



The Plaza Apartment Hotel, as it was known at the time (Joseph Finger, 1926), circa 1945.

New Life for an Old Hotel

In a city that seems to dispose of things as soon as the taint of age is on them, the Plaza Hotel at 5052 Montrose Boulevard is an interesting anomaly. Although it was abandoned for more than 20 years, powerful Houston forces are now working to bring the old hotel back to life as the Plaza Medical Center. In the next 12 to 18 months, the Plaza will be remade to support high-end medical office space, with each floor of the small hotel footprint devoted to one or at most two practices' offices.

The Plaza's resurrection is the result of a timely confluence of creative architectural design, real estate talent, and leading-edge mechanical, electrical, and data information technologies. Most relevant of all, however, is the Plaza's proximity to the Texas Medical Center.

As land around the medical center has become increasingly expensive and the surrounding streets increasingly congested, medical facility sites north of Hermann Park have come to be considered viable. The prime Montrose Boulevard location of the Plaza is close enough to the TMC to be "in the medical center," and close enough for the medical staff to move

quickly among office, hospitals, and lecture halls. For the patient, the site has a well-known address and is highway-accessible, but is far away from TMC traffic headaches and parking expenses.

The costs of renovating the Plaza are supported by the expected high medical office rents. However, the architectural challenges have required some extremely creative thinking. Previous efforts at renovation were stymied by the small hotel floor plate and equally narrow central circulation hall-to-wall depths, elevator hoistways, and stairwells. Just as daunting were the city's ADA codes and off-street parking requirements, which could not be met by the aging small garage to the west of the building.

The architectural team, led by Cisneros Architects with the developer Greenberg & Company, is demolishing the garage and central elevator core of the old hotel, and redesigning this parking and vertical circulation relationship to bring the building up to code. The new garage structure will contain 250 spaces. Each of its floors will link to a corresponding medical office floor and elevator

lobby so that a patient can go in straight to the floor of his appointment from the garage—in a wheelchair if necessary. In this way the front door avoids having to accommodate access ramps, and the parking structure does not have to accommodate multi-level movement to the ground.

The new elevator banks, sized to meet medical office building codes, will be located in the northwest notch of the Plaza footprint, linking the new garage and the rejuvenated office floors. This allows the current too-small elevator shafts to be used as vertical chases for mechanical and information technology distribution. With one or two office suites per floor, fewer parking spaces are needed compared to equivalently sized business offices or residential units with the same footprint. To further facilitate parking, the garage will use new information technology similar to systems employed at the TMC. A kind of reserved parking, the technology will match office appointments with available parking spaces on that floor, and a patient will be told when making an appointment where her space will be.

The Cisneros team—primed by a number of recent, challenging renovations of tight, older buildings—has structured the small floor plans to accommodate the realities of modern medical offices. Hallways are minimized with access and emergency egress in mind. They are located on the outer north or west edges of the floors, with views and daylight (a nice hallway environment), and thus allow the waiting rooms, patient rooms, support spaces, and doctors' offices to occupy the full remaining floor space.

The rejuvenated external form of the building will be similar to that of the Plaza's heyday, with the weaknesses of age repaired. The developer plans to use double-pane windows that match the original double-hung profiles. The prominent elevator penthouse on the roof will be replaced. The front plaza and *pôrt*e cochère will be redesigned to serve as the entry for only the ground-floor functions (the upper floors being served directly from the garage). The ground floor is likely to be the site of those medical practices and medical ancillary services, such as pharmacies, that will enjoy the high ceilings and the "front door" presence. While the building may come to house the growing retinue of cosmetic surgery professionals in the city, this rejuvenation of the Plaza is anything but skin deep.

— Rives T. Taylor