

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Baker-Meyer Building

OWNER: FKM Partnerships Ltd.

APPLICANT: Kenny Meyer

LOCATION: 315 Travis Street – Main Street Market Square
Historic District

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: Vb

HPO FILE NO: 10PL93

DATE ACCEPTED: June 8, 2010

HAHC HEARING: June 17, 2010

PC HEARING: June 24, 2010

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 7, Block 33, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, brick, commercial building.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Baker-Meyer Building at 313 Travis Street in Downtown Houston was designed in the Greek Revival style as is revealed in the corbelled brick cornice. The building was constructed circa 1870 making it among the oldest commercial buildings still standing in Houston. George Baker, a pioneer citizen of Houston, was the original owner. In 1884 George Baker's daughter Rebecca married Joseph F. Meyer and the building has remained in the Meyer family ever since. Joseph Meyer was founder of the Joseph F. Meyer Hardware Company; president of the Houston National Exchange Bank; served two terms as alderman of the Third Ward; served one year as county commissioner of Harris County and was chief of the Houston Volunteer Fire Department. In 1885 Meyer began acquiring land in the southwest part of Houston and by 1893 he owned more than 6,000 acres. In 1955 George Meyer developed the Meyerland subdivision, located in southwest Houston, on a portion of this land.

The Baker-Meyer Building is featured in two authoritative surveys, the *Houston Architectural Guide* (Architectural Institute of America) and *Last of the Past: Houston Architecture 1847 to 1915*. The building contributes to the historic and architectural significance of the two historic districts in which it stands, the Main Street Market Square National Register Historic District and the City of Houston Historic District. The building faces the historic Market Square Park, which was the site of the Market and was encompassed by commercial buildings. While many of the historic buildings have been demolished, the site is significant due to its importance as the center of trade, commerce and government in the early days of the city. The Baker-Meyer building is a visible reminder of the development and heritage of the early period of Houston's history.

The Baker-Meyer Building meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8, is a contributing structure to the Main Street Market Square National Register Historic District, and was built before 1905 - all considerations for Protected Landmark designation.

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HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Baker-Meyer building was completed circa 1870 and was originally owned by George Baker, a pioneer citizen of Houston. In 1884, George's daughter Rebecca married Joseph F. Meyer, Sr., and the building has remained in the Meyer family ever since. It is one of a few extant buildings that still remain in the ownership of the original family.

The shops and stores that have occupied the building were a feed store; a tailor shop run by former state representative Rex Braun; a toy store; and several night clubs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, The Super Market and Le Bon Rat. For thirty years, Treebeards Restaurant, owned by Jamie Mize and Dan Tidwell, has occupied the building; their restaurant has become a well known institution for lunch-time dining in the Main Street Market Square Historic District. Treebeards opened their original 30-seat café on March 1, 1978 on Preston Street in Market Square. They quickly outgrew the original location and moved to the Baker-Meyer Building in 1980. They have expanded over the years and now operate four restaurants in downtown Houston.

The Baker-Meyer Building is significant since it is one of the few surviving Greek Revival era buildings of the early period of Houston's history. Its importance is further amplified by its proximity and association with almost an entire block of historic buildings facing the historic Market Square Park, which was the site of several City Hall buildings and Market. While the City Hall buildings have been demolished, the site is significant due to its importance as the center of trade, commerce and government in the early days of the city.

Joseph F. Meyer, Sr.

Joseph F. Meyer, Sr., was the president of the Houston National Exchange Bank. He was prominent in business circles in Houston and Harris County and widely known as a successful financier. He began in the business world when he was sixteen years old, as the proprietor of an independent business. His earlier operations were on a small scale and expanded with the passage of time, so that within a few short years he became well-known among more established and powerful businessmen of the city.

Born in Germany in 1851, Joseph F. Meyer was the son of Frank and Josephine Meyer. Josephine died when Joseph was three years old, and Frank brought him to America in 1855, settling first in Memphis, Tennessee, and moving to Houston in 1867. At the age of 16 years he established the Joseph F. Meyer Hardware Company at 802 Franklin at Milam Street. The Company sold heavy hardware, wagon makers' supplies, farm implements, railroad contractors' supplies, iron, and steel, and was one of the largest of its kind in the city or Harris County. From then on, Meyer became identified with the financial and commercial activities of Texas.

With the continued prosperity that Mr. Meyer experienced, he began to explore other places for the investment of his capital. In 1885 Joseph F. Meyer began acquiring land in the southwest part of Houston between Buffalo and Brays Bayous. By 1893 he owned more than 6,000 acres which were leased to rice farmers and small cattle ranches. In 1892 he purchased 415 acres near what would become Houston Intercontinental Airport from a New York firm for \$780. In 1915 he donated a 69 acre tract of land to the Bayland Orphan Home.

In 1892 he was one of the organizers of the Houston National Exchange Bank, of which he was vice president until 1912, when he became president.

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Mr. Meyer was an Independent Democrat and was twice elected alderman in the city of Houston, representing the third ward in the City Council from 1888 to 1892. He also served one year as county commissioner of Harris County and enjoys the distinction of having been chief of the Houston Volunteer Fire Department as long ago as 1880.

Rebecca and Joseph married in 1884 and had three children – George B., Joseph F. Jr., and Frank K. Joseph died in 1935; his land was divided among his three sons.

Meyerland

Three generations of the Meyer family were instrumental in the development of the Meyerland subdivision, located in southwest Houston west of Post Oak Road and south of the City of Bellaire. In 1953 Joseph Meyer's son, George, decided to develop the 1,200 acres that we call Meyerland. Tom Robinson, Jr., president of First Mortgage Company, was selected to plan the subdivision and head up the Meyerland Company. In the spring of 1955 the former rice fields became a subdivision for single-family dwellings. Vice President Richard Nixon cut the ribbon for the grand opening that featured a Parade of Homes in the 5100 block of Jackwood. Development of Meyerland was done in stages and each new section was given a number and set of deed restrictions. There were several years of Medallion Showcases of Homes in Meyerland. *Look* magazine devoted four pages to Meyerland in 1957. *House and Home* magazine covered the area as the "ideal plan" for a subdivision in 1958.

A key element of Meyerland was the Meyerland Plaza Shopping Center. It opened in October of 1957 with a celebration of "Around the Shopping World in 80 Acres." There was a hot air balloon that took riders to the Shamrock Hotel. Leota Meyer Hess, daughter of George Meyer, managed the shopping center from the late 1950's to 1994. The third generation of the Meyer family sold the Meyerland Plaza Shopping Center on January 9, 1984. The Center was purchased again in 1993 and was remodeled by Ed Wulfe in 1994. It was sold to Ronus Properties in 1998.

Today there are 2,315 homes in Meyerland. The property continues to increase in value and the name Meyerland is one that brings to mind a beautiful residential neighborhood with strong deed restrictions. Today, new and younger families are moving in. Many are second and third generation Meyerlanders who knew what they liked a long time ago and are moving back. Many older homes are now being raised and new, larger homes are being built.

Main Street/Market Square Historic District

The Main Street/Market Square Historic District is located on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou between Milam and San Jacinto streets. The buildings within this district range from modest, mid-nineteenth-century brick commercial buildings to a number of small but ornately detailed High Victorian commercial buildings, and include a fine selection of multistory public, bank, and office buildings inspired by the Ecole des Beaux Arts, dating from the first three decades of the twentieth century. Completing this architectural array are several modernistically detailed commercial buildings of the early 1930s. Most of these buildings continue in use as either office or retail establishments. The district represents one of the state's best concentrations of late nineteenth- and early twentieth century commercial and public structures.

Fifty-two buildings and one structure (Main Street Viaduct) contribute to the architectural and historical significance of this district. Allen's Landing and Market Square (both public parks) are

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two of the most historic sites in Houston. Twenty-four of the fifty-two buildings were constructed between 1858 and 1900, and the remainder date from 1901 to 1935. Thirty-two buildings were constructed to serve primarily as stores, eleven to serve primarily as office buildings, four to serve as warehouses or large wholesale stores, and two each to serve as banks and motion picture theaters. The district contains one hotel. Thirty-seven of the "contributing" buildings are one to three stories high. Ten buildings range between four and eight stories in height, and five are nine to eighteen stories high. Twenty buildings are categorized as "non-contributing." Of these, the nine-story Harris County Administration Building of 1978 possesses contemporary architectural merit. Surface parking lots constitute a great intrusion within the district. Fourteen of the "non-contributing" structures are over fifty years old and have been altered so that most, but not all, of their architectural integrity has been compromised.

The lower, more modest nineteenth-century buildings in the district tend to be located in the Market Square area or along streets perpendicular to Main Street. The more elaborate nineteenth-century buildings, as well as a majority of the ornate twentieth-century bank buildings and tall office buildings, tend to be situated on Main Street or the two most important cross-streets within the district, Franklin Avenue and Texas Avenue. The Harris County Courthouse, listed in the National Register, occupies Courthouse Square, one block east of the district between Congress and Preston. Christ Church Cathedral, also listed in the National Register, is located one block east of the district between Prairie and Texas. One block west of Main between Congress and Preston lies Market Square, site of the chief public market and the offices of the municipal government from 1839 until 1939. Allen's Landing at the foot of Main Street was the principal landing for barge and steamboat traffic between Houston and Galveston Bay until the construction of the Main Street Viaduct in 1912-1913 and the concurrent construction of the Houston Ship Channel several miles downstream.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Baker-Meyer Building, constructed circa 1870, is considered to be the third oldest commercial building in Houston (Kennedy Bakery/La Carafe at 813 Congress and the Fox-Kuhlman Building at 305-307 Travis are older). This two-story masonry structure is fifty feet wide and contains approximately 4,500 square feet per floor. The west elevation is the storefront facing historic Market Square Park and has a corbelled brick cornice. The wide band of trim beneath the cornice is an almost universal feature of Greek Revival buildings. Commonly, the band is made up of undecorated boards, but complex incised decorations also occur, as is seen in the Baker-Meyer Building. The north, south and east walls are brick construction supported by spread brick footings. The roof has an original widow's walk allowing natural light to shine into the second floor. The second floor joists and the roof joists are the original heart pine as are second floor columns, typical for similar sized historic buildings in Houston. The roof is single-ply modified bitumen that was installed in the 1990s. Originally, the six windows on the second floor were wood sash, double hung windows with multi-lights.

The mural on the south wall depicts a market scene; it was completed in 1997 by local painter, Suzanne E. Sellers. It was commissioned by Treebeards Restaurant and the Houston Downtown Historic District.

During a renovation in the 1990s, an underground cistern was discovered; when uncovered, the cistern had several feet of crystal clear water in it with the withdrawal pipe partially intact. The

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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;
- (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.

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 Houston 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 Baker-Meyer Building at 315 Travis Street.

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EXHIBIT A
BAKER-MEYER BUILDING
313 TRAVIS STREET



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EXHIBIT B
SITE LOCATION MAP
BAKER-MEYER BUILDING
313 TRAVIS STREET
NOT TO SCALE

