the cellular telephone. Western Electric was also a prime defense contractor for such products as radar, aerospace guidance and communications systems, missile systems, and nuclear weapons.

Western Electric occupied the Jackson Street building until 1926, when International Harvester moved in. In 1935, International Harvester, which sold engines, trucks, tractors, and other farm machinery, moved to 4619 Navigation Blvd, and by 1936, Grocers Supply Co. was occupying the building. Beginning in 1942, the Peaslee Gaulbert Paint and Varnish Co., which sold painting supplies and wall paper, and advertised 'A Pee-Gee Paint for Every Purpose,' was using the building for warehouse space for its retail location at 1435 Travis. Wilson Stationery and Printing, whose offices were located at the corner of Fannin and Prairie in the Main Street Market Square Historic District, also leased warehouse space in the Western Electric Building for many years. Keith Refrigeration occupied the building in the late forties and early fifties, and the Arling D. Smith Company/Adscos Line Products, a local distributor of stainless steel and alloy products, owned and occupied the building for several decades up until the mid-1990s. Following a 2004 renovation, the building currently houses a mix of offices, studios, and loft spaces.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The Western Electric Company Building is a three-story brick building with a basement and one-story addition on the south side of the building. Sanborn maps indicate that the building is constructed of brick supporting walls and a heavy timber frame ("wood posts"). A metal canopy runs across the Commerce Street elevation. The building features wide industrial-type metal-frame windows, and may be one of the earliest buildings in Houston to employ this window type.

By February 2004, the building was in poor condition and condemned by the City of Houston Fire Marshall due to unsafe conditions. The current owner, Caspian Enterprises, Inc., purchased the property on February 16, 2004, and completed a full renovation. Hardwood floors remain intact, the freight elevator still operates, and the existing structural wood beams and columns are exposed as in the original condition. The Western Electric Building is now home to architectural offices, art studios, commercial studios and residential lofts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

“Historic Resources Inventory, Warehouse District, Houston, Harris County,” Volumes 1-4, prepared by Preservation Services, for City of Houston Dept Planning and Development, August 31, 1991.

Houston City Directories.

Environmental Site Assessment, GEO Environmental Consultants, Inc. Sept 25, 1996, Oct 15, 1999 update.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Electric

http://www.porticus.org/bell/westernelectric_history.html

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2900.html>

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		S - satisfies	NA - not applicable
<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 type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" 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);		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7);		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(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).		

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- (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 Western Electric Company Building at 100 Jackson Street.

SITE LOCATION MAP
WESTERN ELECTRIC COMPANY BUILDING
100 JACKSON STREET
NOT TO SCALE