

HOUSTON STREET BACKGROUND
prepared in 2006 by Suzan O'Conner for
American Planning Association National Conference
Houston Street Walking Tour

HISTORY

- In the 19th century Houston Street was a back street
- Commerce Street was the commercial spine, followed by Market Street
- Commerce Street was fully built out, narrow (before the widening) and congested
- Maverick family owned great deal of land on Houston Street
- Maverick family promoted development of the street
- From about 1915 on, Houston Street attracted most retail development; Commerce Street remained the financial center

PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT

- Throughout the 19th century, development on Houston Street was irregular and spotty, including major buildings like
 - Maverick Bank (on Woolworth site)
 - Maverick Hotel (where Bromley Building is now)
 - French Building (where the Gunter Hotel is now and once the US Army headquarters)
- Intermingled with these were one or two-story commercial and industrial buildings
- Along with other major streets, Houston was widened before 1915. The widening was to the south, requiring some demolition of buildings and building facades
- From the mid 1920s, Houston was THE retail street in San Antonio
- By the late 1930s, all of the major retail establishments were in place
- In the 1940s and 1950s, large and gaudy retail signs proliferated (the theatres had always had big animated signs)
- San Antonio was about 10 years behind the rest of the country in the decline of downtown retail
- By the late 1960s, some of the larger retail establishments were moving out. The pattern accelerated throughout the 1970s
- The last retail bastion, Frost Brothers, closed the downtown store in 1985. Thereafter, most of the storefronts were shuttered
- Gunter Hotel remained and was renovated in 1978
- The Texas Theatre went dark about 1970 and the Empire Theatre in 1972. The Majestic continued to show second run films until 1980
- Albert Maverick Building restored in 1982
- The South Texas building was renovated in 1983 and the Mid-City garage built at the same time, with private funds
- 110 Broadway renovated in 1985
- Token restoration of the Majestic Theatre was done in 1980 to allow it to be used for touring Broadway shows
- Majestic Theatre restored in 1989
- Tri-Party improvements were done between 1989 and 1991.
- Apartments in the Majestic and Brady buildings opened in 1992
- Apartments in the Maverick Building opened in 1994
- Children's Museum opened about 1995
- Empire Theatre reopened in 1998
- Federal Realty Investment Trust began acquiring buildings in 1999
 - Kress Building
 - Vacant site east of Kress building
 - Vogue Building
 - Walgreen and Stuart Buildings
 - Schaum Building
 - Joseph's Building (219 East Houston)
 - Building where courtyard is now
 - Frost Brothers Building
 - Giles building
 - Buildings where Valencia Hotel is
- Houston Streetscape improvements completed in 2002
- Court buildings renovated in 2002; courtyard opens
- Palm Restaurant opens in 2002

- Giles building restored in 2003
- Valencia Hotel opens in 2003

SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES

- In the mid-1950s, a proposal was floated to close the street and make it into a pedestrian mall. There was no support for this
- Tri-Party improvements were made between 1989 and 1991
- Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT) began acquiring properties in 1999
- FRIT property ownership leveraged the Houston Streetscape improvements, completed in 2002

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MEDICAL ARTS BUILDING, 1926

705 East Houston

Architect: Ralph Cameron

Now the Emily Morgan Hotel, this building was one of the two principal medical office buildings downtown (the Nix is the other). It also had two or three floors of hospital at the top, likely so located to catch the breeze. It has a stone ground floor and the upper floors are of brick with a generous use of terra cotta trim, now unfortunately painted. This building vertically defined the east end of the Houston Street retail district. The marquee of the Alameda Theatre defined the west end.

U.S. COURTHOUSE & POST OFFICE, 1937

Alamo Plaza

Architects: Ralph Cameron with Paul Cret

This building replaces a Romanesque 1887 building on the same site. The building burned in the early 1930s. The style suggests that Cret had more to do with the facades than Ralph Cameron. The southern half of the building is within the limits of the original Alamo compound.

WOOLWORTH BUILDING, ca. 1925

Alamo at Houston

Architect: Unknown

This building is on the site of the Maverick Bank, a six-story trim with lacy cast iron porches (a la New Orleans) on both facades at all floors.

GIBBS BUILDING, 1909

105 North Alamo (at Houston)

Architect: Sanguinet & Staats, Fort Worth

This sits on the site of Sam Maverick's (the first Maverick) home. It was built as an office building and the interior is meticulously maintained. The ground floor piers are cast iron and the façade is of brick with terra cotta trim and cornice. It is slated to be converted as a budget hotel.

Note: As we move west, we'll cross the gray paving line which indicates the original wall of the Alamo compound.

MAVERICK WALK, ca. 1977

South side of Houston between Alamo and Losoya

This pedestrian walkway was built with the Hyatt Hotel and its garage. The intent was to provide retail frontage at the east side of the buildings facing Alamo Plaza. This hasn't really worked out.

ALBERT MAVERICK BUILDING, 1876

515 East Houston Street

Architect: Alfred Giles

This is likely the oldest existing building on Houston Street. It was meticulously restored by Richard Mycue in the 1982 and this was the first significant historical restoration in the redevelopment of the street.

MOORE BUILDING & NEW MOORE BUILDING, 1904 and on

110 Broadway (at Houston)

Architect: Atlee Ayres

Ayres had his office in this building. The sixth floor was added in 1909 and the New Moore Building, identifiable as the eastmost section, was constructed in 1912. Once completely painted gray, it was renovated for office use in the mid-1980s by the Urban Design Group. An atrium was constructed and the brick-and-terra cotta facades restored.

NEISNERS, 1938

405 East Houston

Architect: Unknown

This previous retail store is being converted as residential condominiums with parking at the basement level.

BROMLEY BUILDING, 1926

401 East Houston

Architect: Unknown

Originally Washer Brothers store, then J.C. Penney Company, the building was renovated for office use in the late 1990s. The original facades had remained pretty much intact. The top floor is a later addition – adding floors to buildings is a San Antonio tradition. It happened here, at the Vogue, the Gunter, the Petroleum Commerce Building, the old Alamo Bank (Presa & Commerce) and 110 Broadway.

MAVERICK BUILDING, 1922

606 Losoya (at Houston)

Architect: Lou Harrington

This building was designed as a 16-story building, but the upper floors were never built. The original design had a proper “top” with cornice. Still, the brick façade is pretty austere. The trim at the ground floor is cast stone. The upper floors were converted to apartments in 1998.

KRESS BUILDING, 1938

311 East Houston

Architect: Edward Sibbert

This building, originally part of the chain of dime stores noted for their Art Moderne architecture, belongs to Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT). Various adaptive use schemes have been tried, without success so far, likely because of the low floor-to-floor height and the large floor plates with minimal opportunity for windows. The polychrome terra cotta façade is failing badly (a few pieces had fallen), hence the protective netting.

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM, ca. 1940

305 East Houston

Architect: Unknown

This is a relatively late retail building. It hung on as a discount store until the Children's Museum acquired it. The Museum opened in about 1995.

VOGUE BUILDING, ca. 1895

600 Navarro (at Houston)

Architect: Unknown

This was built as a furniture store, later converted to a ready-to-wear store, and now offices. It's the tallest wood-framed building in San Antonio (we think) and the top floor was added in the 1940s. The entire building, windows and all, had been painted gray. In order to install a white marble wainscot in the 1940s, the original terra cotta kick plate was knocked off with hammers. It has been restored in cast stone.

BUCKHORN MUSEUM

This was not one of the notable historic buildings. The Buckhorn Bar was originally located downtown on Flores Street and later moved, with its Texana collection, to the Lone Star Brewery, south of downtown. It returned downtown in 1999 with some of the original fixtures. The animal heads are fiberglass and would not have been allowed if the building were designated historic.

Note: At this point it would be useful to point out the palm enclave and stone paving that marks the northern terminus of a new pedestrian linkage down Presa Street between Houston Street and the Riverwalk. This linkage was designed by Mike Beaty and instigated by the FRIT acquisition of a number of buildings on Houston Street. The design intent was to draw pedestrian traffic up from the overcrowded Riverwalk to a resurgent Houston Street. FRIT owns the vacant lot east of the Kress Building and will develop it, likely with a residential component, at some appropriate time.

SOUTH TEXAS BUILDING, 1919

603 Navarro (at Houston)

Architect: Sanguinet & Staats, Fort Worth

This was built as the Central Trust Company. The ground floor is granite, with some terra cotta. The ground floor design is not original, but compatible with the original architecture. All trim above is terra cotta. It was renovated in the early 1980s for office use and linked, by tunnel, to the Mid-City garage. It is presently being converted to residential condominiums.

SCHAUM BUILDING, 1938

231 East Houston

Architect: Unknown

This building originally housed a women's clothing store on the second floor and this store space spanned through this and the two buildings to the west. The ground floor was for other retail uses. The building belongs to FRIT. The Palm Restaurant opened in 2002 and a new bar is under construction in the remainder of the ground floor. The second floor is presently unoccupied.

JOSEPH'S BUILDING, 1916 and 1926

221 East Houston

Architect: Alfred Giles

The first two floors are the Giles design. The third floor is not. The storefronts have been returned to an approximation of the original design. It originally contained a storefront movie theatre and stores. It is known as the Joseph's Building because Joseph's Men's Store occupied the ground floor for many years. They were the last remaining "original" retailer on the street, leaving in 2000.

COURT BUILDING, 2002

219 East Houston

A three-story retail building, built in stages between 1934 and 1938, originally occupied this site. It had minimal structure and used the two adjoining buildings for structural support. It was demolished in order to allow natural light into the flanking buildings. A new in-fill building, linked to the adjoining buildings, occupies the north end of the site.

FROST BROS. BUILDING, 1930

217 East Houston Street

Architect: Ralph Cameron (for façade)

Frost Brothers was the local version of Neiman-Marcus and originally occupied a connecting building that fronts on Travis Street as well. The building utilizes some of the load-bearing walls of the Princess Theatre, originally built in 1912, and possibly utilizing limestone walls from an even earlier building. All four floors have been renovated for office use.

GUNTER HOTEL, 1909, 1927

205 East Houston Street

Architect: Mauran, Russell & Crowell, St. Louis

The top two floors were added in 1927. It has remained continuously open since it was built, though the hotel operators have changed a number of times. Most façade elements are original. The glassed-in terrace over the sidewalk was originally a second-floor open dining balcony.

MID-CITY GARAGE, ca. 1983

Houston & Navarro

Architect: Ford, Powell & Carson

The garage was privately funded and built in conjunction with the renovation of the South Texas Building, to which it is linked by a tunnel. In the late 1980s it passed into the ownership of a bank holding company, then to the City. The fact that it overhangs the sidewalk, beyond the traditional building line, is most unfortunate. A recent façade renovation has mitigated the overhang somewhat by masking it with faux piers to make it appear more like an arcade, as at the Majestic or Gunter.

MAJESTIC THEATRE & BUILDING, 1929

222 East Houston

Architect: John Ebersson, Chicago

The office building is really a marquee for the outrageously gaudy theatre inside. As the design progressed the office tower grew from 8 floors to 15. It is topped by a two-story penthouse originally occupied by the spinster sisters of the building owner, Interstate Amusement. The office building was converted to apartments in 1993. The theatre was remuddled in 1980 and restored in 1989, with subsequent work. The theatre is home to the San Antonio Symphony, touring Broadway shows and single-performer shows. The theatre went dark briefly in the depth of the Depression but has remained in continuous use otherwise.

LITTLE BRADY BUILDING, ca. 1890

208 East Houston

Architect: Unknown

The exact date of construction is not known. However, when the Majestic was complete, the Little Brady had a late 19th century façade which was about 10 feet further out into the sidewalk than the present façade. It was owned by the Brady family for some time and given a new façade to match that of the newer Brady Building next door. It presently houses the offices of the operating company for the Majestic and Empire Theatres.

BRADY BUILDING & EMPIRE THEATRE, 1914

202 East Houston

Architect: Mauran, Russell & Crowell, St. Louis

This was built as an office building, possibly for medical offices. The office building was converted to apartments in 1993. The Empire Theatre, which went dark in 1972 and was restored in 1998, is incorporated into the structure with the taller building spanning over it. It is the third performing arts venue to occupy this site. A design scheme by a prominent local architectural firm, dating from 1964, proposed renovating the office building but converting the Empire Theatre volume to a parking structure.

GILES BUILDING, 1888

160 East Houston Street

Architect: Alfred Giles

This was, prior to its restoration, the most denatured building on the street. In order to install a new “modern” façade, the bay windows were removed and the brick ornament was all hammered away and the façade purposely dinged with hammer to provide a better bond for stucco. It is owned by FRIT and the land is leased to the owners of the Valencia Hotel, into which it is incorporated. One of the columns for the high-rise hotel comes down through the center of the building. In order to restore the brick façade, every brick was turned to expose the undamaged face to the restored façade.

VALENCIA HOTEL, 2003

150 East Houston Street

Architect: 3D/I and Bounds & Gillespie

The hotel occupies land owned by FRIT and replaces a series of undistinguished one and two-story vacant buildings. At the River front, the patio incorporates a 1918 feature known locally as the “Chinese balcony”. Once cantilevered from a building over the Riverwalk, it has been converted to a free-standing pavilion, using all of the original historic elements.

SBC BUILDING, 1984

175 East Houston Street

Architect: Ford, Powell & Carson and Fisher & Spillman

This is the site of one of San Antonio’s better known preservation struggles. A Dallas bank, now long gone, acquired the entire block for a three-building high-rise complex. The Hertzberg Building, an architectural balance to the Gunter, across the street, was demolished, as was a good bank building and the Texas Theatre. The Conservation Society weighed in, retaining Michael Graves to design a scheme with the same square footage of office space while retaining the Texas Theatre. The bank won.

TEXAS THEATRE FAÇADE, 1926

175 East Houston Street

Architect: Boller Brothers

The Texas Theatre, while good, was not as distinguished as its façade. Its frontage on the Riverwalk was frankly industrial (it was built too early to recognize the value of a River exposure). The façade is, above the wainscot, entirely of polychrome terra cotta. Boller Brothers were one of a handful of architects who excelled in the design of movie palaces (among others were Rapp & Rapp, Eberson, C. Howard Crane, Thomas W. Lamb and C. Albert Landsburgh).

HERTZBERG CLOCK, 1878 (relocated)

Houston & St. Mary’s

The clock was the identifier for the Hertzberg Jewelry Company, originally located on Commerce Street. The clock moved to the new location in the mid-1920s. It was retained in its new location when the SBC Building was built.

BOOK BUILDING, 1906

1xx East Houston Street

Architect: Dwight Book

Dwight Book was a military civil engineer. Little else is known about the original design or use of the building. It’s a local favorite because of the large arched windows at the second floor.

FURTHER WEST

West of the limits of our tour are a few notable buildings.

The building just west of the Book Building is also by Alfred Giles.

In the next block west is the Rand Building, originally the Wolff & Marx Department Store. This was at the west end of the original “retail” district.

Further west is the Alameda Theatre, built in 1949 and designed by N. Strauss Nayfach. It has about 2500 seats and was built specifically for Spanish language films and live performances. Fund-raising is underway for its renovation, which will include a new stagehouse suited for large-scale productions. The marquee of the Alameda is the west “bookend” of Houston Street, balancing out the Medical Arts Building tower at the east end.

TRI-PARTY IMPROVEMENTS

The Tri-Party improvements, done between 1989 and 1991, are largely transit-oriented and were largely funded by Federal transit funds. The City funded part of the improvements, but the City’s portion was largely in utility improvements – made while the streets were torn up.

The major bus streets became Commerce, Market, Navarro and St. Mary’s with VIA trolley routes on Alamo and Houston Streets. With minor exceptions, like Presa, streets that weren’t transit routes (bus or trolley) weren’t improved – like Main and Soledad.

Downtown was a war zone. Streets were torn up and rebuilt one-half at a time and traffic was gridlocked. Sidewalks and curbs were torn up and a number of retailers, who had managed to hang on, failed during the construction. Most streets were narrowed by at least one lane and the sidewalks widened. Houston Street, intended principally for trolley traffic, was purposely made two lanes.

The new streets are constructed of a prepared base with 12 inches of asphalt. The concrete pavers are set in sand over the asphalt. The ragged configuration of the brick sidewalk edge (closer to the buildings) was occasioned by the number of basements that protruded beyond the property line. Tri-Party decided it didn’t want to mess with the basements.

There were four distinct projects and four design teams. Some amenities are specific to a certain area, e.g. the bollards, planters and lights on Alamo Street. Some elements like the tree grates were custom designed. A lot of trees were planted on Houston Street, but the pattern was not uniform. In the 500 block there were no trees, just some tall shrubs.

Two levels of lighting were installed on all streets. At the intersections, tall hockey puck fixtures are mounted on all four corners. Elsewhere, traditional ornamental pedestrian-scale fixtures are evenly spaced along the sidewalks.

The name bricks in the sidewalk were sponsored by the Downtown Alliance, while the Tri-Party work was being done. Each cost the donor \$25.

STREETSCAPE IMPROVEMENTS

The most notable improvement is the planting of additional trees, using the Tri-Party design standards. The intent was to make the planting pattern as uniform as possible (as uniform as underground utilities allowed). All of the trees in the 500 block are new.

At the intersection of Houston and Presa/Jefferson, Houston Street was slightly realigned and the paving changed. The street paving is uniform but the sidewalk is paved in Luders limestone. The “grove” of palm trees is intended as a focal point, the northern termination of a new pedestrian linkage between Houston Street and the Riverwalk. FRIT was responsible for getting this done, as well, though the City funded it. The intent was to draw pedestrian traffic up from the overcrowded Riverwalk to a redeveloped Houston Street. The pedestrian linkage was designed by Mike Beaty.