PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

Reviewed by the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission

LANDMARK NAME: First City National Bank
OWNERS: 1021 Main Street Owner LLC
APPLICANTS: Joseph Slezak, owner and Amanda Coleman, Ryan, LLC, agent
LOCATION: 1021 Main Street

AGENDA ITEM: A
HPO FILE NO.: HP2026_0092
DATE ACCEPTED: Mar-26-2026

HAHC HEARING: May-21-2026

SITE INFORMATION: LTS 1 THRU 12 & TR 13 BLK 136 SSBB. 1021 Main Street consists of the former First City National Bank commercial tower and a non-historic parking garage. The commercial tower, constructed in 1961, is on the southern portion of the property and the 1999 parking garage is on northern portion of the property. The property is approximately 1.48 acres and located in downtown Houston.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

Most of this report was extracted from the National Register of Historic Places nomination for First City National Bank by Ryan, LLC senior consultants Amanda Coleman and Steph McDougal, consultant Melanie Caddel, and assisted by director Anna Mod. The First City National Bank is nominated to the National Register under Criterion C in the area of Architecture at the local level of significance. The period of significance is 1961.

The project is currently under consideration for the Texas and Federal Historic Tax Credit Program (Part B/2). First City National Bank was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on January 20th, 2026.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The 1961 First City National Bank is a Corporate Modern skyscraper in the center of downtown Houston, Texas. The historic functionally related complex includes a 32-story office tower, hyphen, and non-historic parking garage connected by an original subterranean tunnel to the original detached seven-story parking garage. The office tower, hyphen, and non-historic garage are located at 1021 Main Street and the original garage is located at 1101 Fannin Street. When First National Bank and City National Bank merged in 1956, it was determined that a larger modern office complex was needed to house the corporation. The original complex included the tower, the hyphen, a banking pavilion, and a motor-bank—all designed by Skidmore, Owings, & Merril (SOM) with Houston architects Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson. The banking pavilion and motor bank were demolished in 1998, and the 1999 parking garage constructed in its place connects to the tower through both the above-ground hyphen and an underground lobby. First City National Bank is significant in the area of architecture.

The complex is significant as an early skyscraper building in Houston to employ the geometric masonry structural grid (aka exoskeleton or articulated frame) pioneered by Bunshaft with engineer Paul Weidlinger. The resulting design was so widely employed by multiple SOM offices during the 1960s that it became somewhat of a trademark for the firm. The exterior structure reduced or eliminated interior columns, creating more flexible open space. The tower was constructed during a brief transitional period in SOM's Corporate Modern architecture, between the Miesian early 1950s glass curtain-wall systems developed by Bunshaft for the

Lever House in New York City and SOM's mid-1960s tube-within-a-tube approach to externally expressed structure, developed by Bruce Graham and engineer Fazlur Khan after computer-aided design (CAD) became available in 1965. The First City National Bank tower's window wall was deeply inset behind a structural-steel grid of columns and spandrel decks. It was built at the end of the era when corporations constructed buildings for their own use, before office buildings were primarily developed as investment properties to maximize leasable space. First City National Bank was SOM's first project in downtown Houston, and it became the largest banking operation in Houston.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Development of the First City National Bank Complex

Established in 1866, First National Bank was Houston's first chartered bank. In 1904, architects Sanguinet and Staats designed the bank's headquarters, an eight-story sliver of a building with a 25-foot-wide frontage at 201 Main Street near its intersection with Franklin Street. Completed in 1905, it was the city's first steel-framed building, its first high rise office building, and the first tall building designed by Sanguinet and Staats architectural firm. An addition in 1909 tripled the width of the Main Street elevation. A small annex was added to the rear of the building in 1911, and a second rear addition in 1925 further expanded the building's footprint to Fannin, the cross street to the southeast. First National Bank owned and occupied that building until 1956, when it merged with City National Bank. The bank's original location, now known as Franklin Lofts, is extant and located within the Main Street/Market Square National Register Historic District. It was converted into residential condominiums in 2004 and the ground floor banking hall is an event venue.[1]

City National Bank was founded as the Guaranty Trust Company in 1924 by an attorney and judge, James Elkins Sr. After merging with Gulf State Bank in 1928, "City Bank" obtained a state charter; ten years later, it received a federal charter and became City National Bank.[2] The bank moved into the Gulf State Bank's offices in the Beatty-West Building (815-817 Main Street, demolished in 2007) after that merger and then into offices at Main and McKinney around 1930. Before the end of the 1930s, bank president Elkins engaged Houston architect Alfred C. Finn to design a new building that would reflect the bank's influence and prosperity. Although those plans were deferred during World War II, construction began in 1946, and the new City National Bank Building (NRHP 2000) opened in 1947 at 1001 McKinney Avenue (the corner of McKinney and Main Street; across the street to the northeast from the subject property).[3] Banking operations were housed at that building from 1947 until 1960.

After the public's trust in banks was damaged by the Great Depression, new building concepts commissioned by bank executives gradually shifted away from the monumental Classical

[1] Ron Bass, "First National Bank Building, Houston." *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, 2020, tshaonline.org.
[2] Lila Knight, "City National Bank Building," National Register of Historic Places nomination, Texas Historical Commission, February 11, 2000.
[3] Knight, "City National Bank Building."

Revival fortress of the early 1900s and toward modern constructions that prioritized service over the appearance of security.[4] These design concepts gained more widespread acceptance after World War II, when economic prosperity once again allowed for new construction, as evidenced by the Moderne-style City National Building at 1001 McKinney Street. Although finished in 1947, that building's design still relied on a heavy stone ornamented facade. The shift to Modern bank buildings in the International Style reflected those sentiments, and by the 1950s, bank executives had embraced open interiors, customer-friendly design, prefabricated materials, efficiency, and drive-up teller windows or kiosks that characterized Modern bank architecture. Numerous articles and advertisements in publications like *Banking: The Journal of the American Bankers Association* positioned Corporate Modern bank building design as the way of the future.[5] In 1954, the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company building in New York City was the first bank designed by SOM. Realized in the International Style, the building marked a turning point toward physical and metaphorical transparency and a customer-focused bank design.[6]

In 1956, City National Bank merged with First National Bank to become First City National Bank. Elkins remained president of the combined entity and sold the much smaller First National Bank building. In 1958, Elkins sold the City National Bank building to Gus Wortham, a former business partner, who also purchased the Electric Building (corner of Walker and Fannin Streets) and part of Kirby Theatre (911 Main Street) for $10 million to house John L. Wortham & Son Insurance (founded in 1915).[7] Elkins secured a site for First City National Bank's new complex at the corner of Main and McKinney Streets, displacing the Normadie Club and Restaurant, Jive-Hive Hi-Fi Music Shop, The Town Shop, Rupley Storage, Guaranty Federal Savings and Loan Association, and the Sam Houston Book Store.[8] The original freestanding garage site at 1101 Fannin Street was already used for surface parking in the late 1950s, as confirmed by historic aerial photographs.

Following the merger, First City National Bank became the largest banking operation in Houston and, even though the City National Bank Building was less than 10 years old, sought to occupy a new building that would represent "progress" through cutting-edge Modern

[4] Charles Belfoure, *Monuments to Money: The Architecture of American Banks* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2005), 250.
[5] Carol J. Dyson and Anthony Rubano, "Banking on the Future: Modernism and the Local Bank," *Preserving the Recent Past 2*, Deborah Slaton and William G. Foulks (editors), (Washington, D.C.: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 2000), 2.44–2-51.
[6] Belfoure, *Monuments to Money,* 248-251.
[7] Frank Cortese, "Cost To Be Near $25 Million," *Houston Chronicle*, July 13, 1958, 1.
[8] "Gus Wortham Is Worthy Insurance Man of Year," *Houston Post*, August 24, 1958, 95. Robert E. Connor, "Death Ended Plan for Main Skyscraper," *Houston Chronicle*, July 13, 1958, 35. Cortese, "Cost To Be Near $25 Million," 22. "Normandie Club Awaits New Quarters," *Houston Chronicle*, September 5, 1958, 19. "Guaranty Federal to Buy New Building Site," *Houston Chronicle*, July 13, 1958, 35. "Rupley to Open Monday At Main, McKinney Site," *Houston Post*, October 5, 1958, 31.

architecture.[9] Likely because of their reputation as designers of the innovative Lever House and Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company buildings in New York City, and their involvement in Medical Towers (1709 Dryden Street, NRHP 2016) in Houston, the New York firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) was selected to serve as the primary architects, with Houston-based Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson (WMCA) as associate architects. SOM partner Gordon Bunshaft drove the project forward with assistance from WMCA, local engineers, and contractors.[10] From SOM, Whitson Overcash was the senior designer, and Herbert Warrington was the job captain.[11] Bunshaft and team collaborated with New York engineer Paul Weidlinger (Weidlinger Associates) and Houston-based engineer Robert J. Cummins (Adams & Cummins). Jaros, Baum & Bolles (JB&B) of New York were the mechanical engineers for the office tower block. The general contractor, W.S. Bellows Construction Corporation, was well-known in Houston at the time for constructing buildings of similar scale, such as 500 Jefferson (NRHP 2019) and the Humble-Exxon Building (800 Bell Street, NRHP 2025). WMCA designed the garage at 1101 Fannin Street with engineer Robert J. Cummins and parking consultant Wilber Smith & Associates.[12]

First City National Bank requested that the overall design make a bold architectural statement and provide a street-level space for 75 tellers, 36 bank officers' desks, and six drive-in windows.[13] The bank also needed two floors in the office tower for executive offices. For upper floors, the company specified flexible or modular open floor plans (without multiple columns) that could be easily adapted to tenants' needs. The design objectives for the complex were reflective of post-World War II and late 1950s sensibilities that catered to the customer with a retail mentality, enabled flexible space configurations for upper-level tenants, and provided vehicular access.[14] SOM and First City National Bank's plan for the complex included more welcoming modern conveniences, like long, open, spacious teller countertops without protective grilles; customer lounge areas, shops, and a cafeteria; and vehicle-friendly drive-in teller windows and ample parking. While some banks of that era chose to further emphasize their retail focus with large exterior signage, the design for First City National Bank in Houston instead focused on the architectural features and scale of the building to highlight the strength and prosperity of the company. Perhaps as a result, it appears that the building design stood alone as a signifier of corporate grandeur but was not part of advertising campaigns. Based on available images of First City National Bank's print advertising in the 1960s, the bank's marketing appears to have primarily showcased what its customers could do with loans from

[9] "First City National is Part of the Houston Picture," *Houston Post*, January 1, 1958, 142. "New Bank Building 'Expression of Faith,'" *Houston Post*, July 15, 1958, 18. City of Houston, "City National Bank Building," Landmark Designation Report, Archaeological & Historical Commission, May 6, 1996. Bass, "First National Bank Building, Houston."
[10] Dan Hardy, "First City National's Site," *Houston Post*, September 21, 1958, 41. "Gaping Holes Hasten Wrecking Project," *Houston Post*, October 30, 1958, 70.
[11] Nicholas Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM: Building Corporate Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 101.
[12] "Tripartite Scheme for Bank, Office Building, and Garage," and "The Parking Garage," *Architectural Record* 129 (April 1961): 164.
[13] "Tripartite Scheme for Bank, Office Building, and Garage," 156.
[14] Dyson and Rubano, 2-45.

the bank; for example, corporate customers could build skyscrapers or expand their oil and gas interests, while individuals could use travelers checks to take exotic vacations.

The office tower was originally planned to include 37 aboveground stories over a five-story underground parking garage.[15] Due to Houston's shallow water table, propensity for flooding, and the cost of underground ventilation, that plan was scrapped.[16] An aboveground parking garage was subsequently planned to the southeast of the office tower, across the intersection of Fannin and Lamar Streets. Cost considerations also reduced the height of the office tower to 29 floors for both banking offices and tenant space, plus three mechanical floors.[17] The site was cleared while SOM architects finalized plans for the new building, and a full-scale mockup of the recessed window wall was tested for resistance to wind and rain.[18] Construction of the structural steel framework for the office tower began in 1959.[19]

The complex opened for business on February 6, 1961.[20] First City National Bank originally occupied four portions of the complex: the banking pavilion with lower-level vault, the drive-in bank booths (service structures), the connecting link/hyphen, and four levels of the office tower. In the tower, executive offices were located on the second and third floors, a reception area was provided on the first level, and the lower/basement level contained an employee cafeteria. The drive-in service area was a separate structure that complemented the banking pavilion, with six angled teller booths. It was located on the Fannin Street side of the banking pavilion, and customers could conveniently drive through from McKinney Street.

Upon its completion, the First City National Bank complex stood out among other buildings in Houston's downtown Central Business District because of its Corporate Modern design, height, and structural features. When it opened, it was the one of the tallest buildings in downtown Houston, along with the 1956 Bank of the Southwest (910 Travis, NRHP 1983), 1929 Gulf Building (712 Main Street, NRHP 1983), and the 1947 City National Bank Building (1001 McKinney, NRHP 2000). Only 10 downtown buildings were 18 or more stories tall in 1961; by 1970, that number had jumped to 22. In addition, the banking pavilion was fairly unusual. Other downtown banking buildings had been constructed before 1930 and incorporated both banking functions and offices in the same structure; these included the State National Bank (412 Main, NRHP 1982), Second National Bank (806 Main), Commercial National Bank (116-124 Main), and the First National Bank Building (201 Main).

The First City National Bank became a symbol of Houston's booming economy and expectations of the city's future progress.[21] In the 1970s and 1980s, First City National Bank

[15] "First City National Bank May Reduce Size Of Proposed Skyscraper," *Houston Chronicle*, February 1, 1959, 11.
[16] "Tripartite Scheme for Bank, Office Building, and Garage," 155-164.
[17] "First City National Bank May Reduce Size Of Proposed Skyscraper," *Houston Chronicle*, February 1, 1959, 11. "1st City Dedication Scheduled Monday," *Houston Post*, February 5, 1961, 83.
[18] "Tripartite Scheme for Bank, Office Building, and Garage," 159.
[19] "City's Largest Bank Moves To New Home," *Houston Chronicle*, February 5, 1961, 95.
[20] "City's Largest Bank Moves To New Home," 95.
[21] Kevin Alter, "SOM In Houston," *Cite* 40 (1997): 36, https://hdl.handle.net/1911/116355.

expanded its physical presence in Houston to include the First City East Building (1111 Fannin Street, 1971), First City Tower (1001 Fannin Street, 1981), and First City National Bank Operations Building (1301 Fannin Street, 1983). Together, these buildings were referred to as the First City Financial Center.[22]

First City National Bank of Houston was a major subsidiary of the First City Bancorporation of Texas, Inc. (aka First City Bancorp), a holding company established in Waco, Texas, in 1950. In 1988, First City Bancorp, by then headquartered in Houston with 59 subsidiaries in both banking and non-banking sectors, "nearly collapsed … under the weight of billions of dollars in bad loans in the energy and real estate industries." [23] The bank was bailed out by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), which contributed $960 million, and Chicago banker A. Robert Abboud, who raised another $500 million. Unfortunately, the investment group led by Abboud "inaccurately assessed the continuing losses from First City's loan portfolio … and compounded the problem with unwise lending of their own." [24] In 1992, First City Bancorp was officially closed, and its assets seized and liquidated by the FDIC.[25] First City National Bank subsequently declared bankruptcy, which took nearly 20 years to settle.[26]

Rick McCord of McCord Development acquired the building in 1998, and demolished the banking pavilion, lower-level vault, and drive-in service structures. Due to an increased need for parking, an above- and below-ground parking garage was designed to be sensitive to the complex. Completed in 1999, the new garage left the hyphen to the office tower in place and connects to the office tower through the hyphen and lower level.

The First City National Bank office tower served as an important precedent to later skyscrapers in downtown Houston and Dallas, where influential architects such as I. M. Pei and Phillip Johnson designed abstract, sculptural commercial architecture in the 1970s and 1980s. With money to be made, the rampant construction of office space in Houston continued unabated through the 1980s, before a real estate bust in the 1990s cooled the market.[27] The *articulated frame* left a noticeable impact on the Houston skyline but was mostly abandoned by the early 1970s as developers, rather than corporations, led the design and construction of high-rise office buildings, pushing every inch of leasable square footage to the curtain wall.[28]

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[22] "First City Kicks Off New Facility," *Houston Chronicle*, October 28, 1981, 37.
[23] Daniel Fisher, "FDIC Seizes First City Branches," *Houston Post*, October 31, 1992, 1. "FDIC Grants Final Approval to Assistance Plan for Subsidiaries of First City Bancorporation, Houston, Texas" *FDIC News Release,* Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, April 20, 1988, https://archive.fdic.gov/view/fdic/10710/fdic_10710_DS1.pdf.
[24] Fisher, "FDIC Seizes First City Branches," *Houston Post*, October 31, 1992, 21.
[25] Steven Greenhouse, "Company News: U.S. Closes First City Bancorp," *New York Times*, October 31, 1992.
[26] "First City Bankruptcy Nears Final Chapter 20 Years After Its Filing," *Dallas Morning News*, May 22, 2012, https://www.dallasnews.com/business/2012/05/22/first-city-bankruptcy-nears-final-chapter-20-years-after-its-filing/.
[27] Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to Contemporary American Architecture* (New York: Plume/Penguin, 2001), 266-268.
[28] Axel Menges, *SOM: Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1963-1973* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2009).

Commercial Architecture by Skidmore Owings & Merrill

SOM was founded in 1936 in Chicago by Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings; John O. Merrill joined the firm in 1939. Skidmore established the firm's New York office in 1937, with associates Robert W. Cutler, J. Walter Severinghaus, William S. Brown, and Gordon Bunshaft, who emerged as the office leader.[29] Bunshaft became a firm partner in 1949 and created a design language for the firm's corporate projects.[30] That architectural identity nevertheless was flexible enough to allow Bunshaft to continue evolving as a designer throughout his career, often combining design elements from multiple Modern styles and subgenres.

SOM became one of the largest architecture firms in the United States and quickly developed a reputation for its Modern skyscrapers, corporate office designs, and other influential projects. A temporary office for the Manhattan Project was established in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in the early 1940s. Other offices later opened in San Francisco (1946), Portland, Oregon (1951), Washington, DC (1967), Boston (1971), Los Angeles (1974), Houston (1976), and Denver (1977).[31]

One of the most influential architects of the 20th century was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Mies strove to create a universal design that could be easily adapted as needs changed, ideally "a single huge enclosed volume that could be subdivided by movable impermanent screens" or walls.[32] Mies' Lake Shore Drive Apartments in Chicago, twin towers of concrete construction with a steel and glass veneer, were completed in 1951 and "became the paradigm of aloof, anonymous freestanding glass boxes that began to appear in every American city, beginning with (Gordon) Bunshaft's Lever House and soon found in cities around the world. … Frigid hauteur, of course, was exactly what was wanted by corporate clients, and the glass box immediately became the symbol of American business."[33] Even when the building was not a glass box, Miesian elements often found their way into the design; for example, Miesian "prismatic" ground-floor lobbies lighten some heavier concrete buildings, such as the Harris County Family Law Center at 1115 Congress Street in Houston.[34]

After World War II, the decline of domestic manufacturing and rise of services industries led to the construction of high-rise office towers, accelerating in the 1960s and 1970s, to house the growing number of corporate employees and managers. Made possible by structural steel framing, these skyscrapers were "signposts in the sky"—a way to advertise a corporation's

[29] Nicholas Adams, "Gordon Bunshaft: What Convinces is Conviction," *SOM Journal* 9 (January 2015), https://www.som.com/news/gordon-bunshaft-what-convinces-is-conviction/. Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM,* 24.
[30] Adams, "Gordon Bunshaft."
[31] Beth Jacob, "John Hancock Building," National Register of Historic Places nomination, Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, May 10, 2017, 11.
[32] Leeland M. Roth, *American Architecture: A History* (Westview Press: Boulder, Colorado, 2001), 416.
[33] Roth, *American Architecture*, 419.
[34] O'Rourke and Koush, *Home, Heat, Money, God*, 176.

success, whether in downtowns or new suburban office parks.[35] The expansion of American corporations provided architects the opportunity to design new headquarters and incorporate corporate ideas and ideals into these buildings and campuses at a time when Modern architectural expression was at its peak.[36] The success of Modern architecture convinced business leaders that modernism was not only aesthetically desirable but would also be cost effective and convey their forward looking corporate ideals.[37] These corporate values drove new building commissions, especially banks, to be designed in what would later be described as Corporate Modernism. Designed in various Modern styles, many of these seminal buildings (while not all high-rises) were designed by SOM, such as the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company building in Manhattan (1954) and the First National City Bank at Idlewild (JFK) Airport (1959).[38]

During the second half of the 20th century, SOM pioneered and continued to explore structural engineering solutions for tall buildings.[39] The firm's purposeful collaboration between architects and engineers from the outset of a project resulted in a "clarity of structure."[40] Also referred to as *structural rationalism*, this approach prioritizes functional and structural forms as key design elements; SOM's work emphasized distinct geometric forms with little or no ornamentation, focusing on a single design idea while stripping away visual clutter.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, SOM had explored reinforced concrete structures out of necessity, as a cost-saving solution to the steel shortages of that era; the firm later returned to an emphasis on steel structures. In 1951, Bunshaft and the SOM New York office completed Manhattan House, an International Style apartment complex constructed of reinforced concrete; it was one of the largest of its kind in New York City when it was built.[41] The following year, Bunshaft and team completed Lever House (constructed 1950-1952, NRHP 1983) in New York City, and architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed the Seagram Building with Phillip Johnson and Kahn & Jacobs (constructed 1954-1958, NRHP 2006). Together, these two projects established a standard vocabulary of glass-curtain-wall design with flush supporting structural grid, which SOM and others would employ nationwide.[42] During this period, Bunshaft was influenced by Mies, notably in SOM's design for Lever House, with its massing of floating rectangular volumes and intersecting planes.[43] Bunshaft and SOM

[35] Rifkind, *A Field Guide to Contemporary American Architecture*, 265-268.
[36] Yan, *Building Brands: Corporations and Modern Architecture* (London: Lund Humphries, 2020), 7-8, 13.
[37] Yan, *Building Brands*, 76.
[38] Belfoure, *Monuments to Money,* 248 and 256.
[39] "Sky's the Limit: The Engineering of Architecture." Publication, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, April 7, 2017, https://www.som.com/publication/som-the-engineering-of-architecture/.
[40] Christian Schittich, ed., *DETAIL Engineering 4: SOM Structural Engineering* (Munchen, Germany: DETAIL, 2016), 24.
[41] Kim Velsey, "The Bloomingdale's of Apartment Buildings – Manhattan House Conversion Draws to a Close," *Observer*, December 9, 2015, https://observer.com/2015/12/the-bloomingdales-of-apartment-buildings-manhattan-house-conversion-draws-to-a-close/.
[42] Rifkind, *Field Guide to Contemporary American Architecture*, 270-271.
[43] Whiffen, *American Architecture since 1780*, 259. O'Rourke and Koush, *Home, Heat, Money, God*, 280.

employed the use of a prismatic glass curtain wall or glass box and embraced the adaptable, modular, or modernist "free plan."[44]

As the 1950s progressed, SOM began to experiment with projecting design elements and making visible the structure behind glass curtain walls, eventually leading to fully projecting and exposed exterior structures.[45] SOM also experimented with more dimensional structural elements, such as the concrete exoskeleton utilized in both the 1954 New York Infirmary and the 1955 Hilton Hotel in Istanbul, Turkey.[46] However the firm continued to produce glass curtain-wall designs; for example, the Heinz Research Building's (Pittsburgh, 1956-1959) one-story lobby, with exposed fins, is similar in appearance to the First City National Bank's glass-walled hyphen.[47]

SOM began in the late 1950s to design buildings with an *articulated frame*, which "portray(s) the structural bones" of a building and pushes the load-bearing structure to the exterior walls, to "produc(e) large expanses of column-free interior space."[48] The firm's first building with a fully expressed *exoskeleton* exterior structure was the Inland Steel Building in Chicago, constructed in 1958. SOM Chicago architects Bruce Graham and Walter Netsch brought all of the building's structural steel support columns to the exterior, where they projected outward toward the street on the building's long elevations.[49] The resulting clear-span construction created open floor plans.[50] Once completed, the Inland Steel building housed SOM's offices in Chicago until 1980.[51] This building, along with the earlier concrete examples, set the stage for the First City National Bank Building, which married the concrete exoskeletal form with a welded-steel structure.

In New York, Gordon Bunshaft began to partner with structural engineer Paul Weidlinger (Weidlinger Associates) in the late 1950s. After World War II, SOM began hiring in-house engineers in its Chicago office, but its New York office continued to utilize engineers in New York and/or near individual project sites well into the 1960s.[52] For the subject property, this included Weidlinger, as well as Houston structural engineer Robert J. Cummins.[53] Bramlette McClelland of McClelland Engineers Inc. oversaw the soil studies and worked with Cummins,

[44] O'Rourke and Koush, *Home, Heat, Money, God*, 281.
[45] Jacob, "John Hancock Building," 12; "Peristylar Precast Structures by SOM," *Progressive Architecture* 44, no. 9 (1963): 126-135.
[46] Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM*, 124.
[47] Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM*, 92-94.
[48] Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to Contemporary American Architecture,* 279.
[49] "Sky's the Limit: The Engineering of Architecture."
[50] "Clear-Span Construction," *Architecture Encyclopedia*, Chicago Architecture Center, https://www.architecture.org/online-resources/architecture-encyclopedia/clear-span-construction.
[51] "Inland Steel," *Buildings of Chicago*, Chicago Architecture Center, https://www.architecture.org/online-resources/buildings-of-chicago/inland-steel.
[52] Schittich, *SOM Structural Engineering*, 18.
[53] Bramlette McClelland, "Foundation Heave and Multistory Buildings," Progressive Architecture 42, no. 6 (June 1961).

an expert on welded steel, on the foundation and structure.[54] Welded, rather than riveted, steel allowed for lightweight but extremely strong construction for high-rise buildings. Beams were bolted, and seams were fused together with a welded bead, increasing strength.[55] Welded steel was also more economical since riveted joints required more material and labor.[56] Cummins and the W.S. Bellows Construction Company had previously collaborated on the San Jacinto Monument near Houston.

The First City National Bank complex was one of Gordon Bunshaft and Paul Weidlinger's first collaborative projects in the United States. Weidlinger "raised structure from a superficial aspect of building to the grammar of architecture."[57] He influenced Bunshaft's work through his modern application of and experience in concrete construction, and was "the man who helped (Bunshaft) create an entirely new architecture out of concrete."[58] From that point on, Bunshaft's buildings gradually shifted toward more sculptural exposed structures and an increased exploration of concrete.[59]

In the American South, evolving construction technologies were used to combat heat and light in skyscrapers, both for cost savings and to reduce the air-conditioning load. Early skyscrapers relied on natural sunlight for interior lighting, before electricity became widely available, but solar and heat gain through uninsulated windows increased the cost of central air conditioning, once that became standard.[60] First City National Bank's deeply inset windows, shaded by projecting structural members, such as horizontal decks and vertical fins, functioned as both structural support and shading device.[61]

The geometric structural grid became the mark of SOM. "The iconic, visually distinct structural grid was like a logo that could be, and was, applied to any number of SOM's products."[62] However, because high-rise architecture evolved so quickly in the 1950s-1960s, the articulated frame only enjoyed a relatively short period of popularity, through the early 1970s.[63]

SOM continued and continues to explore new, innovative approaches to high-rise architecture and engineering to the present day. The firm combines architectural, planning, interior design,

[54] "New Office, Lab Building Planned," *Houston Chronicle*, January 20, 1959, 40.
[55] "Steady Hands Build a Skyscraper," *Kansas City Star,* May 8, 1962.
[56] Tony Solano, "Welding and the Birth of Modern Skyscrapers," *The Welders Blog*, November 27, 2024, https://weldingtablesandfixtures.com/blogs/the-welders-blog/.
[57] Mario Salvadori, "Teaching Structures to Architects," *Journal of Architectural Education (1947-1974)* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1958): 5, https://doi.org/10.2307/1424174.
[58] Adams, "Gordon Bunshaft"; Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM,* 123.
[59] Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM*, 123.
[60] Thomas Leslie, "Glass and Light: The Influence of Interior Illumination on the Chicago School," *Journal of Architectural Education* 58, no. 1 (2004): 19, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40480520.
[61] Stephen Fox, "Cullinan Hall: A Window on Modern Houston," *Journal of Architectural Education (1984-)* 54, no. 3 (2001): 164, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1425582.
[62] Reinhold Martin, "The Bunshaft Tapes: A Preliminary Report," *Journal of Architectural Education* 54, no. 2, November 2000, 83.
[63] Rifkind, *A Field Guide to Contemporary American Architecture*, 279-280.

and engineering disciplines, with a portfolio of well-known buildings, often breaking their own height records and collecting numerous awards for their designs.[64] SOM is responsible for more than 10,000 projects completed in 50 countries and has received the American Institute of Architects Firm Award for excellence in design twice: in 1962 and 1996.[65]

Architectural Description and Restoration History

The First City National Bank tower is nine bays wide and five bays deep; the narrow (99'-9½") elevations face Main Street and Fannin Street, while the wide elevations facing Lamar and McKinney Streets are 252' wide. The geometric exoskeletal frame shades a deeply inset tinted Spandrelite glass window wall on all levels except the three top mechanical floors, which have louvered metal panels to provide ventilation for the HVAC and mechanical systems. The resulting grid of solids and voids is visually distinctive, economical, and environmentally beneficial: the horizontal spandrel decks and vertical fins together minimize solar glare and heat gain inside the building to reduce the air-conditioning load. The original spandrel deck design by SOM allows for window washer accessibility without scaffolding or extensive rigging, another cost-saving measure in terms of maintenance. The square vertical columns of the grid extend to the ground, and the original full-height ground-floor window wall is set back, creating an arcade along all elevations.

Three types of original window systems are present: full-height storefront window walls in the tower and hyphen, ribbons of six fixed windows in the upper levels of the tower, and “pivot” windows in the tower. All windows above the first floor are original. The storefront window-wall glass and other minor elements may have been updated over time; those in the hyphen are original. On each upper level except Floors 30-31, one operable, side-hinged “pivot” window is present on each long elevation, offset from center; these are visually identifiable by their slightly wider frames (Photo 4). From the penthouse on Floor 29, an interior social lounge area with bar extends outside to a “social deck” with metal and glass-panel balustrades via a full-height door at the pivot window location on the northeast side of the building.

The flat roof has a nearly nonexistent parapet, and metal railings surrounding the rooftop mechanical equipment limit pedestrian access to the center third of the roof, well away from the edge. A ramp leads to the slightly lower section where the cooling tower is located.

Like the tower lobby’s storefronts, the hyphen curtain walls are original (Photo 7). The wide horizontal clerestory mullion continues from the office tower into the hyphen and forms its roofline. The roof of the hyphen is flat and covered with tar and gravel. Part of the elevator build-out of the non-historic garage is inset into the central interior hyphen but does not interact with the original hyphen curtain walls.

[64] Beau Peregoy, “12 Massive Projects by Legendary Architecture Firm SOM,” *Architectural Digest*, July 4, 2016, https://www.architecturaldigest.com/gallery/som-architecture.
[65] Jacob, “John Hancock Building,” 11.

On the exterior of the garage, metal louvers are used as cladding on the street level, while uniform rows of square metal screens are used on upper levels to obscure structural elements and mechanical equipment (Photo 3). This design repeats on all four elevations. Immediately inside the garage, the elevator lobby provides access to two elevators on one side and stairs to the underground garage on the other side. The lower levels of the garage connect to the office tower's basement lobby (LL1) and mechanical sublevels.

Renovations/Alterations

1998 – Original banking pavilion and original drive-through motor bank structure demolished. The lower-level vault was also removed.
1999 – Non-historic garage constructed in place of banking pavilion.
2002 – Confirmed failure of the original marble and backing clips on tower.
2011 – Exterior Vermont marble cladding on tower replaced with Mount Airy or Solar White polished granite (1¼ " thickness) which is more durable and weather-resistant and maintains the appearance of the original cladding.[9]

Other Changes to Tower Exterior

Sometime between 1998 and 2007, pedestrian openings at the street level were altered. Originally, the primary entry doors from Main Street and Lamar Street consisted of a sequence of two doors creating an entry vestibule, for a total of six sets of paired doors. The exterior center pair were replaced with revolving doors, and the inner sequence and vestibule were removed. A new automatic sliding door was installed on the McKinney Street side, concurrent with all other code-compliant openings related to the 1999 garage. At some point on the first floor, some of the louvered metal panels below the metal connecting band atop the curtain wall were removed and replaced with glass, except for part of Bay 2 on the McKinney elevation, which now consists of matte metal panels and fire doors. Other glass panels in the exterior window wall throughout the office tower and hyphen may have been replaced over time, although specific locations and dates are unknown. On the Lamar Street side of the 29th floor, the operable side-hinged window was removed and sensitively replaced with a full-height glazed door which provides access to the penthouse social deck, and a metal and glass-panel safety railing was also installed. Both the door and the railing are visually compatible with that the curtain wall.

The First City National Bank complex retains a high level of integrity of location, setting, design, workmanship, feeling, and association. While some exterior materials have been altered, the office tower's form—defined by its structure—is visibly the same as when it was completed in 1961. Alterations do not detract from the overall integrity of the building.

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

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation

(a) The HAHC, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

S	NA	S - satisfies D - does not satisfy NA - not applicable
☐	☐	(1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;
☐	☒	(2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;
☐	☒	(3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;
☐	☐	(4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;
☐	☐	(5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
☐	☐	(6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
☐	☒	(7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
☐	☐	(8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

AND

☐ ☒ (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the First City National Bank at 1021 Main Street, Houston, TX 77002.

EXHIBIT A
CURRENT PHOTOS
FIRST CITY NATIONAL BANK
1021 MAIN STREET

Photo 1

Northwest (Main Street) and Southwest (Lamar Street) elevations, view east

Photo 2

Southwest (Lamar Street) and Southeast (Fannin Street) elevations, view northwest

Photo 3

Southeast (Fannin Street) and Northeast (McKinney Street) elevations, showing attached non-historic garage in foreground, view west

Photo 4

Northeast (McKinney Street) elevation, façade detail, operable side hinged windows for maintenance access visible in fourth bay from left, view south

Photo 5

Northwest (Main Street) entrance, view southeast

Photo 6

Southeast (Fannin Street) elevation, loading dock, view northwest

Photo 7

One story hyphen connecting office tower and attached non-historic garage, view west

Photo 8

Southeast (Fannin Street) and Northeast (McKinney Street) elevations of the non-historic parking garage, view west

Photo 9

Northwest (Main Street) elevation of the non-historic parking garage, view southeast

EXHIBIT B1: SITE MAP
(COURTESY GOOGLE EARTH)
FIRST CITY NATIONAL BANK
1021 MAIN STREET

EXHIBIT B2: SITE MAP
(COURTESY HCAD)
FIRST CITY NATIONAL BANK
1021 MAIN STREET

PARCEL INDICATED IN RED:

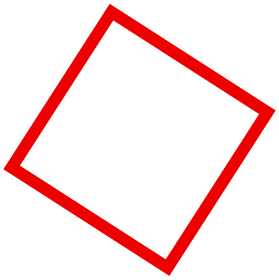

EXHIBIT C
SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE MAP
(COURTESY PROQUEST, 1940, VOL. 1, SHEET 22)
FIRST CITY NATIONAL BANK
1021 MAIN STREET

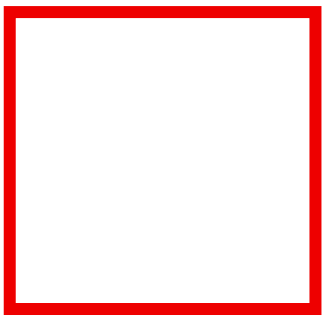

EXHIBIT D
HISTORIC PHOTOS
FIRST CITY NATIONAL BANK
1021 MAIN STREET

Figure 1

First City National Bank Office Tower Construction (SOM NEWS, no. 36, August 15, 1960, page 2)

Figure 2

First City National Bank, Office Tower, and Banking Pavillion (demolished) (Ezra Stoller, Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1962-1962, page 152)