

JOSEPH FINGER: THE MAN BEHIND HOUSTON'S ICONIC ARCHITECTURE

By Josh Levine

The period between World War I and World War II saw trends in Houston's architecture that bore little resemblance to anything that had come before them. Imported from Europe, these new styles grew out of people's increasing desire to put the Great War behind them and look to the future and, as economic depression set in, to do so in an economical way. The widespread destruction in Europe following World War I and advances in modern technology left much of Europe disenchanted with the classical styles of architecture. The art deco style satisfied people's desire for a modern way to express sophistication. Some of Houston's most iconic structures, including the Gulf Building, theaters such as River Oaks Theater, and City Hall are products of these trends known collectively as both art deco and moderne. One of the first and most prolific Houston architects of these styles, a Jewish immigrant named Joseph Finger, helped change the face of Houston through his trendsetting architecture.

Joseph Finger (who bears no relation to Houston's Finger Furniture family) was born in 1887 in a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that is now in Poland.¹ His father Henri Finger wanted him to take over the family dry-goods store, but Joseph had other plans for his life. After training at the Royal School in Vienna, Joseph immigrated to New Orleans with his family in 1905. There he found a city with an established architectural scene operating more on cronyism than merit. He needed to find a city where he could demonstrate his skills as a young architect, and he found it in Houston. Finger moved to Houston in 1908 and started working as a draftsman for the Dallas-based firm of C. D. Hill. After proving his architectural skill at Hill for five years, Finger



Shown left to right: Mayor Oscar Holcombe; owner/developer Michele DeGeorge; Dupree Fountain, hotel manager 1926-1931; and Joseph Finger. Taken at the groundbreaking for the Auditorium Hotel in March 1926, this is one of only two public images of Joseph Finger known to exist.

Photo courtesy of Miki Lusk Norton, The Lancaster Hotel.

anything moderne.² During this period, he designed the Plaza Hotel, the Auditorium Hotel, the Ben Milam Hotel, and the Texas State Hotel, as well as three hotels outside of Houston.



Joseph Finger designed the DeGeorge Hotel for owner Michele DeGeorge, which opened in 1914. Today the hotel offers housing for homeless veterans as well as other veterans' services.

Photo courtesy of Miki Lusk Norton, The Lancaster Hotel.

A *Houston Chronicle* article discussing Houston's top hotels put the Auditorium, the Ben Milam, and the DeGeorge in Houston's top five.³ Most of these swanky

hotels had all of the modern amenities, including room service, ice water taps, mini-fridges that made ice in every room, and a primitive form of air conditioning known as “mechanical refrigeration.” Many of the rooms actually went to wealthy permanent residents of the hotels, which had unrivaled standards for maid service.

The prosperity of some of the hotels did not last, as the Great Depression was just around the corner. Some of the wealthy clientele that could afford to live in one of Finger’s buildings in the 1920s were unable to pay the same fees in the 1930s. The Plaza Hotel faced other unique challenges. Despite a good location, the hotel was too small, lacked adequate parking, and only provided views of office buildings and a grocery store. The developer, however, was so happy with the hotel that he soon decided to build another similar hotel, the Warwick (now Hotel ZaZa). It stood only three blocks away from the Plaza, was larger, had better parking, and offered beautiful views of Hermann Park.⁴

All five of Finger’s Houston hotel buildings remained until 2012. The DeGeorge is a center for veterans, and the Plaza on Montrose Boulevard adjacent to the Museum of Fine Arts is now a bank. Two still operate as hotels, the Auditorium Hotel under the name Lancaster, and the Texas State Hotel as Club Quarters. In December 2012, the Ben Milam was demolished to make way for upscale apartments.⁵



The interior of the Ben Milam Hotel exhibited the tremendous detail in Finger’s work. In 2012, the Ben Milam, which had been vacant for decades, was razed. Photo courtesy of Texas Bob Travels.

The first wave of art deco architecture in America, sometimes known as Zig-zag Deco, emphasized and exaggerated buildings’ heights. Their often-fluted exteriors soared upwards, and the buildings would narrow the higher they went (such as Alfred C. Finn’s Gulf Building). The modern designs would often be accented with bas-reliefs (sculptures with minimal depth built directly onto the exterior walls) that frequently used very angular designs and paid tribute to ancient civilizations and cultures. The style’s popularity in the twenties is due in part to the discovery of King Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922. The discovery inspired interest in Egyptian civilization all over the country, and people wanted to express their

new fascination with an ancient culture in a modern way, a task to which the art deco style was perfectly suited.⁶

Finger opened his own firm in 1923 and immediately began designing structures that boosted his reputation as one of Houston’s finest architects. The first in 1925 was for his Jewish congregation, Temple Beth Israel. Its oversized columns create a larger-than-life feeling with a design inspired by ancient Egyptian architecture. Today the building serves as the Heinen Theater of Houston Community College with an unaltered exterior.



Built in 1925, Temple Beth Israel was designed for Finger’s own Jewish congregation. Beth Israel used the structure until 1967. Today it serves as the Heinen Theater of Houston Community College.

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Although his hotel designs remained conservative, Finger’s other work reflected a more progressive style than that of most architects of his day. In 1929, he built one of the city’s most significant works of art deco architecture. Designed for a German social and recreational club, the Houston Turn-Verein Clubhouse was unlike anything in the city that had come before it. This one-story building of concrete and brick with cast stone ornaments emphasized horizontal lines, geometric shapes, and structural sturdiness. It featured details rooted in Greek antiquity and a stone sculpture of an eagle sitting above the main entrance.⁷ It represented one of Houston’s first buildings to use the Zig-zag Deco architectural style almost exclusively. Although this style first became popular in Paris a few years earlier, it had its roots in design trends from Austria. Consequently, although the Turn-Verein was regarded as an art deco masterpiece, Finger described it as a product of the Viennese modern style known as the Sezeession. The Turn-Verein demonstrated how Finger’s exposure to Austrian design styles when he was young and his Austrian training, unique among Houston architects, impacted his work and prepared him to explore the new American moderne styles.⁸

While Finger preferred to design commercial and institutional structures, friends and wealthy Houston businessmen alike commissioned him to design their private homes. One of these friends, Abe Weingarten, a fellow congregant at Beth Israel, had Finger design his



Finger designed over thirty Weingarten's grocery stores for his friend and fellow Beth Israel congregant, Abe Weingarten. Most of these stores bore a similar design to the one shown here, in a more streamlined moderne style, which Finger explored later in his career. The style was characterized by metallic, smooth, rounded features and emphasized the horizontal instead of the vertical. Quite a few of the structures that Finger designed for Weingarten's still stand today, such as this one on Washington Avenue, but they have been altered so much that they bear only a skeletal resemblance to their original glory and are not easy to locate.

Photo from Bob Bailey Studio Photographic Archive, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.



In 1938, Joseph Finger designed this 5,500 square foot, four-bedroom home for Joseph Weingarten. This house sits at South MacGregor Way and Oakcrest Drive in the Riverside Terrace subdivision.

Photo courtesy of flickr.com.



Houston City Hall stands as a lasting tribute to the art moderne architectural style for which Joseph Finger is known.

Photo courtesy of wikicommons.

home in Riverside Terrace. In addition, over the course of their careers, Finger designed almost thirty Weingarten's grocery stores in Houston, some with interesting art deco detailing (and few of which still stand today).

Of Finger's residential clients, the most prominent was James M. West, a lumberman, cattleman, oil man, and banker.⁹ The home Finger designed for James West in the Clear Lake area in the 1920s was one of the largest in Houston at the time. Employing an Italian Renaissance style, Finger cared deeply about perfecting every detail of the home's design. He designed each guest bathroom, of which there were at least seven, to have a specific color scheme. When he could not find the specific color grout that he wanted for one of the bathrooms, he had coral shipped in from the South Pacific to create the right color. The home, which had multiple swimming pools, stables, and fish ponds, was valued at \$750,000 or the equivalent of \$9.7 million today. Finger designed many other homes, almost all of them in Riverside Terrace, which had the city's largest Jewish population at the time. Finger usually did not enjoy designing houses, actually claiming that the wives were too difficult to work with and had a frustrating tendency to change their minds.

In 1928, Finger designed a four-story building for Jesse Jones that was to house the Houston Chamber

of Commerce on the upper floors and Levy Bros. Dry Goods on the street level. After the designs were made in the ornate art deco style, Jones turned the plans over to Alfred C. Finn to add five floors to the design. Another of Houston's prominent architects, Finn essentially served as Jones's personal architect. He stripped most of Finger's art deco embellishments from the design, and Jones had the building constructed according to Finn's revisions. Later, Jones had Finn alter the building again, adding thirteen more floors. The building still stands downtown today, but is unrecognizable due to modern redesigns.¹⁰

Despite the competition that naturally may have arisen between Houston's two greatest architects, Finger and Finn later collaborated on one large-scale project that took seven years to complete: Jefferson Davis Hospital on Allen Parkway. By this point, the Great Depression had caused the ostentatious art deco style to fall out of fashion, and the more practical moderne style had taken its place. While Finger and Finn designed a less ornate building than would have been built in the 1920s, lack of funds forced them to strip away much of the decoration from their design. The hospital was completed in 1937 and demolished in 1999. The Federal Reserve Branch Building now occupies its former site. The collaboration may have made it seem like relations between the two ar-

chitects had improved, but this was not entirely the case. Finger claimed that he had done most of the work on the hospital, and Finn received most of the credit.¹¹

Finger and Finn later found themselves fighting over one of the most important buildings in Houston, and the most important building of Finger's career. In 1928, the City Planning Commission's vision for Houston's fifth city hall encompassed a building, which would be part of a larger civic center and match the Spanish Renaissance style of the Houston Public Library's Julia Ideson Building. Houston voters approved bonds for the project, and the commission hired Finn to design this city hall. When Finn revealed his initial design, however, he unveiled a modernistic twenty-story skyscraper modeled on one recently built in Los Angeles. The Great Depression halted the entire project, but eventually plans reemerged to build a new city hall, without the accompanying civic center, and were approved in 1938. When it came time to choose an architect, then mayor R. H. Fonville wanted to give the contract to Finn because Fonville felt obligated to give the job to the architect who had worked on it in the early stages. The city council disagreed with the mayor about obligations to Finn and, instead, awarded the contract to Finger. Although Finger was chosen by city council, the switch from Finn to Finger resulted in a disastrous lawsuit for Finger. The court forced him to pay \$11,500 of his commission, the equivalent of about \$180,000 today, back to the city to redistribute the money to Finn and other architects who had drawn the previous city hall plans.¹²

When Finger returned with his modern design for city hall, Fonville, in favor of a more classical design, again criticized it as being "ultra-modernistic." Finger responded by saying, "Here in America we are rapidly developing our own type of architecture which is far above that of foreign countries . . . We are building for the masses, not the classes."¹³ In spite of Mayor Fonville's remarks, Finger's city hall design garnered much praise for its unification of both conservative and progressive trends in architecture.

The overall structure of this Depression-era, PWA-funded building is a simple and architecturally sound ten-story skyscraper that is narrower on top than it is at the ground level. The building is made from Texas Limestone, which was not Finger's first choice. Finger wanted to use Indiana Limestone, but Jesse Jones pressured Finger to go with the native Texas Limestone.¹⁴ Compared to this simplicity, the sculptures in relief surrounding the outside of the building are incredibly ornate, depicting idealistic scenes of industry, agriculture, and civic service.¹⁵ The conservative, "stripped" moderne exterior contrasts with the height of moderne opulence found inside the building's main lobby. Four large murals depicting industry, culture, social activities, and municipal activities cover the ceiling and surround another mural of a stylized globe with Houston represented by a large lone star. Water fountains of marble dot the lobby walls, and signs using fonts typical of the 1930s

direct citizens to various public service departments. Finger's Houston City Hall combined conservative and progressive elements; it strongly represented Houston as a city whose past had led to its prosperity and that eagerly embraced the future.

Finger's success with City Hall earned him more contracts for public buildings, such as Houston's first airport terminal designed specifically for commercial passenger aviation. Finger's terminal and hangar opened at Houston Municipal Airport in 1940 and featured fun art deco aviation-themed ornamentation sculpted into the buildings. After falling into disrepair, the Houston Aeronautical Heritage Society restored and reopened the building as the 1940 Air Terminal Museum, which sits adjacent to Hobby Airport (formerly Houston Municipal Airport). It is one of a very small number of aviation-themed art deco structures remaining in the United States today.



The Temple of Rest art deco mausoleum is the second building Joseph Finger designed for Congregation Beth Israel. It is unique for many reasons, one of which is that Joseph Finger himself is interred there. His body is right next to that of his wife and some of Houston's most prominent Jewish families, including the Weingartens.
Photo by Jim Parsons.

Joseph Finger, like his fellow architects and citizens in all professions, suffered in the Great Depression when work was scarce. Unlike most others, though, Finger preferred to slowly pay off his debts rather than go into bankruptcy. The outbreak of World War II affected his financial situation so greatly that in 1940 he had a serious stroke, from which he never fully recovered. With declining health, Finger hired George Rustay as a new architectural partner. As Finger's health declined, Rustay gradually did more of the work in the firm for projects such as Battlestein's department store downtown, which was built in 1950. Finger died in 1953, and is interred in Beth Israel's Temple of Rest, an art deco mausoleum that he designed.

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