

CiteSeeing

The Warehouse District

An Architectural Tour

Stephen Fox

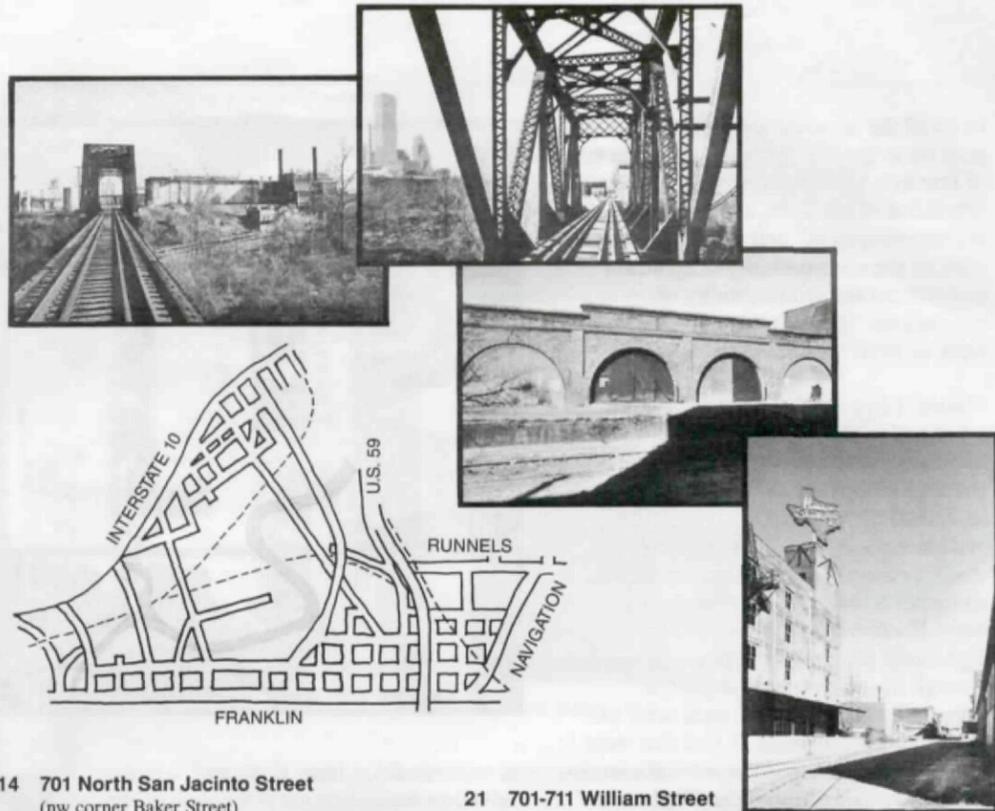
The warehouse district, which grew up along Buffalo Bayou between the 1890s and the 1920s, developed in response to the overlap of major transportation arteries – the bayou itself, navigable by barge, and a series of railroad lines. It was railroad expansion after the turn-of-the-century that made the lightly settled working-class neighborhood on the north bank of Buffalo Bayou and the somewhat denser middle-class residential district on the south bank attractive locales for commercial redevelopment. The north side (today's NoHo), in Fifth Ward, became the "factory district;" the south bank, in Second Ward, the "wholesale district," reflecting Commerce Street's long-standing identification as Produce Row, where wholesale grocery, meat, produce, and baking establishments were concentrated until 1950. What is surprising about the warehouse district is how much still remains of its industrial vernacular buildings, rail trackage, and brick-paved streets. And there are the startling views: up to the towers of downtown Houston in the middle distance, and down, to always unexpected glimpses of the muddy bayou from which Houston sprang.

Enter from the north on North Main Street

- 1 1 North Main Street**
Merchants and Manufacturers Building
(now University of Houston-Downtown)
1930, Giesecke & Harris
- This vast, 11-story hulk, with its double-volume, drive-through arcade and 6 1/2-story sallyport entrance bay, was constructed to serve as the Merchandise Mart of Houston. Accessible by water, rail, car, and truck, it was designed in the so-called American Perpendicular manner of the late '20s by a firm of Austin architects. The great flood of 1929, followed five months later by the Stock Market crash, foretold its economic doom, before construction was even completed. Acquired by the University of Houston in 1974, the M&M Building has been rehabilitated externally by Charles Tapley Associates with a jazzy polychrome paint job (1985).
- 2 Main Street and Buffalo Bayou**
Main Street Viaduct
1913, F.L. Dormant, City Engineer
- This is the *only* way to enter downtown Houston, up over the high-arched span of the Main Street Viaduct, then down into the heart of the city, crowned with domes and the cornices of classically detailed office blocks. The viaduct spans not only Buffalo Bayou but White Oak Bayou and the tracks of the Houston & Texas Central and Missouri, Kansas & Texas lines as well. The 150-foot-long concrete arch spanning Buffalo Bayou was the longest single bridge span in Texas when the viaduct was completed.
- 3 719-721 Franklin Avenue**
(nw corner Milam Street)
Magnolia Café Building
1911, Cooke & Company
- The Magnolia Café was part of an extensive complex of buildings linked to the Houston Ice & Brewing Company's Magnolia Brewery on the opposite bank of the bayou. The second great flood on Buffalo Bayou (in 1935) precipitated the collapse of portions of this complex, including the back of 110 Milam Street, which has survived ever since in its ruined condition.
- 4 404 Washington Avenue**
(ne corner Louisiana Street)
Houston Ice & Brewing Company Building
c. 1912, Cooke & Company
- The original Magnolia Brewery of 1893 lay to the west, across what is now Louisiana Street. This building was part of an extensive expansion campaign undertaken in the 1910s, all of which seems to have been the work of the English-born architect Henry C. Cooke, who set up practice in Houston in 1900.
- 5 800-806 Commerce Street**
Siewerssen and Hogan-Allnoch Company Buildings
1894 and 1906
- Wilson/Crain/Anderson/Reynolds's rehabilitation of these two buildings as a law office (1975) was one of the first examples of

preservation-oriented adaptive reuse in the warehouse district. Off to the left catch a spectacular glimpse of the Main Street Viaduct.

- 6 901-915 Commerce Street**
(ne corner Travis Street)
Desel-Boettcher Company Building
1912, Cooke & Company
- Benjamin A. Riesner, a blacksmith turned carriage-maker, redeveloped the west end of Produce Row in the early 1900s. He and his architect, H.C. Cooke, were responsible not only for this building, leased to a wholesale grocery company, but 902 Commerce across the street (1906).
- 7 1000 block of Commerce Street**
Allen's Landing
1967, W.H. Linnstaedter
- Here, where White Oak Bayou empties into Buffalo, beneath the H&TC trestle, Augustus C. and John K. Allen staked their townsite of Houston. Through the early 1900s the foot of Main Street was a wharf area, where barges loaded and unloaded directly onto the earthen bank. Transformed into a city park through the efforts of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, it is – appropriately – navigable by automobile almost all the way to the water's edge. It is also possible to walk beneath the viaduct to a westward extension of the park.
- 8 1118 Commerce Street**
(sw corner San Jacinto Street)
Gordon, Sewall & Company Building
1913, Sanguinet & Staats and A. E. Barnes
- Considerably gentrified and shorn of its roof-top water tank (outfitted to look like a coffee pot), this stolid brick wholesale grocery company warehouse is one of several buildings in the area that has been adaptively reused by Harris County.
- 9 1119 Commerce Street**
(nw corner San Jacinto Street)
Texas Packing Company Building
1924, Joseph Finger
- Still owned and occupied by S. J. San Angelo's meat-packing plant, this 2-story above and 2-story below-grade building is in the industrial vernacular style of the 1920s: an exposed concrete frame in-filled with red brick and metal industrial sash windows.
- 10 1201-1207 Commerce Street**
(ne corner San Jacinto Street)
Central Warehouse and Forwarding Company Building
1927
- A handsomely proportioned example of the '20s industrial style, respectfully updated externally by Harris County. Henry C. Schuhmacher and Charles A. Perlitz erected this building next to the no-longer extant Schuhmacher & Company wholesale grocery warehouse of 1910. Like the earlier building, it sandwiches three floors between the bayou and street level. The street front walls are all brick, but the reinforced concrete frame is exposed on the bayou elevation.
- 11 San Jacinto Street and Buffalo Bayou**
San Jacinto Street Bridge
1914, F.L. Dormant, City Engineer
- Connecting the Second Ward, on the south, to Fifth Ward on the north, this is a condensed version of the Main Street Viaduct.
- 12 610 North San Jacinto Street**
(se corner Baker Street)
Peden Company Building
1930, James Ruskin Bailey
- Opened within a few months of the M&M Building's inauguration, this building – originally containing the offices of the Peden Company and its retail "hardware department store" – was also in the American Perpendicular style, replete with a moderately setback penthouse tower above the corner entrance bay.
- 13 700 North San Jacinto Street**
(ne corner Baker Street)
Peden Iron & Steel Company Building
1906, C. H. Page & Company
- Arched windows and the use of projecting brick piers and string courses distinguish the Peden Company's earlier headquarters and warehouse building, one of the first to contribute to the modernization of the Fifth Ward factory district. Peden, manufacturers of heavy hardware, mill, railroad, and oil well supplies, added an extensive L-shaped concrete and brick annex to the 1906 building in 1912, designed by C. D. Hill & Company. Mustard-colored paint now gives the complex a rather depressing aspect.



- 14 701 North San Jacinto Street**
(nw corner Baker Street)
Houston Terminal Warehouse and Cold Storage Building
1927, Engineering Service Corporation
- This white, concrete-framed monster is strategically positioned between the H&TC and MKT tracks and Buffalo Bayou. When crossing the tracks, look eastward for an uplifting view of the M&M Building.
- 15 807-811 North San Jacinto Street**
(sw corner Steam Mill Street)
City of Houston Crematory and Pumping Station
1901
- This complex of buildings, executed in red pressed brick with very thin mortar joints, contained the city's pioneer sewage-treatment plant and municipal incinerator (the crematory). The molded brick arches of the pump house are especially good examples of what constituted standard brick detailing in Houston at the turn-of-the-century. Still owned by the City of Houston.
- 16 804-810 North San Jacinto Street**
Southern Pacific Lines Freight Depot
1928, R. W. Barnes, Chief Engineer
- Designed in-house in the Southern Pacific's Houston office, the main block of the complex is regulation 1920s concrete-and-brick frame-and-fill. The 1- and 2-story warehouse, shooting out on the diagonal of the Houston & Texas Central's transfer track, is formidable, however. The Southern Pacific firmly insinuated itself into this part of town between 1881 and 1899 by successively absorbing the Texas & New Orleans, the Houston & Texas Central, and the Houston East & West Texas lines.
- 17 908-912 Wood Street and 711 Walnut Street**
Moore Warehouses #2 and #1
1908 and 1907
902-910 Wood Street
(nw corner Walnut Street)
South Texas Implement & Transfer Company Warehouse
c.1908
- Consolidated for much of their existences, these three 3-story warehouses of "mill-type" construction (brick load-bearing perimeter walls encasing a heavy timber frame) were the first in the warehouse district to be converted to loft lease space for studios and offices, in 1982. The concrete-walled film studio and sound stage affixed to 711 Walnut was added by Houston Studios in 1986.
- 18 802 Walnut Street**
(ne corner Sterrett Street)
Patrick Transfer Company Warehouse
1911
- Another solid utilitarian warehouse of red brick construction with paneled brick exterior walls. The Houston Studios sign atop is a kick: "Texas On A Stick," as the Washington D.C. photographer Renee Butler quipped.
- 19 1200 Rothwell Street**
(ne corner Nance Street)
Henry Henke's Fifth Ward Store Building
1883
- The awkward intersection of streets here does not reflect the insertion of Interstate 10, as it might appear to, but the historic collision of two discontinuous grids with the Liberty Road. A small commercial sub center took root here, of which Henry Henke's branch grocery store (now the North San Jacinto Café) is the only visible remnant. Above the altered ground floor, the rendered masonry façade is intact.
- 20 1302 Nance Street**
(se corner Richey Street)
Erie City Iron Works Warehouse
1909
- Herbert A. Paine built this extensively arcuated brown brick warehouse to contain his wholesale machinery business. The most impressive elevation – on the south, facing Sterrett – is composed solely of repeating semicircular openings.
- 21 701-711 William Street**
(sw corner Sterrett Street)
James Bute Company Warehouse
1910, Olle J. Lorehn
- Olle Lorehn's block-long, 4-story, concrete-framed paint factory for the James Bute Company was the largest warehouse in Houston at the time of its completion. Remarkably, it is still occupied by its original owner and used for its original purposes.
- 22 801 William Street**
(1333-1377 Sterrett Street)
Bartell Warehouse
1912
- The brown brick Bartell Warehouse, with its narrow, jack-arch headed windows, represented the old school of warehouse design in the 1910s, a lingering Victorian presence in the Progressive Era.
- 23 1403 Nance Street**
The Last Concert Café
1951
- This delightful hybrid of brick, stucco, glass block, and iron grills, all festively painted, is the concoction of Sam González, who built the Last Concert in the back yard of the cottage at 904 William Street.
- 24 801 McKee Street**
(ne corner Sterrett Street)
Houston Sash & Door Company Building
c. 1916
- A brown brick reprise of the Bartell Warehouse at #22.
- 25 1902 Rothwell Street**
(se corner Maury Street)
W. T. Carter Lumber Company Warehouse
1909
- Of red brick and heavy timber construction, this building originally comprised the high nave-like central bay and its flanking lower bays, to which more "offsets" – as they were described in 1909 – have been added subsequently.
- 26 900 block Elysian Street**
- When the City of Houston built the Resweber Viaduct to carry traffic across the bayou, the railroad tracks, and the future I-10, it simply bridged Elysian Street, leaving the buildings facing it intact and the roadway unobstructed. As William T. Cannady has observed, this strategy offers an enticing suggestion of how elevated highway structures might have been made to intervene civilly in the fabric of hot, humid cities to provide arcaded vehicular streets of noble proportion. Elysian Street is the central thoroughfare in the S.F. Noble Addition, platted in Fifth Ward in 1867; the names of flanking streets commemorate heroes of the lost cause.
- 27 McKee Street and Buffalo Bayou**
McKee Street Bridge
1932, James Gordon McKenzie, City Bridge Engineer
- During his tenure in the City Engineer's office, McKenzie put the ingenuity back into engineering. The undulating reinforced concrete girders that bracket the brick-paved roadway of the McKee Street Bridge are in the shape of moment diagrams, expressively demonstrating the disposition of structural forces. The spirited polychromy and the landscaping of adjacent banks are the work of the artist Kirk Farris, who orchestrated a volunteer beautification campaign in 1985.
- 28 507 McKee Street**
Gable Street Plant, Houston Lighting & Power Company
1898, 1913, 1917, 1918, 1921, 1939, 1950
- This is the oldest electrical generating plant in the city, opened on this site by HL&P's predecessor, the Citizens Electric Light & Power Company. The present plant building, although it incorporates older construction, dates principally from the 1910s, as the arched industrial sash windows set into recessed wall bays of red brick suggest.



29 View from McKee and Runnels Streets toward Spruce and Bramble Streets Frost Town shotgun cottages

This collection of shotgun cottages is all that remains of Frost Town, an eight-block subdivision slightly downstream from the Allen brothers' townsite (although located in the John Austin Survey, which the Allens acquired in 1836). Its name derives from a settlement predating the Allens, made hereabouts in 1822. Unlike the Allens' grid, the Frost Town grid aligns with the boundaries of the John Austin Survey; McKee Street is virtually the only trace remaining of this old network; note that it also retains its exposed brick paving surface.

30 1801 Ruiz Street
(ne corner McKee Street)
MK&T Railroad Company of Texas Freight Office Building
1927, A. L. Sparks

Like the Southern Pacific freight depot, the Katy freight office is skewed in plan, pivoted on the intersection of the Frost Town and Houston grids. Designed by the railroad's St. Louis corporate architect, the freight office exhibits vestigial classical detail at the main entrance, which is considerably less compelling than the expanse of sheds along McKee.

31 1901 Ruiz Street
(ne corner Hamilton Street)
J. L. Jones Warehouse
1930, J. W. Northrop, Jr.

Northrop is best remembered for his numerous American Georgian houses in the South End and River Oaks. But for one of his most loyal clients, J. L. Jones, he designed a number of warehouse and commercial buildings in the 1920s. There is just a hint of the Georgian - streamlined, to be sure - in this 3-story brick warehouse, with its abstract rendition of a pedimented portal at the main entrance.

32 1901 Commerce Street
(ne corner Hamilton Street)
M. De George Warehouse
1925, L. S. Green

This was the last major work of Lewis Sterling Green, a Houston architect quite active between 1900 and 1914, after which his career began to wane. It was built for Michael De George, who also built the De George and Auditorium (now Lancaster) hotels.

33 1700 block Commerce Street
(sw corner Chenevert Street)
National Biscuit Company Building
1902, Ollé J. Lorehn

Nabisco's first production plant in Houston was a comparatively elaborate building, as far as local industrial architecture was concerned. The slightly tacky stone-faced cast concrete vousoirs above the arched openings were all the rage in Houston between 1900 and 1910.

34 15 North Chenevert Street
(sw corner Ruiz Street)
National Biscuit Company Building
1910, A. G. Zimmerman

So successful was Nabisco's business in Houston that in 1910 the company's architect, A. G. Zimmerman, made plans for this exceptionally well-detailed and constructed 5-story baking, packing, and shipping plant, where Nabisco was located until 1949. The building displays a kinship to Zimmerman's contemporary plants for the company in New York and Kansas City. Its reinforced concrete frame construction is evident from the regular disposition of vertical piers, horizontal spandrels, and bay openings. The variegated red brick of the exterior walls is relieved with courses of molded tan terra-cotta. The Nabisco Building remains the most monumental work of architecture in the wholesale district, thanks to the 6-story corner tower, containing the entrance and fire stairs.

35 11 North Jackson Street
(sw corner Ruiz Street)
Grocers Supply Company Building
1940, Joseph Finger

A far cry from the utilitarianism of Finger's Texas Packing Company Building (#9) is this 2-story, block-long, streamlined modernistic building, with slot windows inserted into a second-story band of continuous speed lines. This was the last major wholesale company building constructed in the district; in the 19th century this block and the one to the west had contained the generating plant of the Houston Gas Works.

36 1701 Commerce Street
(ne corner Jackson Street)
J. L. Jones Warehouse
1927, J. W. Northrop, Jr.

In contrast to the Jones Warehouse at #31, this red brick box is strictly plain-Jane, with only a protruding mechanical penthouse to alleviate the building's flat, unarticulated Commerce Street front. Diagonally across the intersection, at 100-104 Jackson Street, and now painted eye-eze green, is a near twin.

37 1606 Commerce Street
(se corner Crawford Street)
Eller Wagon Works Building
1909

Befitting a production plant for beast-drawn wagons constructed at the dawn of the auto age, this 3-story brown brick building is architecturally anachronistic: the narrow jack-arch headed windows bespeak its conservative design.

38 103 Austin Street
William L. Macatee & Sons Building
1906, Cooke & Company

Vigorously modeled abstract classical detail, picking out the second-floor arched openings and the pedimented entrance bay, gives this small building big presence, which it needs now that the mammoth Harris County Jail looms over it. The two blocks that the jail occupies were where the International & Great Northern Railway built its freight depot between 1901 and 1905, disrupting the tranquillity of what had been the old antebellum residential district of Quality Hill, and precipitating its redevelopment as an eastward extension of Produce Row.

39 109-111 Crawford Street
(visible from the intersection of Franklin Avenue and Crawford Street)
Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company Building
1920, Alfred C. Finn

PPG had taken over the Eller Wagon Works Building (#37) when it built this 3-story office building just after World War I - now camouflaged in eye-eze green. The crisp, rectilinear composition of the Crawford Street front and the pair of cartouche plaques above the two outer window bays betray the hand of H. Jordan MacKenzie, an obscure but exuberant designer who worked for the Houston architect Alfred C. Finn.

40 1619 Franklin Avenue
(nw corner Jackson Street)
Shell Petroleum Company Service Station #12
1934

An ebullient little art déco pavilion.

41 2018 Franklin Avenue
(sw corner St. Emanuel Street)
Standard Brass & Manufacturing Company Building
1937, John F. Staub

This building is by one architect you wouldn't have expected to find represented in the warehouse district, but here it is: a handsome composition of horizontally banded industrial sash windows emphasizing the planar walls of the building box, into which deep and shallow volumetric incursions are made to provide for vehicular and pedestrian access. Staub's partner, J. T. Rather, Jr., was the designer.

42 121 St. Emanuel Street
(ne corner Franklin Avenue)
Gribble Stamp & Stencil Company Building
1948, C.R. Berry & Company

The 2-story glass-block cylinder functions as the pivot point for the Gribble Building's diverging, two-toned, red-and-tan brick walls. A witty adaptation to a pie-shaped site.

43 Hutchins Street and Commerce Street Navigation Boulevard Underpass
1928

With the railroad-track grade crossing at Hutchins and Commerce underpassed, the way was opened - via Navigation Boulevard and Clinton Drive - to connect the new industrial district stretching along both sides of lower Buffalo Bayou directly to downtown Houston, foretelling the day when the "old" district along the upper bayou would be superseded.

44 2405 Navigation Boulevard
Our Lady of Guadalupe Church
1923, Leo M. J. Dielmann

Dielmann, a prolific San Antonio architect, had already designed a church for the Spanish-language Roman Catholic parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe in San Antonio when he was retained to design Guadalupe, Houston, the city's first Spanish-language parish. Rendered in Dielmann's distinctively heavy-handed style, the church is of Italian Romanesque derivation, more Victorian than '20s neo-Lombard, however. Slated for major restoration.

45 2115 Runnels Street
(nw corner Lottman Street)
Lottman Manufacturing Company Building
(now El Mercado del Sol)
1904, 1910, 1926

Marking the far east edge of the warehouse district is this complex of 2-, 3-, and 4-story brown brick and heavy timber-framed buildings, which housed the wholesale furniture factory of the Lottman (subsequently Lottman-Myers, then Myers-Spalti) Manufacturing Company. A number of additions were carried out in the original vernacular style; a 5-story concrete frame and brick in-fill wing dates from 1926. Between 1983 and 1985 the complex was rehabilitated to become El Mercado del Sol, a Mexican-themed shopping center upon which Fortune has yet to smile.

End of Tour.

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