

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Star Engraving Company Building  
**OWNER:** City of Houston - Convention and Entertainment  
Facilities Department  
**APPLICANT:** Same  
**LOCATION:** 3201 Allen Parkway  
**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** N/A

**AGENDA ITEM:** IV  
**HPO FILE NO:** 10PL82  
**DATE ACCEPTED:** Jan-20-10  
**HAHC HEARING:** Feb-11-10  
**PC HEARING:** Feb-18-10

### SITE INFORMATION

Tract 43, Abstract 1, J Austin Survey, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story office building and attached one-story former manufacturing building.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Star Engraving Company Building at 3201 Allen Parkway was designed in 1930 by architect R.B. Steele in the Spanish Mediterranean-style and built on a small bluff overlooking Buffalo Bayou. For nearly half a century, the Star Engraving Company manufactured and sold high school class rings and other commencement-related products, such as engraved diplomas and graduation announcements. Incorporated in Houston in 1911, the company's trade territory grew to encompass 16 Southern states. The Star Engraving Company is the most intact commercial building designed by architect Steele, who practiced in Houston from 1892 until his death in 1936. Steele's extant body of work includes the Henke Building on Market Square, Baptist Temple in the Heights, and Sidney Lanier Middle School. Steele also designed the first suburban-style auto-oriented grocery store in Houston in 1923 for the Henke-Pillot grocery chain on Travis Street.

Constructed in 1925-26, Allen Parkway linked Houston's downtown with the new garden suburb of River Oaks. Soon after, three printing plants, all in the Spanish-Mediterranean style, sprung up in a cluster at a bend on the scenic bayou parkway just west of Waugh Drive: Gulf Publishing Company and Rein Company in 1927 and 1928, and Star Engraving Company in 1930. The Star Engraving Company occupied the building on Allen Parkway until 1965. After sitting vacant for awhile, the building was rehabilitated in the mid-1980s to serve as a cultural center and office building. In 1992, the City of Houston purchased the building to prevent its demolition and ensure its continued use as a cultural arts center. Since this time, the Star Engraving Company Building has housed the offices of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston (now the Houston Arts Alliance) and other non-profit arts groups and most recently, Stages Repertory Theater.

The building's rehabilitation and conversion to a cultural center in 1985 is an excellent example of adaptive use and has enhanced the Star Engraving Company Building's public identity. The Star Engraving Company Building was individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1995, and meets Criteria 1, 4, 5, 6 for Landmark and Protected Landmark designation.

## **HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The Spanish Mediterranean-style Star Engraving Company Building was built in 1930 and is located on a small bluff overlooking Allen Parkway and Buffalo Bayou. The site is bound on the east by Rosine Street, a narrow cross street, and on the south by D'Amico Street. Although the north facade, facing Allen Parkway, is the formal front of the Star Engraving Company Building, the most frequently used entrances to the building open onto Rosine Street. The building is adjacent to two other Spanish Mediterranean-style printing plants built at a bend on the scenic bayou parkway in the late 1920s.

In 1930, Houston was ranked, for the first time in its 94-year history, as the largest city in Texas. The city had experienced a sustained period of economic expansion that began during World War I, based on its status as a petroleum processing and exporting center. A key factor in this expansion was the demand for petroleum products resulting from an extraordinary surge in automobile production in the U.S. during the 1920s. Houston was a prime example of this automobile phenomenon; while the city's population nearly doubled between 1920 and 1930 (from 155,000 to 292,000), car ownership in Harris County increased almost four and one-half times, from 22,032 registrations in 1920 to 97,902 in 1930. Reliance on the automobile prompted the evolution of a "new urban form" in Houston's development patterns after 1920. An emphasis on improvement of the street network was occasioned by intense, low density development all around Houston's suburban perimeter. Concerns about traffic management were addressed by the landscape architects Hare & Hare, Houston's city planning consultants during the 1920s, who proposed integrating traffic engineering with urban design and civic landscape. The chief example of their large-scale civic design work is the 2 1/4-mile park and parkway corridor built along Buffalo Bayou in 1925-26. Buffalo Drive, now known as Allen Parkway, linked the Civic Center (City Hall and Central Library) in downtown Houston, also planned by Hare & Hare, to Houston's new garden suburb, River Oaks, in whose early planning Hare & Hare were also involved.

The pervasiveness of affordable automobile transportation in the 1920s made it feasible to decentralize the dense urban cores of American cities. As Houston acquired an impressive cluster of skyscraper office and hotel buildings, large new specialty stores, and opulent movie theaters downtown in the 1920s, light manufacturing companies found it feasible to leave downtown as their space requirements grew. Such businesses could acquire much larger sites at less expense outside of downtown. Problems of access and parking for customers, employees, shipping, and deliveries disappeared, and space was available for rationally planned, illuminated, and ventilated buildings. Businesses with a regional trade felt less tied to downtown especially when they could locate along major thoroughfares. The Star Engraving Company Building embodies these general trends of the 1920s.

### *Star Engraving Company*

For nearly half a century, the Star Engraving Company manufactured and sold high school class rings and other commencement-related products. The Star Engraving Company was incorporated in 1911 by several prominent Houston businessmen. Originally located on the upper floor of a building near Courthouse Square in downtown Houston, it provided design, illustration, and engraving services to a local clientele. In 1919 and again in 1922, the company moved to different

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downtown lease spaces. In 1922, the company was acquired by Roy J. Beard, sales manager of the Southwestern Engraving Company of Fort Worth. Beard developed a specialty market for the Star Engraving Company. During the 1920s, the combination of urbanization, expansion of middle class affluence, increased secondary school attendance, and institutionalization of high school graduation rituals produced a market that Roy Beard identified and exploited.

At the time the construction of the Star Engraving Company Building was announced in the Houston Post-Dispatch in April 1930, the company's business was described as concentrated in steel and copper plate engraving and jewelry manufacturing. The Star Engraving Company produced engraved diplomas, commencement announcements, engraved certificates, etchings, greeting cards, and commercial engravings, as well as high school class rings, pins, badges, and belt buckles. Sales were as important a company function as manufacturing. The construction announcement article indicated that 100 to 150 employees would work in the factory processing orders secured by a force of 45 salesmen, whose trade territory encompassed 16 Southern states. By 1935, the Great Depression notwithstanding, the Star Engraving Company advertised itself in Houston business publications as the "South's Largest Manufacturer of Class Jewelry, Diplomas, Invitations".

Other successful Houston printing companies began to emulate the successful business practice of Star Engraving. The Gulf Publishing Company produced publications and printed material for the oil industry. The Rein Company specialized in commercial advertising, including producing the superlative graphics for the River Oaks Corporation's advertising. Clarke & Courts, which moved to Houston in 1936 from Galveston, specialized in government documents and bank checks, as well as the sale of office equipment and furniture.

The Star Engraving Company purchased the approximately one-acre tract on Allen Parkway in April 1929 for \$14,616. Construction of the building was first announced in April 1929. It was announced again, one year later, in April 1930. A construction contract for \$96,815 was awarded to Joseph B. Townsend in April 1930. A photograph of the new building was published in the Houston Post-Dispatch in September 1930. The Star Engraving Company occupied the building until 1965, when its offices were moved to the Bayou Building next door. The Star Engraving Company was last listed on Allen Parkway in the 1972 Houston City Directory and ceased to be listed altogether after 1981. Roy J. Beard was president of the company until the early 1960s, when he became its chairman. He was last listed in the 1967 Houston City Directory.

In the early 1980s, the vacant building was acquired by the Mainland Building and Development Group. In 1975, the parent organization of this corporation, Mainland Savings Association, also bought and remodeled the Rein Company Building as its headquarters. Mainland Building and Development Group also bought the Gulf Publishing Company properties and the Bayou Building. The group's chairman, Raymond M. Hill, hoped to use the historic properties as the nucleus for a high density, mixed-use urban development. Under his direction, the Star Engraving Company Building was rehabilitated in 1984-85 by W. O. Neuhaus Associates to serve as a cultural center and professional office building. Mainland Savings Association was declared insolvent in April 1986, however, and in 1987, the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation sold the Star Engraving Company Building to a group of investors. These investors determined to sell the property in 1991 to the developer Jenard M. Gross, who planned to demolish most, if not all, of the

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Star Engraving Company Building and build apartments on the site. The Board of Directors of Stages Repertory Theater, led by its president Emilie S. Kilgore, persuaded Mayor Robert H. Lanier of the extraordinary public value of this property as a cultural center. Under the direction of Mayor Lanier, the City of Houston purchased the building in 1992 in order to prevent its demolition and ensure its continued use as a cultural arts center. That year, Stages commissioned the architects Cisneros Partners, with Robert Robinowitz, to prepare plans for remodeling the interior and repairing the exterior of the building. Since the completion of the remodeling and rehabilitation, the Star Engraving Company Building has housed the offices of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston (now the Houston Arts Alliance) and other non-profit arts groups and most currently, Stages Repertory Theater.

The Star Engraving Company Building was found eligible for listing in the National Register in 1995 by virtue of its prominent location along a major civic parkway, its Spanish Mediterranean architectural style, its proximity to a group of similarly designed printing plants, its linkage of business and manufacturing with suburbanization during the 1920s, its association with a regionally important business enterprise, and its high degree of external integrity. Its rehabilitation and conversion to a cultural center in 1985 have enhanced the Star Engraving Company Building's public identity and confirmed its original aspiration to artistic status.

*Rezin D. Steele*

The Star Engraving Company is the most intact commercial building designed by architect Rezin D. Steele. Steele arrived in Houston in 1892 with his employer, architect Frank S. Glover. Steele began independent practice the following year and maintained an active practice in Houston until his death in 1936. Steele never achieved great prominence, but he produced a substantial body of work in Houston during his long career. His major works include the original St. Paul's Methodist Church (1909, demolished); the original Memorial Hospital (1910, 1924, demolished); the Harris-Hahlo Building, a six-story commercial building at the corner of Main Street and Texas Ave (1920, demolished); the downtown Rettig's building (1927, demolished); Sidney Lanier Junior High School (1925, with Jonas & Tabor); and Baptist Temple in Houston Heights (1931). Steele was also architect for the Henke-Pillot grocery chain, designing the 1924 Henke Building on Market Square (1924) and the 1923 Henke-Pillot South End store at 2800-2816 Travis Street (demolished 2008), one of the first auto-oriented suburban shopping centers in Houston. The historian Richard Longstreth has identified the Henke-Pillot store on Travis as the first suburban market building to be oriented not to the street but to its own off-street parking lot. Steele also designed houses in River Oaks for lumber dealer William J. Buhmann (1925), the second house to be built in River Oaks, and Herbert E Neuhaus (1928).

### **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY**

The 1930 Star Engraving Company Building consists of a one-story manufacturing plant and two-story office. The building is constructed of reinforced concrete and designed in the Spanish Mediterranean style. The two-story office building is situated in front of the one-story manufacturing wing and gives the Star Engraving Company Building a more imposing scale from the parkway and minimizes its identity as a manufacturing plant. The building contains 29,320 gross square feet. The two-story front block is 4 bays wide and three bays long. Cast stone

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decorative detail and a terra cotta tile roof coping, framed by low towers, contribute to its Spanish architectural theme.

The division of labor within the company between the white collar administrative, sales, and design work force, and the blue collar artisanal work force is reflected in the spatial composition of the building. The distribution and size of openings on the two sections of the building represent the different purposes the building was designed to serve. The main facade is organized according to principles of symmetry and decorum relating to the external, urban scale of the parkway; the rear wing according to a pattern of uniform repetition relating to internal requirements for wide structural spans and plentiful ventilation and illumination. These hierarchical distinctions are also visible in the building's surfaces. The office portion is faced with multiple coats of stucco, concealing the marks of the wood shuttering used in casting the concrete walls. The manufacturing wing is faced with a light coat of stucco, through which the horizontal striations of the wood shuttering are clearly visible.

Historic interior fabric consists primarily of the exposed, board-finished, cast in place concrete structural shell, comprising floors, columns, beams, joists, ceilings, and the interior surfaces of the exterior walls. Original steel window sashes, with the original hardware, remain in most openings on the north, east, and south sides of the building, as do wood window sills and second-floor skylight openings. Also intact is the original sequence of spaces that led from the front doors to the executive offices. This consists of the concrete tile paved entrance foyer; a wide dog-leg stair paved with concrete tiles that begin its run on axis with the front door; and the sky-lit second-floor landing vestibule. At the turn of the stair is a decorative cast concrete scrolled volute that protrudes from the wall. The second-floor landing vestibule contains an opening profiled with scalloped edges, which continues the exterior architectural theme.

First floor windows occupy tall rectangular apertures with cast stone sills. Steel mullions divide window sash into a 10/10/5 pattern, except in the projecting end bays, where first-floor openings comprise a pair of 6/6/3 divisions. Second floor windows in the intermediate B bays are detailed with cast stone sills and scalloped notches where the headers are framed into the walls. The glazing pattern in these windows is 5/10/5. In the projecting towers, paired 3/6/3 windows are grouped beneath a blind arch panel springing from scalloped bases. Above the projecting end bays are low towers, set back slightly from the face of the front end side walls of the building but tied visually to the corners of the end bays by cast stone scrolls. The four faces of each tower are lit by triple arched openings. Each tower is capped by a low-pitched, pyramidal tile roof. These towers provide secondary focuses of decorative elaboration on the Star Engraving Company Building's facade and reinforce the primacy of the entrance bay. The principal facade retains its integrity to a high degree, even in such details as door and window hardware. Photographs indicate that by 1934 the spandrels between the first and second floor openings were faced with advertising graphics that spelled out "Star Engraving Co." and "Jewelers Engravers." These were additions to the facade, and do not appear in the earliest photograph of the building.

The principal facade of the Star Engraving Company Building faces north toward Allen Parkway. It is symmetrically composed in an A-B-C-B-A pattern and consists of a central entrance bay flanked by three bays and a pair of projecting single end bays. The base of the building is a molded water table. A low entrance platform of scored concrete is stationed at the front entrance, which consists

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of double-leaf wood paneled doors, containing glass lights in their scalloped upper panels, and a semicircular fan light ornamented with radiating wood spindles. The front doors are encased in an elaborate 2-story cast stone portal, the building's single point of ornamental richness. The portal consists of a pair of fluted Ionic columns with Salomonic shafts, mounted on paneled bases. Above the Ionic capitals are impost blocks carrying a cornice that spans above the fanlight and is broken out atop the columns. The double doors and fan light are outlined with a scalloped frame, crowned by an escutcheon-wreathed medallion and swaged draperies in high relief.

The 266 foot long east side elevation of the Star Engraving Company Building, facing Rosine Street, displays the spatial organization of the building: the compact 2-story north block facing Allen Parkway, which is 6 bays (66 feet) long, and the long one-story rear (south) block, with its central second-story spine, which is 10 bays (200 feet) long. The north block is organized (from north to south) with openings in an A-B-B-C-C-B pattern. The detailing of window openings corresponds to the north facade. Indicating the location of internal structural columns are tile-capped piers that project above the roof line. A curved screen wall marks the intersection of the two-story front block and the 1-story rear block.

The rear (south) end elevation of the Star Engraving Company Building is a tripart composition that represents the sectional stratification of the rear wing into a narrow, central 2-story bay, which is 20 feet wide, flanked by wide 1-story bays, which are each 30 feet wide. In 1985, a screen wall of rough textured concrete masonry block was built in front of the central and west end bays to conceal an exterior fire escape stair attached to the center of the building and a wide service door in the west bay. The east bay of the rear elevation contains two window bays filled with steel window sash, duplicating the patterns and details of the east-facing windows, although a double door has been cut into the easternmost window bay. The screen wall conceals much of the rear elevation, but entailed no alterations to it.

The west elevation of the Star Engraving Company Building faces the site's only interior property line and is located between 1 and 3 feet from this property line. In 1993, a dense cluster of apartment buildings was constructed on the adjoining property. Therefore, the west elevation of the building is visible only from inside the adjoining apartment complex. The west elevation originally duplicated the east elevation, except that it consisted only of window bays. The pattern of window openings on the west duplicated that on the east except in the two-story front section of the building, where window spacing reflected the internal structural bays with an A-B-C-C arrangement from north to south. The windows filling the C bays are wide expanses of steel sash on the second floor. On the first floor, these bays were blocked in and painted over prior to the rehabilitation of the building in 1985. All of the west side window bays in the one-story rear block were blocked in prior to 1985. The only openings on the west side of the one-story block are a pair of emergency exits.

A green lawn that slopes down to the Allen Parkway east-bound bypass lane lies in front of the Star Engraving Company Building is consistent with the original landscape treatment of the north end of the site, as is the foundation planting of shrubs along the base of the building. The entrance platform and a flagstone walk parallel to the front of the building remain. A set of flagstone steps that curved down to Allen Parkway no longer remains. Also gone is a mature live oak tree that originally stood at the northwest corner of the site. Concrete tile paved sidewalks and the low concrete masonry

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block parapet walls on Rosine Street side of the building are additions of 1985, as is all the planting along the east and south sides of the building.

### *Restoration History*

The Star Engraving Company Building retains its exterior architectural integrity. The greatest number of documented alterations occurred in 1985 when the building was rehabilitated and converted into a cultural center and office building. Preservation and conservation of original architectural fabric and details was carried out to ensure that the change in historic use did not compromise the building's integrity. Exterior alterations to the north, east, and south elevations were minimal. The alterations are clearly visible as alterations and are compatible with the historic appearance of the building. Alterations to the west elevation were less sympathetic, but there is no visual access to the side of the building.

The original delivery entrance was redecorated in 1985 with a projecting canopy and a pair of freestanding, scrolled, metal light standards, when this portion of the building was remodeled to provide temporary quarters for the Children's Museum of Houston. At that time, the original doors were replaced by double-leaf glass doors with modern hardware. A second-floor window opening above the delivery entrance was refitted with double-leaf wood doors and a guard rail panel. The one story rear wing is 15 feet high, the stucco walls rising to a metal flashing cap that runs continuously atop the parapet. Each of its ten bays originally contained a single, flat-headed window opening, 16 feet long and 8 feet high, with cast stone sill. Each opening was glazed with three steel sash windows, divided in a 10/10/5 pattern. Three of these bays have had their openings altered to accommodate entrances to the theater that occupies this wing. In front of the new primary entrance bay, a freestanding, rough-textured concrete masonry block screen wall was built. The other modified window bays have had a pair of doors inserted in place of the central window panel, which required cutting through the sill. Fabric awnings projecting above window bays are additions of 1985, as is a low, concrete block parapet wall between the building and the sidewalk. Historic photographs indicate that retractable awnings were originally installed above all east-facing windows. Landscaping at the base of the building, like the entry screen wall, doors, awnings, and sidewalk parapet wall, was installed in 1985, although it echoes the historic landscape treatment of this side of the building.

### *Spanish Mediterranean Style*

The design of the Star Engraving Company Building with Spanish Mediterranean architectural features places it in the context of neo-Spanish style architecture. This style was introduced in Houston by two distinguished American architects, Harrie T. Lindeberg of New York, in the Womack House in Shadyside (1921-23), and Ralph Adams Cram of Boston, in the Julia Ideson Library (1922-26, NR, 1977) and the Cleveland Sewall House in River Oaks (1923-26, NR, 1979; COH Protected Landmark 2009). The style's initial associations in Houston were with elite patronage, high culture, and civic dignity. By 1927, Spanish-Mediterranean architecture was being applied to commercial buildings in Houston to imbue them with these associations. This was especially visible in two districts: the 10-block 'Spanish village' retail corridor on South Main Street, to which the Isabella Court is an extant contributor (1929, NR 1994), and the "crafts section" on Allen Parkway, where the Star Engraving Company, Gulf Publishing, and Rein Company were

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built. Both districts are of historical significance; they represent an attempt, characteristic of the 1920s, to use picturesque architectural styles to elevate the status of commercial buildings as well as to create a distinct sense of place in the new roadside landscape that began to evolve in deference to the automobile.

Spanish Mediterranean architecture was popular throughout the U.S. in the 1920s. In Texas it exerted a special appeal because of its assumed connection to Spanish Texas of the 18th century. Other printing plants built in Texas in the 1920s and early 1930s exhibited this style, notably the El Paso Times Building (1930) and the San Antonio Light Building (1931, Robert B. Kelly, architect). An early example important, not only for its Spanish architecture, but also for its suburban setting was the Johnston Graphic Arts Building in Dallas of 1925, designed by the notable Dallas architect David R. Williams. The spatial and decorative format Williams pursued was quite similar to the format Steele employed at the Star Engraving Company Building: a two-story, tile-roofed office building, sparingly decorated with conventional Spanish ornament and craft detail, prefaced a larger, one-story, flat-roofed manufacturing plant at the rear of the property.

In 1984-85, the entire building was replanned internally. Portions of the first and second floors were replanned as temporary quarters for the Children's Museum of Houston, which occupied the space until 1992. The second floor was replanned for the architectural offices of W. O. Neuhaus Associates and Charles Keith Architects. The rear block was replanned to house Stages Repertory Theater.

*The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Diana DuCroz, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.*

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Fox, Stephen. *Houston Architectural Guide*. The American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter and Herring Press, Houston. 1990, p. 59.

Houston Architectural Survey, 1984, p. 199.

National Register Nomination, 1995.





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**OR**

- The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3);

**OR**

- The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4).

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Star Engraving Company Building at 3201 Allen Parkway.

## **PLANNING COMMISSION ACTION**

Recommended to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Star Engraving Company Building at 3201 Allen Parkway.

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## EXHIBIT A

STAR ENGRAVING COMPANY BUILDING  
3201 ALLEN PARKWAY



