

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Farnsworth and Chambers Building
(aka Gragg Building)

OWNER: City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department

APPLICANTS: SWCA Environmental Consultants

LOCATION: 2999 South Wayside Drive

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: V.c

HPO FILE No.: 08PL69

DATE ACCEPTED: Aug-29-08

HAHC HEARING: Oct-16-08

PC HEARING: Oct-23-08

SITE INFORMATION

Tract 12D, a portion of Abstract 51 L Moore, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The structure is a one-story commercial building on the east side of South Wayside Street.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

Built in 1956-1957 as the headquarters of the local Farnsworth and Chambers construction firm, one of the largest in the nation at the time, the Farnsworth and Chambers Building has served for many years as the headquarters of the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department. The building is also significant historically as the first Houston home of NASA. NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center was located here from 1962 to 1964, while the Johnson Space Center was being built in Clear Lake. When the MSC moved into the Farnsworth and Chambers Building, NASA's Mercury Program was already underway, and the remaining Mercury flights were planned by the engineers and scientists at the Farnsworth and Chambers Building.

Designed by Houston architects MacKie and Kamrath, the Farnsworth and Chambers Building is also noteworthy as an outstanding example of modern architecture. The one-story, reinforced concrete building faced with stone was placed in a suburban-style corporate setting in vogue at the time, surrounded by acreage. Long and low, with modern horizontal lines reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright, the building's stonework is a pale green. The surrounding acreage, donated by former owner Oscar Lee Gragg to the city, is now known as Gragg Park.

The Farnsworth & Chambers Building meets Criteria 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 for PLM designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

FARNSWORTH AND CHAMBERS

The Farnsworth and Chambers Building at 2999 South Wayside Drive was built in 1957 as the headquarters of the Houston-based Farnsworth and Chambers construction company. Farnsworth and Chambers was a Houston-based construction company that worked regionally in the southwest and Louisiana. Notable buildings built by Farnsworth and Chambers are found on higher-education campuses throughout the southwest. Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana holds three: University Center (1959, Curtis and Davis, Architects); Robert Sharp Hall (1960, Koch and Wilson, Diboll, Kessels, Architects); and the Patterson House (1953, Koch and Wilson, Architects) were constructed by Farnsworth & Chambers. Austin College in Sherman, Texas, boasts the Jackson Technology Center (1951, Peyton G. Cooper, Architect). University of New Mexico's Student Union in

Albuquerque (1959, Meem, Holien, Buckley and Associates, Architects) is also part of the Farnsworth and Chambers legacy.

Many of the young men who got their start at the company went on to establish their own construction companies. For example, Rice alumnus and former trustee Al Jensen began his career as a carpenter's helper for Brown and Root on the construction of the Rice Stadium. Upon graduation from Rice University, he began working for Farnsworth & Chambers. In 1957, he became one of the founders of H.A. Lott, Inc., a Houston-based construction company whose significant buildings include the Astrodome, The Summit (Compaq Center, now Lakewood Church), and San Antonio's Riverwalk.

In 1954, Farnsworth and Chambers hired the local Houston architectural firm MacKie and Kamrath to design their new corporate headquarters at 3601 Brock Avenue. The building was to be built on 46 acres of undeveloped land near the Gulf Freeway and in the midst of the suburban development growing up around Gulfgate Mall and Palms Center. The suburban corporate setting, as opposed to a downtown location, reflected the development preference of the late 1950s. Long and low, with modern horizontal lines that seemed to stretch forever, the building's stonework was an almost otherworldly green. The building featured a wonderful new innovation: air conditioning. The building opened in 1957, and the Brock Avenue address was changed to 2999 South Wayside after the connection of that street to the Gulf Freeway.

Farnsworth and Chambers did not enjoy their new building for long. In the fall of 1956, partner Dunbar Chambers, who was also one of the investors in the Sharpstown development in Southwest Houston, was accidentally killed while hunting in South Dakota. In 1961, the building was bought by W.D. York and Gragg Drilling and renamed the Gragg Building.

MACKIE AND KAMRATH

Karl Fred Kamrath (1911-1988) was born in Oklahoma and graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in Architecture in 1934. He worked in Chicago for architects Pereira and Pereira, The Interior Studios of Marshall Field & Company, and the Architectural Decorating Company. He returned to Texas and in 1937 established his own Houston firm with fellow UT graduate Frederick James MacKie, Jr. (1905-1984).¹

The firm was one of the first in Houston to design modernist buildings, and their designs quickly attained national recognition. Examples of their early work include a house for Kamrath's family (1939); the City of Houston Fire Alarm Building (1939, demolished); the Covington and Kivlin houses (1941, 1942); and San Felipe Courts (1942, 1944, listed on National Register 1988), a large federal housing project near downtown Houston. Kamrath incorporated the design ideals of Frank Lloyd Wright even prior to their meeting in 1946. The firm's subsequent work, as seen in the Farnsworth and Chambers Building, further exemplifies their following of Wright's Usonian architectural ideals.² The Farnsworth and Chambers Building is a clear example of the influence of Wright's horizontal emphasis as exemplified at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona (see photos at end of report).

¹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "KAMRATH, KARL FRED," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/KK/fka15.html> (accessed March 10, 2006).

² *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "KAMRATH, KARL FRED," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/KK/fka15.html> (accessed March 10, 2006).

MacKie and Kamrath's major buildings in Houston and Texas include Phillis Wheatley High School (1948); Temple Emanu-El (1949, with Lenard R. Gabert); the Dow Chemical Company complex, Freeport (1953); the Schlumberger Well surveying corporation complex (1953); Humble Research Center, located at Buffalo Speedway and Alabama (1954); St. John the Divine Church (1954, with H. A. Salisbury); the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute (1954, with Schmidt, Garden, and Eriksen, altered); the Champlin Oil Company Building, Fort Worth (1956); the Commercial Standard Insurance Company Building, Fort Worth (1956); Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church, Bunker Hill Village (1957, 1974); Temple Rodef Shalom, Waco (1962); the Pasadena State Bank Building, Pasadena (1962, with Doughtie and Porterfield); The Science and Research Building, University of Houston (1968); the Big Three Industries Building (1974); and the University of Texas School of Public Health Building, Houston (1975).³

Landscape architect Garret Eckbo (1910-2000) designed the central atrium at the Farnsworth & Chambers building. Born in New York, Eckbo was brought up in California and studied landscape architecture at University of California, Berkeley. After graduation he won a scholarship to study at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) where, influenced by Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius who taught at the GSD, he found himself disenchanted with Beaux-Arts formalism.

In 1938, Eckbo returned to California and designed hundreds of gardens. His first book, *Landscape for Living* (1950), helped popularize the modern garden in California. He became chairman of the Berkeley Department of Landscape Architecture in 1963, founded the EDAW firm (Eckbo Dean Austin and Williams) in 1964, and undertook a wide range of large-scale landscape architecture projects (campuses, malls, shopping centers, and regional plans).⁴ Eckbo taught at the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California from 1948-1956.

MANNED SPACECRAFT CENTER

Farnsworth and Chambers occupied the building for only a few years before it was purchased by W. D. York and Gragg Drilling Company as an investment in 1961. In 1962, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration was transferred to Houston from Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, and set up shop in the Farnsworth and Chambers Building. Houston had beaten 20 other cities vying to house NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center (MSC) based on 14 criteria. The MSC occupied the Farnsworth and Chambers building from 1962-1964 while the Clear Lake campus was being designed and constructed. NASA had several satellite offices in the vicinity of South Wayside for personnel and laboratories.

The political maneuvering necessary to bring the MSC to Houston was largely orchestrated by Albert Thomas (1898-1966), a fifteen-term Congressman from Houston and Harris County's Eighth District. Houston was among several contenders, including Jacksonville, Florida (Green Cove Springs Naval Station); Tampa, Florida (MacDill Air Force Base); Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Shreveport, Louisiana (Barksdale Air Force Base); Victoria, Texas (FAA Airport); Corpus Christi, Texas (Naval Air Station); San Diego, California (Camp Elliott); and San Francisco, California (Benicia Ordnance Depot).

Specific site criteria were developed to facilitate the search: "The site required access to water transportation by large barges, a moderate climate, availability of all-weather commercial jet service, a well established industrial complex with supporting technical facilities and labor, close proximity to a culturally attractive community in the vicinity of an institution of higher education, a strong electric

³ Ibid.

⁴ Web site: <http://www.gardenvisit.com/got/18/eckbo.htm>

utility and water supply, at least 1,000 acres of land, and certain specified cost parameters.”⁵ Houston actually came in second place to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa because the Air Force planned to close its Strategic Air Command operations there. In third place was the Benicia Ordnance Depot in the San Francisco Bay Area. Before a decision and public announcement was made, the Air Force decided not to close MacDill and thus Houston moved to first place.

The needed 1,000 acres of land was committed by Rice University. The land was once part of the estate of James Marion West (1871-1941), a Houston banker, lumberman, and publisher. The local press attributed the selection variously to Rice University, Rice University’s President Kenneth Pitzer and Chancellor Carey Croneis, Rice University’s Board Chairman George R. Brown, Congressmen Albert Thomas and Bob Casey, President Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson, NASA Administrators James Webb and Hugh Dryden, Humble Oil’s Chairman Morgan Davis, and the general “can-do” attitude of the Houston community.

When the MSC moved to the Farnsworth and Chambers Building, NASA’s Mercury Program was already underway, having sent two men into space in 1961. In February 1962, John Glenn orbited the earth. The rest of the Mercury flights were planned by the engineers and scientists at the Farnsworth and Chambers Building. In 1964, NASA left the building on Wayside Drive and moved into its new permanent home, the Johnson Space Center in Clear Lake.

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Oscar Lee Gragg, an oil drilling magnate, purchased the Farnsworth & Chambers building in 1961 as a real estate investment, although his firm, W.D. York and Gragg Drilling, never occupied the building. Building tenants, in addition to NASA, included the Stran Steel Corporation and National Steel Corporation from 1970-1974, Cactus Petroleum, Inc., Cactus Transport, and F&C Equipment. In 1976, the City of Houston purchased what would come to be known as the ‘Gragg Building,’ a name still in use today, as the new headquarters for the City’s Parks and Recreation Department. Oscar Lee Gragg donated the 15.67 acres of land surrounding the building to the City, with the provision that five acres be reserved as a green area to be named Gragg Park. The move into the building marked the first time all sections of the Parks Department had been housed in one central location.

Growing out of humble beginnings in 1916 with a holding of approximately 750 acres of land, the City of Houston’s Parks and Recreation Department now boasts almost 40,000 acres of land and a budget close to \$60 million. The department requires a staff of 800 to continue its mission: “To enhance the quality of urban life by providing safe, well-maintained parks and offering affordable programs for the community.” The number of current employees is a far cry from the initial three city aldermen selected by former Houston Mayor Sam Brashear to oversee the acquisition of Houston’s first parkland in 1899, now Sam Houston Park, located on the edge of the city’s skyline.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The 1957 Farnsworth and Chambers Building is a one-story, reinforced concrete commercial building with a strong horizontal emphasis reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona. Designed by MacKie and Kamrath, the building has defined layers of materials that enforce the horizontality of the building. The lower battered concrete wall splays out to meet the ground. Above is an angled vertical mass clad with narrowly coursed mint-colored stone. This construction method is called talud and tablero and is commonly seen in pre-Hispanic pyramid sites in Central Mexico. Copper

⁵ Dethloff, page 38.

flashing overhangs the flat roof and parapet and creates a strong horizontal band at the roof level. Below the flashing is another horizontal band of unpainted concrete. A ribbon of horizontal steel casement windows runs below the large overhanging eaves historically clad with rough-sawn cypress boards.

The grid plan radiates out from an interior open-air atrium whose landscaping was designed by noted American landscape architect Garret Eckbo. The primary façade faces west onto South Wayside Drive and includes a semi-circular driveway and porte cochere. The plan consists of two parallel north-to-south and two east-to-west corridors which intersect at right angles.

The building layout allowed the firm to separate its departments by function. The floor plan also allowed for natural light into interior space. Administrative functions, including the offices of Mr. Farnsworth and Mr. Chambers, symbolically occupied the central core of the building. Purchasing and leasable space were located in the southern two wings of the building. Estimating and accounting took up the wings that protruded to the east, and the northernmost extension of the building was occupied by heavy engineering.

The executive offices of Farnsworth and Chambers were located on opposing hallways that run north and south. While Mr. Farnsworth's office, complete with personal changing room and rest room, was large compared to most senior management offices found throughout the building, Mr. Chambers' office unmistakably held the ultimate position within the building spatially and formally. His office protruded into the courtyard area and had direct access to it via a sliding glass door beneath a stone and cypress canopy. Although the courtyard was accessible to employees through sliding glass doors on the corridors that ran on the south and west sides of the atrium, Mr. Chamber's was the sole office with direct access to the exterior. The large conference room is the only other space that has direct access to the atrium. Mr. Chambers' office abutted the large conference room as well as a personal changing room and rest room.

MacKie and Kamrath provided ample fenestration in public areas, emphasizing the building's connection to the outdoors. The main entrance, the dining areas, and the primary interior corridors were enclosed by plate glass and glass doors. The remaining office areas did not possess the same visual connection to the outdoors. Instead, a ribbon of fixed and casement windows surrounds the Farnsworth and Chambers building at eyelevel except where the stone talud and tablero motif is carried up the full height of the building in an effort to "anchor" the ends of the building visually. A stained horizontal wood trim band runs the perimeter of each interior wall at the height of door and window heads, thus continuing the exterior horizontal emphasis indoors.

Many of the wall surfaces are wood paneling, which was fashionable at the time of construction. Rubber tiles comprised the floor coverings in the hallways, while offices contained asphalt floor tiles. Higher-end materials were used in more notable spaces. The flooring in Mr. Chambers' office and the adjoining large conference room is clad in slate tile. Restroom and kitchen floors were covered in terrazzo. Mr. Farnsworth had the sole carpeted floor in the building.

Acoustic ceiling tiles with recessed can lighting can be found throughout the building. Most interior doors are wooden with metal louvers as rooms did not possess return air ducts, instead venting through doors, into halls and directly to mechanical rooms behind large grills at the junction of the crossing of both east/west axes on the north/south corridor. Doors to the exterior are aluminum narrow-framed glass doors with aluminum pulls.

CURRENT CONDITION / REHABILITATION

The Farnsworth and Chambers Building is currently unoccupied and is undergoing a sensitive rehabilitation led by Harrison Kornberg Architects. Construction is anticipated to begin in October 2008 with a target completion date of October 2009. The project team has had reviews with the City of Houston Preservation Officer Randy Pace and Elizabeth Butman of the Texas Historical Commission. A Certificate of Appropriateness is being prepared and will be submitted for consideration by HAHC this fall.

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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 PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

S NA

S - satisfies NA - not applicable

Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1)):

- (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));
- (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));

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- (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));
- (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));
- (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));
- (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));
- (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)).

AND

- (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)).

OR

- The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2));

OR

- The property is listed 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 (Sec. 33-229(a)(3));

OR

- The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Farnsworth and Chambers Building at 2999 South Wayside Drive.

SITE LOCATION MAP
FARNSWORTH AND CHAMBERS BUILDING
2999 SOUTH WAYSIDE DRIVE
NOT TO SCALE



PHOTOS
FARNSWORTH AND CHAMBERS BUILDING
2999 SOUTH WAYSIDE DRIVE
NOT TO SCALE



Taliesin West, Scottsdale, AZ, built 1937-1959. Frank Lloyd Wright, architect. Photo by Donald Corner and Jenny Young.



Farnsworth & Chambers building, Houston, Texas, 1957. Photo courtesy NASA archives.