

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: Texas Company Building

AGENDA ITEM: IVb

OWNER: Mr. David Soloman

MEETING DATE: Jan-16-97

APPLICANT: 1111 Rusk Realty Partners

HPO FILE NO.: 97L013

LOCATION: 720 San Jacinto Street, aka 1111 Rusk Street

DATE ACCEPTED: Dec-5-96

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: Dec-15-96

HEARING DATE: Jan-16-97

SITE INFORMATION

Being a 1.4950 acre tract of land, being all of Block 79, SSBB and portions of adjacent rights-of-way, also being all of the land described in Deeds to The Texas Company and Texaco, Inc. recorded in the following Deed Records: Volume 195, Page 386; Volume 240, Page 613; Volume 443, Page 138 and Volume 3345, Page 724 and together with the tract of land described in the City of Houston Ordinance establishing a property line and vacating a portion of Capitol Avenue recorded in Volume 3721, Page 617 of the Deed Records, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The Texas Company Building is an L-shaped building which faces south and east at the crossing of San Jacinto Street and Rusk Avenue (known as 1111 Rusk). The building, located in the downtown business district of Houston, is a 13 story, steel frame building with a Bedford limestone masonry veneer. Adjoining the building is a 16 story building, constructed in 1958, which is compatible in construction and echoes several elements of the original 13 story building. The adjoining building, is located at the corner of Fannin Street and Capitol Avenue (known as 720 Fannin). Another adjoining building, constructed in 1975 and located at Capitol and San Jacinto, is clad with limestone-facing. It is not contributing and will be converted to a parking garage.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

According to Stephen Fox, Houston's foremost architectural historian, "the Texas Company Building is "an exceptionally fine example of classical architecture detail applied to a multistory office block."

According to "Houston Architectural Survey," Volume I, prepared by the Southwest Center for Urban Research (1980), the Texas Company Building is significant not only for its architectural individuality, including the great arcade of Guastavino constructed vaults, but also for the important historical contributions of the Texas Company. The Texas Company anticipated two important developments that assured their success in the oil industry: first, that the opening of the southwestern oil fields would alter the geographical pattern of the industry, and second, that new uses for oil—primarily as engine fuel—would come to dominate the market. After being chartered in Beaumont, Texas, on April 7, 1902, the Texas Company moved to Houston in 1908 and leased space in various locations for its employees. Immense growth (the company's assets increased from \$3.5 million in 1903 to about \$60 million in 1913) necessitated the construction of a large building for exclusive use as its offices. The site chosen at the corner of Rusk and San Jacinto was part of a residential area that flourished in the late nineteenth century.

The New York firm of Warren and Wetmore received the commission in 1913, apparently under the aegis of the Gates family of Chicago, major stockholders in the Texas Company. Whitney Warren was trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and his partnership with Charles D. Wetmore, fostered many large buildings in this tradition, among them Grand Central Station in New York (1903-1913). Prior to the Texas project, they had

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

designed Houston's Union Station in 1910. In 1935, they were called upon again to design a three bay extension on the San Jacinto facade. This part is recessed slightly and does not continue the arcade.

A sixteen story building, designed in 1958 by Kenneth Franzheim and Charles S. Chase III, adjoins the original building. According to Fox "they added the stylistically respectful annex." Overall, it echoes several elements of the Warren and Wetmore's work and is compatible. The 1958 addition is a significant addition to the original Texas Company Building as a historical continuation of the original building's "catalan" vault arcade, the "attic" frieze and cornice and limestone veneer. This addition anchors the center on the San Jacinto, Rusk and Fannin block as well as providing protection from and a transition to the more modern building adjacent to these two buildings. It is important that these buildings be considered as a single landmark entity.

In 1975 S. I. Morris Associates designed a limestone-faced garage which is not contributing but materials are sensitive to the buildings in the block.

The thirteen story building is a neo-classical office block. The building rises on a reinforced concrete foundation 28 feet in depth. One thousand four hundred tons of steel, fabricated by the Houston Structural Steel Company, comprise the framework. Bedford limestone was used for the masonry sheathing, terra cotta for decorative details and light brick for facing the court and rear walls.

Contemporary accounts describe the style of the building as modern Italian Renaissance, an attempt to characterize the assimilation of classical details that one sees in this building. Its horizontal organization and use of masonry with terra cotta ornament associate it with the Beaux Arts style, widely used for both commercial and domestic architecture in the early part of the twentieth century. Visually, the building divides into three areas: a base consisting of an arcade over the sidewalk; the main shaft, dominated by rectangular windows; and an "attic" formed of monumental columns with a frieze and cornice.

The arcade, twenty feet in height, consists of paired Tuscan columns made of limestone. The curb and bases are of Texas granite. Within the arcade are strongly-textured quadrupartite vaults. These were constructed by the Guastavino Company, which promoted the "Catalan" vault around the turn of the century because of its light weight and fire resistance. Large arched windows, well suited to commercial display, dominate the wall space within the arcade. The rhythmic arcades, an urban amenity, is found only in one other instance in downtown Houston in the Rice Hotel. The arcade of the Texas Company Building was illustrated in Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets' "The American Vitruvius" (1922) as an example of thoughtful accommodation of pedestrian traffic.

The second floor opens onto a small balcony provided by the roof of the arcade. The remaining eight stories in the "shaft" of the building display only a modicum of ornamentation. The window sills are decorated with several bands of classical molding. The eleventh and twelfth floors are framed by paired Corinthian columns two stories in height. This shift to a larger scale near the top gives a monumentality to the building and ties the arcade to the upper stories. The heavy bracketed cornice is decorated with lions' heads and surmounted by a balustrade identical to the one on the second floor.

The monthly "Texaco Star" magazine published detailed progress reports and excellent photographs from June 8, 1914 when excavation began to May 1, 1915 when the first offices were occupied. This record provides valuable information concerning the building's history and the construction and engineering of skyscrapers in general during the first decades of the twentieth century.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

On April 16, 1996 the Texas Historical Commission determined that the property is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A "as a significant early 20th century skyscraper, associated with the Texas Company, the first major oil company to establish headquarters in Houston. Though this property has suffered alteration of windows and has had additions over the years, it retains substantial architectural integrity and continues to be a significant presence in downtown Houston."

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION:

There have been no structural changes or modifications of any consequence since the construction of the building although the original wood-sash windows which were vertically paned, have been replaced with dark tinted glass panels. The large arched windows under the arcade have been replaced with large glass panels as well. On the frieze level, panels decorated in bas-relief alternate with small square windows. Originally, these windows were covered with screens of grill work. An elaborately framed clock and "Texaco" lettering on the balustrade level on the San Jacinto Street side have been removed. Metal bumper guards, emblazoned with the Texaco star were installed to protect the columns of the arcade. When the building was sold recently to the applicant, the stars were removed. The only other alteration was the relocation of the main entrance to the 1111 Rusk annex building.

The building has sat vacant for about seven years. The applicant plans to convert the building to 300 loft apartments.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

SITE LOCATION MAP
TEXAS COMPANY BUILDING
720 SAN JACINTO STREET AND 1111 RUSK AVENUE
NOT TO SCALE

