

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: Chamber of Commerce Building

AGENDA ITEM: III

OWNER: JPF Holdings, Inc.

MEETING DATE: Jul-15-99

APPLICANT: Mrs. Sharon Mattox

HPO FILE NO.: 99L75

LOCATION: 914 Main Street

DATE ACCEPTED: May-18-99

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: Jun-15-99

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SITE INFORMATION

All of lots 4, 5, 9, 11 and the northeasterly half of Lots 3 and 6, portions of Lot 10, all in Block 138, SSBB, City of Houston. The Chamber of Commerce Building is located on Main Street and Walker. The buildings on the site include a 22-story, commercial tower and a 12-story annex.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Chamber of Commerce Building is considered significant mainly because its existence is the result of the efforts of three of Houston's most prominent citizens and exemplifies their dedication and contribution to the growth and prosperity of the City of Houston. First, it was originally constructed by Jesse Jones, considered as by historians as "Mr. Houston." Secondly, the building was originally designed by one of Houston's most prominent architects, Joseph Finger. And thirdly, it was redesigned by another prominent Houston architect, Alfred C. Finn.

The Chamber of Commerce Building was designed by Joseph Finger, one of Houston's premier architects. The building was designed from plans dated October 1, 1928. The design of the original Chamber of Commerce Building exhibited cast stone spandrels and face brick, being highly representative of the Art Deco style. It was constructed by Jesse Jones, who was not only a prominent figure in Houston, but in the political circles of Washington, D. C. too. The organization from which Jones derived the name for the building, The Houston Chamber of Commerce, was also a major entity responsible for the growth and dynamics of the city of Houston. The building was grade "A" office space at its time and housed the Chamber of Commerce offices as well as the Offices of the U. S. Department of the Coast Guard Artillery, the 360th Infantry of the U. S. Army and the Houston Club. In August 1930, the Houston Chronicle described the interior space: "The new quarters of the Chamber of Commerce constitute one of the most modern and efficiently arranged layouts of its kind in the U.S.... the entire eighth floor is taken up by the organization, and the entire ninth floor will be occupied by the Houston Club." The Chamber of Commerce Building was typical of the caliber of a Jesse Jones project. When he named the building, he said, "Commerce was such a good name that I would have used it sometime anyway." Jones has been described as the most extraordinary administrator and statesman of his time. He was very instrumental in the growth of Houston that resulted in it being a key city in the U.S. When Jones came to Houston in 1898 it ranked 72nd among the nation's cities. By 1930, it had become 24th. In brief, Jones was responsible for most of Houston's major pre-war growth and building. At one point, from the observation tower of his Gulf Building, he could look out at more skyscrapers than any other man had ever owned in an American city. The Port of Houston, another project of Jesse Jones, was instrumental in Houston's development and its transformation into a major city in the U. S.

CITY OF HOUSTON

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Finger was a prolific designer of some of Houston's most notable architecture, including the Temple Beth Israel which is exemplary of the "zig-zag Moderne style". He also designed the City Hall, Cotton Building, William Penn Hotel, Montgomery County Courthouse, and Houston Turn-Verein Clubhouse.

The Chamber of Commerce was incorporated in 1845, with "Help Make Houston Grow" as its motto. It is the oldest commercial organization west of the Mississippi and according to records, it is the second oldest such organization in the country after Boston. When it was started, Houston was only a "sprawling frontier town." Recognizing a need, a committee was formed to oversee the interests of the community's business growth. As a non-political organization, it focused on issues of growth and supplied the leadership for civic projects. In 1930, the group reorganized and a number of new departments were added, which prompted its move from the old headquarters on Texas Avenue at Milam to Main Street, in Jesse Jones' building. The move was greatly publicized and welcomed. An open house was held for the public where they also learned about the role of the chamber in the growth of Houston.

The importance and success of the Chamber to Houston is much reflected in how the building was enlarged and expanded to support the efforts of the Chamber. As the chamber grew, the building was expanded to meet their needs. Alfred C. Finn, known as the "Builder of Houston," was engaged to design these important and significant changes to the building. The relationship between Finn and Jesse Jones was well established at this point, and Finn was well known as a major figure in the architecture world. The Houston Press called him "the gray-haired skyscraper genius." Finn is definitely responsible for the next two additions to the Commerce Building over the following 18 years. In 1931, Finn was engaged to design the adjacent building, known as the Commerce Building extension, which was a parking annex located at the corner of Travis and Walker. He completed the third stage of the Commerce building in 1938 when the original 9-story building was expanded to 22-stories. The building was also known then as the United Gas Company Building. In 1947, Finn designed another stage which included an addition to the Commerce Building annex. To its original five floors of parking were added another floor of parking and six floors of office space, resulting in a total of twelve floors. On the 22-story building redesign, Finn incorporated some elements of the art deco style probably reflecting some of the original design. He also used face brick with decorative aluminum panels. Even the design of the parking garage/annex building related sympathetically and proportionately to the redesigned main building, including the use of face brick and cast stone spandrels. The color of the brick has a slight variation showing the line of addition.

Finn also designed such projects as the Gulf Building, the San Jacinto Monument, the Sam Houston Coliseum, Sakowitz Brothers Store, Bankers Mortgage Building, State National Bank Building, U of H Ezekiel W. Cullen Administration Building, Lamar Hotel, Lowe's Theatre, Metropolitan Theatre and the Shrine Crippled Children's Hospital and the City National Bank Building.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION:

There have been no structural changes or modifications of any consequence since the additions were added in 1947. In the early 1980's the streetfront of the building was faced with simple stone panels with an overhang running the perimeter of the garage annex building. It has been recommended by the Texas Historical Commission that the owner retain these alterations to the building, which does not detract from the original design and are a feature of its development. The Texas Historical Commission has also determined the building as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

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STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

That the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend designation of the Chamber of Commerce Building as a landmark to the Planning Commission since the application complies with the applicable criteria.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION....:

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the 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 D NA

S - satisfies D - does not satisfy NA - not applicable

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- (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;
- (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.

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SITE LOCATION MAP
914 MAIN STREET
NOT TO SCALE

