

Lost Houston

Images from a century of erasure

BY STEVEN R. STROM

In the late 1930s, reporters from *Architectural Record* toured 16 American communities to ask lay people (i.e., non-architects) which among the recently constructed buildings in their cities were their favorites. In Houston, 24 leading citizens were polled, and their top choices (in descending order of votes received) were the new City Hall, the Oil and Gas Building, the Houston Fire Alarm Building, Mirabeau B. Lamar High School, the River Oaks Community Center, Jefferson Davis Hospital, the Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall, and St. Joseph's Hospital's Maternity and Children's Building.

Though the arbitrary nature of those chosen to participate in the poll might call into question the actual importance of their favored structures, in fact almost all of the named buildings won some architectural recognition at the time of their construction. And they proved to be lasting: in the six decades following the November 1939 publication of the poll's results the buildings became comfortable fixtures in Houston's cityscape. Then, in a tragic twist for the city's architectural history, three of Houston's eight top vote-getters were demolished during 1998-1999: the Sam Houston Coliseum, Jefferson Davis Hospital, and St. Joseph's maternity wing.

Those demolitions were part of Houston's periodic need to reinvent itself at the expense of its past. The redevelopment of downtown has exacted

a heavy historical price: the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts meant the destruction of the Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall, while Enron Field required the demolition of the Metropole Hotel.

This frenzy of demolition is a sad capstone to a century that in Houston has been notable for the number of significant civic, commercial, and residential structures that have fallen to the wrecking ball. Despite the gains made by the local preservation movement, it is the destruction of Houston's architectural heritage, rather than its conservation, that truly marks the past 100 years. The cycle of this destruction can be surprisingly quick. I have friends who, in the late 1970s, lived in areas of the city that consisted entirely of new construction. Yet when these friends returned to visit after an absence of as few as 15 to 20 years, they were able to recognize only scattered landmarks from their past neighborhoods.

Even to those who have never moved, the pace of the city's change can be overwhelming. Of course, feelings of dislocation are anything but new for Houstonians. In 1910, Salvation Army Major John T. Milsaps, who was born in Houston in 1852, returned to the city after an absence of several years. Milsaps visited his childhood haunts and noted in his diary that, "I scarcely recognized the locality, so great has been the change."

As that change has progressed, the communal memory of place so necessary for a cohesive public attachment to urbanitas and a sense of civic identity has been virtually eliminated. My job as architectural archivist for the Houston Public Library's Archives Department has given me a heightened awareness of the depth of the obliteration of Houston's architectural past. Dense, complex layers of the city's infrastructure have vanished with scarcely a trace, or no trace at all, remaining. Even highly knowledgeable researchers who utilize the library's archives are often totally unaware, to use just a few of dozens of examples, that Main Street and the South End were the locales of a fabulous residential area in the early part of the century; that Eugene Heiner and George Dickey created beautiful and impressive Victorian-era buildings, both public and private; or that Joseph Finger's and Alfred Finn's now-isolated Art Moderne buildings once dominated the city skyline. (Unfortunately, the archives can be a double-edged sword. While its architectural drawings have enabled architects to redevelop the Rice Hotel and other historic buildings, they also showed demolition crews just where to place the dynamite when the Sam Houston Coliseum and the Jefferson Davis Hospital were imploded.)

In recent years, the feelings of loss over the destruction of familiar and beloved architectural landmarks world-

wide has been exemplified by a proliferation of books on "lost" cities: *Lost London*, *Lost Boston*, *Lost Chicago*, and, in Houston, forgotten being as good as lost, *Houston's Forgotten Heritage*. At the same time, a good deal of recent historical scholarship has focused on what has been described as, to use Norman M. Klein's term, the "history of forgetting," the attempt of present-day society to recreate the past in order to recapture lost communal feelings. It is in that spirit that the following images of demolished 20th-century buildings of Houston are presented. While it is impossible to actually recreate the past, these photos and drawings impart some idea of the wide variety of notable structures that we once had, but no longer do. Remarkable for their style and range, the buildings seen on the following pages give some idea of the scope of what we have lost during the past 100 years. And, perhaps, they might remind us to be careful of what we could lose in the next 100. ■

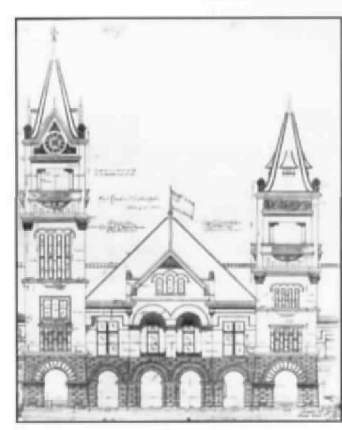
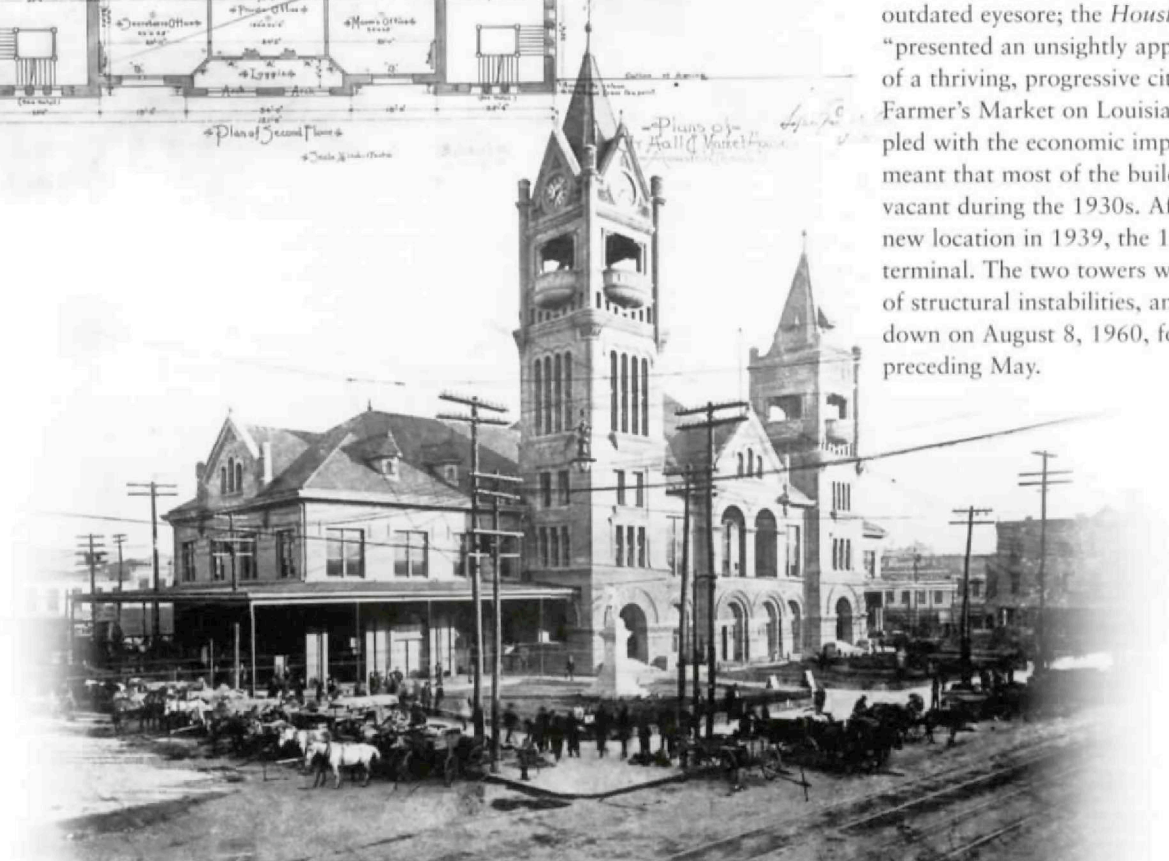
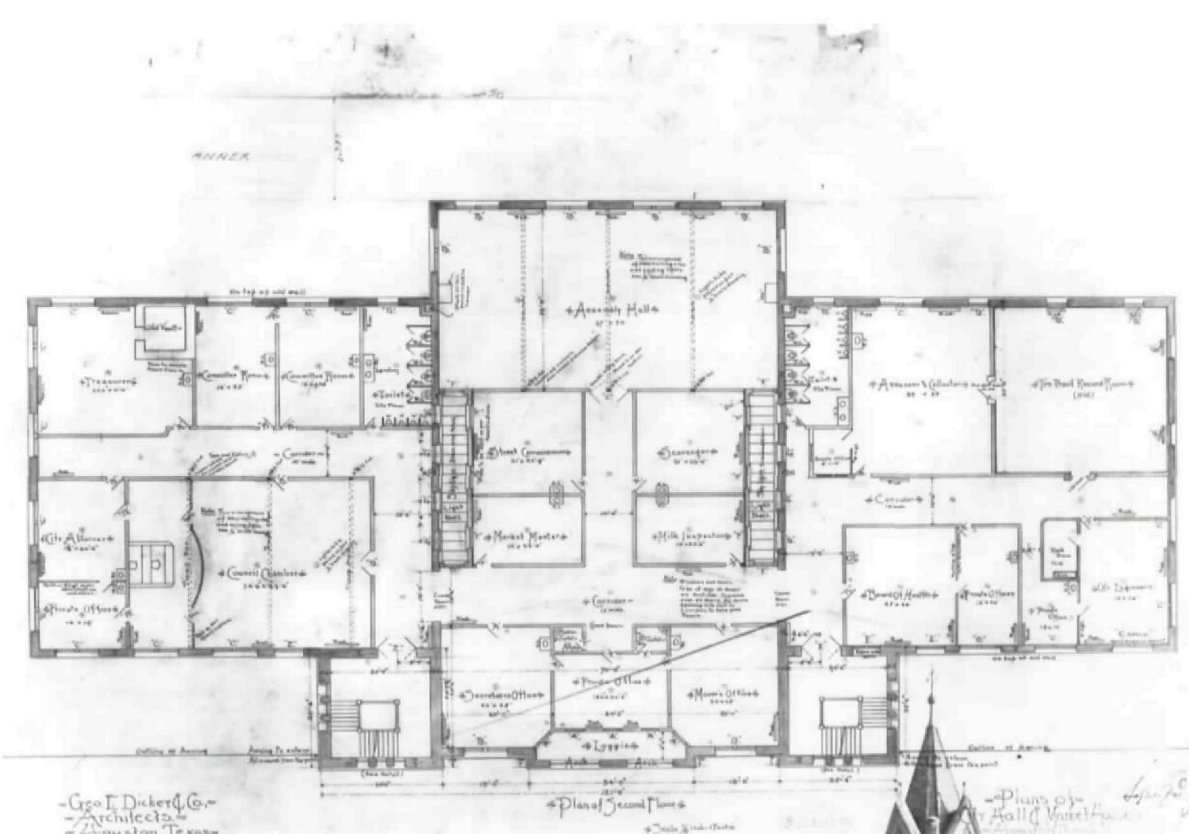
(Except where noted, the photos on the following pages are courtesy of the Houston Public Library, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.)

HOUSTON CITY HALL AND MARKET, 1904.

George E. Dickey, architect.
Market Square. Demolished 1960.

For many years after its completion, George E. Dickey's grand Victorian City Hall and Market dominated Market Square. But the construction of Joseph Finger's current City Hall, completed in 1939, guaranteed the building's demise, even though it lingered on in truncated form for two more decades. Dickey, a prominent turn-of-the-century Houston architect, received the contract to build Houston's fourth city hall in November 1902. The stone and brick edifice's Victorian Romanesque style was stylistically anachronistic, since by the early 1900s most large public buildings on the east and west coasts were being built in the classical style. Dickey was able to keep construction costs below \$100,000, which was the main reason his plan was accepted over a bid by E.S. Glover and Son, which came in at \$250,000. The 1904 City Hall had two towers, one for a clock and one for a fire bell, both of which have been reinstalled in the Friedman Clock Tower (1996) at the corner of Travis and Congress. The vendors of the first-floor market stalls sold a wide variety of agricultural produce, meat, fish, and retail products. During the hot Houston summers, City Hall workers complained of the heavy odors from the stalls, which permeated the building's offices.

Well before the 1939 City Hall was finished, the Dickey structure was viewed by many Houstonians as an unseemly, outdated eyesore; the *Houston Chronicle* editorialized that it "presented an unsightly appearance for the government seat of a thriving, progressive city." The city constructed a new Farmer's Market on Louisiana Street in 1929, and that, coupled with the economic impact of the Great Depression, meant that most of the building's first floor stalls were vacant during the 1930s. After city government moved to its new location in 1939, the 1904 City Hall was used as a bus terminal. The two towers were demolished in 1948 because of structural instabilities, and the rest of the building came down on August 8, 1960, following a devastating fire the preceding May.





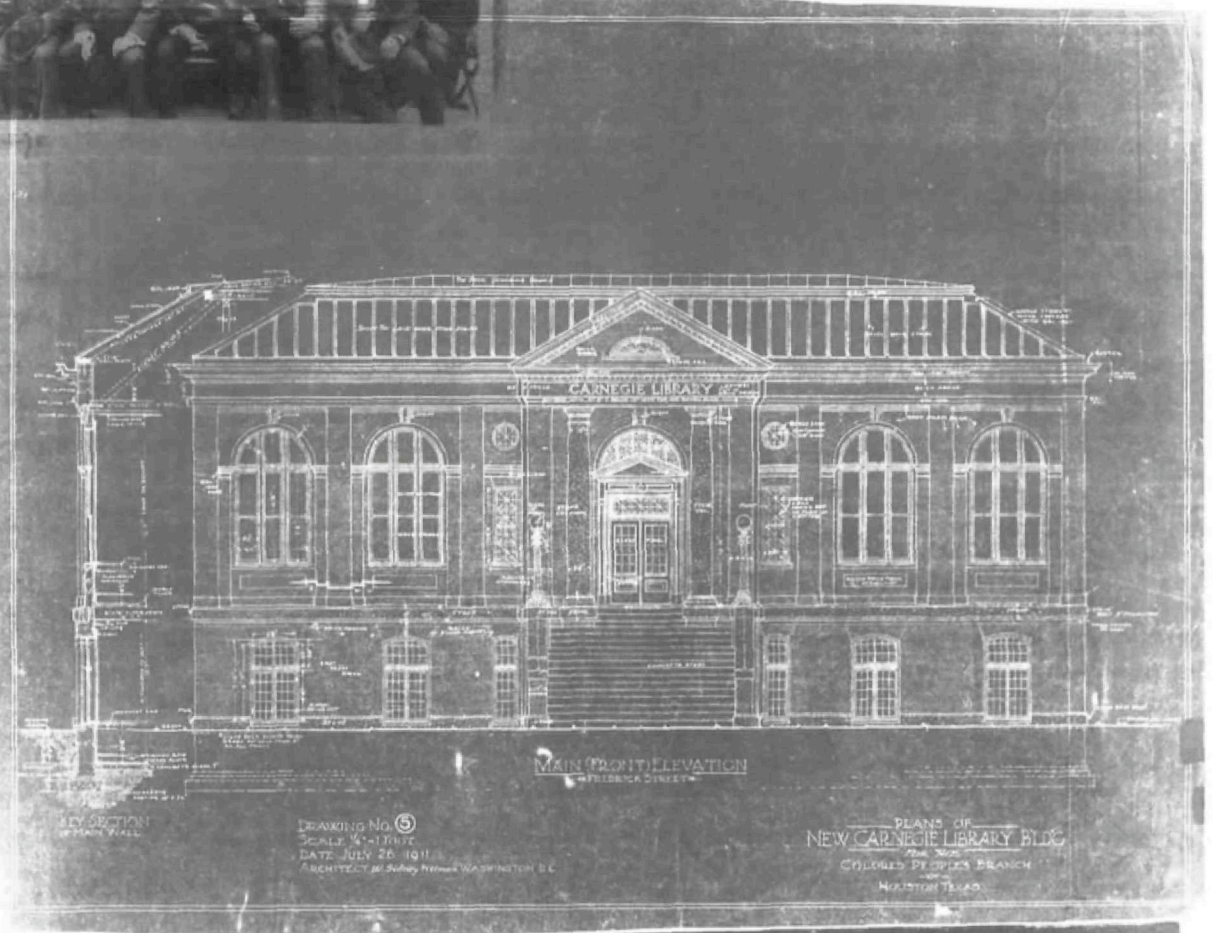
COLORED CARNEGIE BRANCH HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1913.

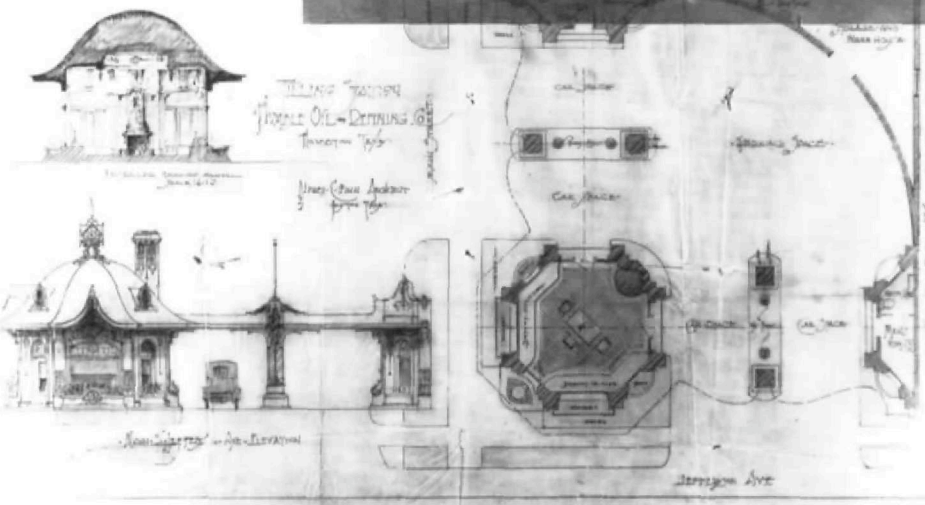
William Sidney Pittman, architect.

1112 Frederick Street. Demolished 1962.

The Colored Carnegie Library was a product of the thriving African-American community that once existed in the Fourth Ward, a community that was disrupted, if not actually destroyed, by freeway construction and a lack of intelligent urban planning. Efforts to establish a library for Houston's African-American community began as early as 1903. The Negro Library and Lyceum Association was organized in 1907, and a circulating library for African Americans was established inside Houston's Negro High School in 1909. A subscription drive was then initiated to build a new "colored" library, and although a moderate amount of money was obtained from local supporters and the City of Houston, Emmett J. Scott, a Houstonian who had once worked as Booker T. Washington's secretary, appealed to Washington to ask philanthropist Andrew Carnegie for assistance. Carnegie donated \$15,000 and promised an additional yearly appropriation of \$1,500; construction of the library began in 1912. The library was formally dedicated on April 11, 1913, and operated independently until 1921, when it became a branch of the Houston Public Library.

William Sidney Pittman was probably given the commission to design the library because he was Booker T. Washington's son-in-law, although Pittman had previously worked on Carnegie-financed projects in Washington, D.C., where his office was located. The classical library's exterior was faced with buff-colored bricks; its roof was green. It contained an auditorium that seated 250 people. In 1962, the Colored Carnegie Library was demolished. What was lost when it became rubble was a focal point for African-American educational, social, and cultural functions, such as the circa-1926 meeting of Houston's African-American teachers and educators seen in the photo above.





HUMBLE OIL AND REFINING COMPANY FILLING STATION #4, 1919.

Alfred C. Finn, architect.

1802 Main at Jefferson. Demolished 1983.

The Humble Oil and Refining Company Filling Station #4 served as something of a prototype for local petroleum companies, which were eager to develop a standardized method for selling name brand gasoline. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, automobile drivers usually purchased gasoline from hardware stores, transferring it to their cars from cans using a funnel, a process that could be inconvenient, messy, and sometimes dangerous. Following the opening of the nation's first gas station in California in 1907, gasoline began to be dispensed from an upright stand. Just three years later, gas was delivered for the first time to cars by pump and hose from an underground tank. Following this development, curbside pumps began to appear, which created considerable traffic problems in large cities. In 1913, to reduce traffic and to promote its own gasoline, Gulf Oil opened the first off-street filling station in Pittsburgh.

While Humble Oil was not especially eager to enter the retail gasoline market, the company had acquired the Dixie refinery, which operated curbside pumps. The construction of Filling Station #4 was intended to spotlight the Humble corporate name and serve as a showcase for the sale of the company's gasoline. Built at a cost of \$50,000, the station contained elements of both Art Nouveau and Beaux Arts styles when it opened on April 1, 1919. Subsequent Humble Oil stations were not constructed in such an elaborate manner. The explosion of automobile ownership after World War I and a ten-fold increase in the number of filling stations during the next decade required the development of a standardized, cheaper, and utilitarian architectural style.





MAJESTIC THEATER, 1923.

*John Eberson, architect.
908 Rusk. Demolished 1971.*

Dallas entrepreneur Karl Hoblitzelle, owner of the Interstate Amusement Company, opened the Majestic Theater on January 29, 1923. The Majestic gained national notice as the first “atmospheric” motion picture theater (with ceilings of stars and clouds) designed by noted Chicago architect John Eberson. It was also the first of the major movie palaces to be constructed during Houston’s theater building boom of the 1920s. Hyperbolic advertisements in the local papers trumpeted that the Majestic’s debut would be a “social event that all Houston will celebrate.” Professor Stockton Axson of the Rice Institute helped inaugurate the theater by delivering an outline of the history of

drama to the opening night crowd. The Majestic was principally Italian Renaissance in style, although it contained Greco-Roman decorative elements as well. On the building’s terra cotta façade were two ceramic-tile inscriptions written with classical lettering.

The fourth level of the exterior façade contained a pink-tinted frieze of frolicking children. The Majestic’s interior was designed to create a garden-like atmosphere, and the theater was replete with hanging vines and trellises and floral motif decorations on the entry ceiling. The auditorium was intended to give theater audiences the impression that they were seated in the outdoor garden of an Italian palazzo. The ceiling had twinkling lights to give the effect of shimmering stars, and drifting clouds were projected to add to the illusion of being outdoors.

The Majestic specialized in elaborate live productions and vaudeville shows, with silent films being almost a sideline entertainment. By 1970, the theater was showing X-rated films; the site was sold in April 1971 for \$1.4 million, and in September it was closed. Shortly thereafter, the Majestic was razed.



METROPOLITAN THEATER, 1926.

*Alfred C. Finn, architect.
1018 Main. Demolished 1973.*

The entrance of the Metropolitan Theater was adjacent to the neighboring Loew’s Theater, both of which shared space in the Metropolitan Block complex constructed by Jesse Jones for Southern Enterprises. Construction costs for the Metropolitan, which opened on Christmas Day of 1926, reached \$2 million. The theater’s outstanding feature was its hydraulic orchestra pit, which lowered and raised the Metropolitan Grand Orchestra. The Metropolitan was also known for its giant Wurlitzer organ, reputedly the largest in the South. The balcony alone seated 700 people, and the theater had a total seating capacity of 3,000.

The Metropolitan was widely hailed in both architectural and theatrical circles, even being chosen as one of country’s outstanding new theaters in the 1927 publication *American Theaters of Today*. Nonetheless, Finn’s interior decoration for the Metropolitan has been described as “Egypt gone amok” and “an Egyptian nightmare.” Although the use of Egyptian Revival architecture peaked in the United States in the mid-19th century, the use of various historically eclectic styles gained widespread acceptance in theater interiors during the 1920s.



HOUSTON TURN-VEREIN CLUBHOUSE, 1928.

Joseph Finger, architect.
5202 Almeda Road. Demolished 1993.

The Houston Turn-Verein is Houston's oldest German-American organization. Founded in 1854, the "Turners," primarily a cultural, social, and fraternal group, occupied three buildings before Joseph Finger was selected to design a clubhouse to mark the Turn-Verein's 75th anniversary. For their fourth move, the Turners sought a suburban location, one removed from their previous downtown sites, and bought a parcel of land on Almeda Road adjacent to newer South End subdivisions.

The Austrian-born Finger, who was largely responsible for introducing the Art Moderne style to Houston, utilized elements of Viennese Secessionism and Art Nouveau in his zigzag Moderne design for the Turn-Verein Clubhouse. The two-story building was constructed of brick, stucco, reinforced concrete, and hollow tile at a cost of nearly \$200,000. The first floor contained a reception hall, the principal men's clubroom, and a women's meeting hall. A rear wing contained a bowling alley, bowling being one of the group's favorite recreational sports. The second floor held a ballroom and stage for the club's social functions. A promenade also extended above the bowling lanes.

Perhaps the building's greatest appeal was the delightful ornamentation that Finger used to decorate the exterior facade. Over the entrance, an eagle sat above the inscription "Turn-Verein," which was flanked by the club's founding date and the date of the building's completion. Art Nouveau stylized floral reliefs decorated the plaques that adorned a one-story terrace extending along the front exterior. On the second floor, plaques displayed a stylized bowler and bowling pins. Even the drainpipes were embossed with an "HT" monogram.

In 1969 the Turn-Verein moved to a new location near Sharpstown, abandoning their old clubhouse. Following years of neglect, the building was placed on the city's "dangerous buildings" list in 1991; it was demolished two years later. A Walgreen's drugstore now occupies the site.



GRAND CENTRAL RAILROAD STATION, 1934.

Wyatt C. Hedrick, architect.
329 Franklin. Demolished 1960.

The Southern Pacific's Grand Central Railroad Station and its adjoining rail facilities were designed by Wyatt C. Hedrick and built at a cost of more than \$4 million. It subsequently served as a model for railway stations built in other U.S. cities during the

1930s. The 392-foot-long station was four stories high and faced a parking "plaza." The exterior of Grand Central Station was built of Texas Cordova Limestone; its base was Texas pink granite. The main passenger waiting room, which seated 176 people, had a two-story ceiling and was flanked on either side by murals painted by John McQuarrie. One of the murals can be seen in the photo inset above; it depicts Stephen F. Austin, Baron de Bastrop, and other settlers beginning the Anglo-American colonization of Texas in 1823. The second mural portrayed Sam Houston entering Houston on horseback in 1837.

The station, which with its adjacent railyards occupied an area extending two blocks from Washington north to Girard Street and for six blocks parallel to Washington Avenue, replaced the Central Depot of the Houston and Texas Central Railroad. At its height, Grand Central saw about 30 trains arrive and depart daily. The station was demolished in 1960 to provide a site for the downtown post office. Its destruction symbolized the passing of the passenger train era.

OIL AND GAS BUILDING, 1939.*Kenneth Franzheim, architect.**Louisiana at Lamar. Demolished 1971.*

The design of the Oil and Gas Building of the Continental Oil Company was praised in the March 1940 issue of *Architectural Record* as being successful in an effort "to create office quarters attractive enough to draw desirable tenants from the center of the city." The walls of the six-story building were faced with light brick, with granite trim. The general color scheme was comprised of tan and black. On the ground floor was a garage, a filling station at the rear that sold the company's Conoco gasoline, and retail shops. The top floor consisted of a penthouse, home to the Ramada Club, an exclusive private venue that restricted its membership to 75 oil company executives. For the convenience of the building's oil company tenants, who generated a large number of drawings in their real estate and engineering departments, the ground floor had a blueprint copying service. The structure was razed in May 1971.

Architect Franzheim made an enormous mark on Houston architecture from the 1930s through the 1950s. In addition to his 1930s work on the Oil and Gas Building, the Humble Building, and Lamar High School, Franzheim designed the downtown YMCA, Foley's downtown, the Prudential Building, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Blaffer Wing, and the Bank of the Southwest.



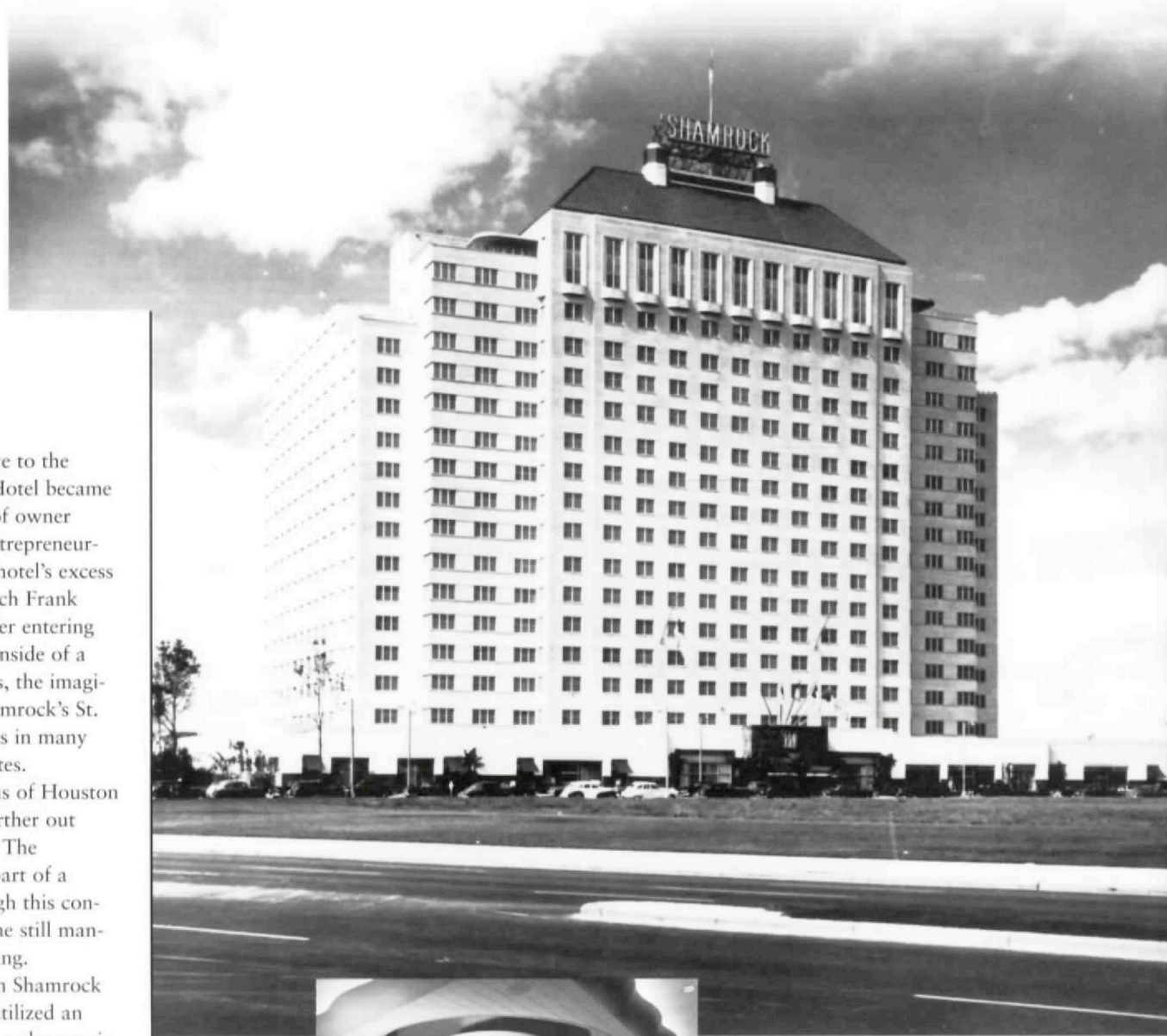
SHAMROCK HOTEL, 1949.*Wyatt C. Hedrick, architect.**6900 S. Main. Demolished 1987.*

With a star-studded opening that was broadcast live to the nation on the ABC radio network, the Shamrock Hotel became firmly fixed in the American mind as an example of owner Glenn H. McCarthy's can-do brand of Houston entrepreneurship. The fame came largely from the spirit of the hotel's excess and grandiosity rather than its architecture, of which Frank Lloyd Wright was reported to have commented after entering the lobby, "I've always wanted to know what the inside of a jukebox looks like, and now I know." Nevertheless, the imagination of the entire country was riveted by the Shamrock's St. Patrick's Day debut on March 17, 1949, which was in many ways the city of Houston's debut to the United States.

McCarthy had a vision of relocating the nucleus of Houston from its traditional downtown center to a point farther out along South Main — a daring concept at the time. The Shamrock was originally envisioned as being one part of a Rockefeller Center-like suburban complex. Although this concept was eventually abandoned, the Shamrock alone still managed to generate interest for decades after its opening.

Ultimately, the cost of the 18-story, 1,001-room Shamrock reached \$21 million. Architect Wyatt C. Hedrick utilized an uninspiring version of stripped classicism with stepped pyramidal massing for the hotel's exterior, but inside the building Irish-American McCarthy's tastes ran rampant. Practically every fixture in the hotel, including the ashtrays and wastebaskets, were decorated with shamrocks, while dinner plates were emblazoned with a green "S." In all, 63 shades of green were used in the Shamrock's interiors, which were largely designed by Los Angeles interior decorator Robert Harrell. A sculptural panel of the Three Graces above the entrance was done by Edward Z. Galea, and Brochsteins Inc. produced the custom millwork.

After the publicity of the hotel's opening, economic reality began to face McCarthy. A downturn in oil prices forced him to sell the Shamrock to the Hilton Hotels Corporation in 1955. In 1986, the Shamrock was purchased by the Texas Medical Center, and despite spirited, vocal, and well-attended protests, the hotel was torn down in 1987.





FIRST CITY NATIONAL BANK BANKING PAVILION, 1961.

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects.

1001 Main. Demolished 1998.

The preservation of recent modern landmarks has often been a hard-sell for preservationists. Baby boomers frequently have a difficult time comprehending the fact that the homes and buildings they grew up with are now approaching the 50-year minimum age necessary for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. As a result, there was an insufficient public outcry when First City's modernist banking pavilion was threatened with destruction in the late 1990s. First City National's free-standing banking pavilion, with its glass-walled, naturally lighted, open interior, clearly set the bank building apart from its competitors. The free-spanned lobby, with its high-quality finishings by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, became a fixture in the daily routine of many Houstonians who worked and banked downtown. The widespread acceptance of First City's banking pavilion helped facilitate the spread of modernism throughout the city. In 1998, the banking pavilion was demolished to make way for a parking garage. ■