

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Stuart Building

**OWNERS:** FKM Partnership

**APPLICANTS:** Same

**LOCATION:** 304 Main Street – Main Street Market Square

**AGENDA ITEM:** IIIId

**HPO FILE NO:** 11PL103

**DATE ACCEPTED:** Mar-21-2011

**HAHC HEARING:** May-19-2011

**SITE INFORMATION:** Lot 5, Tract 4A, Block 33, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a three-story commercial brick building which is clad with a stucco finish.

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

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Stuart Building was built in 1880 following a disastrous fire in July 1879 that destroyed half of the 300 block of Main Street. Designed in the Italianate style, the Stuart Building is one of downtown Houston's last remaining Victorian buildings. The building was built at the same time as the two adjoining buildings to the south – 306 & 308 Main Street – and retains its original Italianate features, such as its heavy ornate sheet metal cornice, a sheet metal frieze containing the name 'Stuart,' ornate iron window hoods and iron sills, corner quoins, and a broken pediment. The wall surface of the upper floors is heavily plastered to appear as rusticated stone facing. The building is contained within the boundary of the Main Street Market Square National Register and City of Houston Historic Districts, which encompass the area of Houston's earliest commercial development.

In 1999, the Stuart Building was purchased and restored by the Meyer family. 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, one of his sons, George Meyer, developed the Meyerland subdivision, located in southwest Houston, on a portion of this land. The Meyer family descendants today own numerous historic building in Main Street Market Square.

The Stuart Building at 304 Main Street meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, and 5, is a contributing structure to the Main Street Market Square National Register Historic District, and was built before 1905 - all considerations for Landmark and Protected Landmark designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Stuart Building was constructed in 1879-1880, following a disastrous fire in July 1879 which destroyed half of the 300 block of Main Street. The continuous construction in the rear of the Stuart Building shows that the three buildings at 304-306-308 Main Street were all constructed at the same time by the same owner, although they appear as three separate buildings today and are under separate ownership. Original features remain on only two buildings, including the Stuart Building at 304 Main Street. This building retains the heavy ornate sheet metal cornice that was typical of the affluent Italianate style of the 1880s. This cornice is supported by two large brackets at either end

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with several smaller ones in between. The sheet metal frieze under the cornice contains the name “Stuart” centered between the two end brackets. The building also retains the original second and third floor façade treatments, ornate iron window hoods, corner quoins, and a broken pediment.

When constructed, the Stuart Building was numbered 44 Main Street. The Stuarts were a prominent Houston family of physicians. It is unknown whether the Stuarts or other investors built this commercial building. Offices for attorney and other professionals (dentists, agents) occupied the upper floor. Ground floor tenants included three important early Houston firms: Wilkins and Adex Booksellers & Stationers; James F. Dumble’s China House, which sold china, glassware, and other housewares; and L.W. Kurten Jewelry. By the early 1980s, the building housed adult-oriented shops and entertainment; the top floors were vacant. The building was restored in 1999 by the current owners, FKM Partnership.

The Stuart Building is classified as a “contributing” building within the boundary of the Main Street Market Square Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 and designated within the City of Houston Historic District by City Council on March 5, 1997. The historic district of commercial buildings and sites constitutes Houston’s largest, most nearly intact accumulation of physical resources representing the City’s civic and commercial past. The surviving architecture documents the episodes of development that occurred between 1859 and the building and real estate boom of the 1920’s, the half-century when Houston emerged from relative obscurity to become the largest city in the southern United States.

### *Early Houston*

The town of Houston was platted in the fall of 1836 by surveyors Gail Borden (1801-1874), Thomas H. Borden (1804-1877), and Moses Lapham (1808-1838), for Augustus C. (1806 1864) and John K. Allen (1819-1838). The town consisted of sixty-two numbered blocks, most of them two-hundred fifty square feet, located near a shallow bend on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou opposite its confluence with White Oak Bayou. During the ensuing two decades, Houston would continue to expand as a market town and as the state’s first railroad center. A wave of prosperity in the late 1850s encouraged the replacement of wooden commercial buildings in Houston with more substantial masonry ones.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, Houston’s growth as a regional center of trade and finance resumed. Long overdue public improvements began: a brick courthouse for Harris County, begun in 1860, was completed; a permanent City Hall and Market House were built in Market Square in 1873; and during the late 1860s and early 1870s, the wooden buildings on the block fronts surrounding Market Square were replaced with two-story masonry buildings housing grocers, bakers, butchers, confectioners, liquor dealers, and other businesses benefitting from proximity to the public market.

After the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Houston experienced another episode of intensive growth and development, with expansion of the railroads, discovery of oil, and the completion of the Houston Ship Channel. Architecturally, this growth was reflected in a new surge of construction in the lower downtown area. Following World War I, the building boom of the 1920s eclipsed all previous episodes of growth and expansion in Houston. During that decade Houston moved from the position of third largest city in Texas to that of the largest city in the South as its population more than doubled in size.

## *Main Street/Market Square*

The Main Street Market Square Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in July 1983 and designated as a City of Houston historic district in 1997. The Sterne Building is classified as "contributing" to both historic districts. 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. 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.

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 are two of the most historic sites in Houston. Twenty-four of the fifty-two buildings were constructed between 1858 and 1900. The remaining buildings 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 Main Street Market Square Historic District constitutes Houston's largest, most intact concentration of commercial structures from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### *Joseph F. Meyer, Sr.*

Joseph F. Meyer, Sr., 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.

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.

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. In 1892, Meyer was one of the organizers of the

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Houston National Exchange Bank, of which he was vice president until 1912, when he became president.

Rebecca and Joseph Meyer 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 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 1950s to 1994. The third generation of the Meyer family sold the Meyerland Plaza Shopping Center on January 9, 1984. The center was sold 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 are moving back. Many older homes are now being razed and new, larger homes are being built.

### **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY**

The Stuart Building is three bays wide. The wall surface of the upper floors is heavily plastered to appear as rusticated stone facing. The double hung sash windows on the upper floors are topped with decorative iron hood moldings and have simple iron sills. A vertical strip of four fixed panes with a transom is located on each floor directly above the common entrance to allow light into the stairwell.

The original first floor façade and exterior elements were deteriorated or removed. They were probably replaced in the 1920s. The entrance to the first floor is centrally located and flanked by display windows. The entrance to the upper floors as well as the stairway is shared with the building to the south. The first floor is open the width and depth of the building. The floor is concrete and the ceiling is wood. The upper floors are shared with the building to the south (306 Main Street) and are open the width of both buildings.

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At the roofline, a heavy metal cornice is supported by two large brackets at either end with several smaller ones in between. The sheet metal frieze contains the “Stuart” centered between the two brackets. A broken pediment, which once contained a gold eagle, remains in place.

In 1999, the current owners restored the storefront by installing new windows and door on first floor, repairing the decorative iron hood moldings and metal cornice and patching the stucco to match the original treatment.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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McAlester, Virginia and Lee, Field Guide to American Houses, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984.

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Sanborn Fire Insurance map for Houston.

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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 and Courtney Spillane, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.*

### **APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION**

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. 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;

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- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;
- (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 Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Stuart Building at 304 Main Street.

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**EXHIBIT A**  
**STUART BUILDING**  
**304 MAIN STREET**



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## EXHIBIT B SITE LOCATION MAP STUART BUILDING 304 MAIN STREET NOT TO SCALE

