

the practical wisdom of engaging trained professionals. Salesmanship, initiative, and knowledge of design and engineering enabled Texas architects to elbow aside the builder-contractors in the realm of public architecture. Their willingness to seek work far from home spread their influence throughout the state. Although they put business considerations ahead of artistic concerns, these architects designed structures of enduring beauty. Despite occasional difficulties with commissioners courts and other public clients, they upheld standards and furthered the cause of professional architects in Texas. Their contribution to Texas served not only to enrich the built environment, but also to establish architectural practice as a legitimate endeavor and pave the way for a new generation of professionals.

## A Legacy of Civic Pride: Houston's PWA Buildings

*Steven R. Strom*

When Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the presidency on March 4, 1933, the United States was deeply mired in the greatest economic depression of the twentieth century. Almost immediately after taking office, on March 5, President Roosevelt called Congress into special session to begin dealing with the nation's shattered prosperity. From March 9 to June 16, in what would come to be known as "The Hundred Days," Congress passed an enormous amount of important legislation aimed at promoting economic recovery, primarily through the reform of industrial, agricultural, and financial practices and at providing relief for America's unemployed millions, chiefly through the creation of public works jobs. The Public Works Administration (PWA) was one of the earliest "alphabet soup" agencies that Roosevelt's New Deal established in order to provide unemployment relief with civic-oriented job programs. These agencies were authorized by the National Industrial Recovery Act, which was passed by Congress in June 1933. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), which is sometimes confused with the PWA because it provided overlapping funding for some PWA projects, was not approved by Congress until "The Second Hundred Days" of New Deal legislation during the summer of 1935.

The PWA created jobs for large numbers of people through public works projects, including the construction of highways, bridges, and public buildings such as schools, city halls, courthouses, monuments, hospitals, libraries, waterworks, and auditoriums. The PWA was administered by the Department of the Interior and its secretary, Harold Ickes, who decentralized the program to emphasize state-level operations. During the years of its

---

Steven R. Strom is the Architectural Archivist at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

existence (1933-39), the PWA was responsible for the construction of 65 percent of the nation's new civic buildings and 70 percent of its new schools. In all, the PWA appropriated approximately four billion dollars for the construction of these new facilities.<sup>1</sup> Southern cities like Houston especially benefited from these projects, since northern cities had traditionally invested more heavily in urban infrastructure and public buildings than had those of the South. Administratively, Texas was placed in Region Five of the PWA's regional divisions, along with Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, New Mexico, and other southwestern states, and Fort Worth was named as the state's PWA headquarters.<sup>2</sup> Most historical accounts of the Great Depression relate that Texas in general, and Houston specifically, avoided the worst ravages of the depression. Certainly much of the reason for the state's good fortune was directly related to the enormous number of Texan PWA projects, which pumped huge amounts of money into the state's economy. In June 1939, the regional director of the PWA announced that the total value of PWA projects in Texas, either under construction or completed, had reached \$294,551,492.<sup>3</sup> The state's success in obtaining PWA grants was at least partially due to President Roosevelt's 1933 appointment of Houstonian Jesse Jones to chair the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). Jones held this position until 1939, and the RFC's duties—which were expanded in 1932 from aiding business corporations, railroads, and financial institutions to also assisting agriculture and state and local public works—enabled him to help direct PWA funds to his native state. Texas's influential Congressional delegation, which included Democratic majority leader Sam Rayburn and Houston's Albert Thomas, plus Roosevelt's Texan vice-president, John Nance Garner, also helped to steer funds to the state. The list of PWA construction projects in Texas ranged from the Galveston Causeway to small schools in West Texas; from Fort Worth's City-County Tubercular Hospital to museums for the Texas Centennial celebration in Dallas, from the dredging of the Brazos harbor near Point Isabel to improvements for Randolph Field in San Antonio; and from dormitories on the campus of Texas Tech University in Lubbock to water and sewer systems for El Paso, Austin, and San Antonio.<sup>4</sup> The diversity of projects was aston-

ishing in its scope, and few cities in the state failed to benefit in some way from the vast expenditure of public funds, which by 1937 supported 551 projects throughout Texas.<sup>5</sup> School buildings accounted for the largest expenditure of PWA funds in the state, followed by water and road projects.<sup>6</sup> Tens of thousands of blue-collar jobs were created for Texans by the PWA, with incalculable accompanying benefits for white-collar professionals, such as architects and engineers, who helped to design and supervise the construction projects.

In Texas, the PWA "had a gigantic range of diversified lands, climate and occupations to work with."<sup>7</sup> Architecturally, the existing buildings of Texas and the other states of Region Five showed a wider variation of native styles than any other PWA region, reflecting the many climatic and geographical differences of the area. Architects working on PWA projects in Texas employed a range of styles that showed both the influence of the Spanish and the French traditions as well as the then-contemporary "modern" (or "Moderne") style, which was used for numerous public buildings. Indeed, in the introduction to their 1939 survey of the architecture of PWA buildings, authors C. W. Short and R. Stanley-Brown went so far as to suggest that in its successful use of the Moderne style, the PWA may have perhaps created "the seed of the long sought school of American design."<sup>8</sup> The PWA did not dictate which architectural styles were to be used in agency-approved projects, nor were specifications and drawings produced at PWA offices. PWA policies stipulated that the "character of architecture, the materials to be used and the type of construction are left entirely to the private architects and engineers employed by the owners on Non-federal projects and those employed by the Federal agencies on Federal projects."<sup>9</sup>

Rather than exercising direct supervision, the PWA acted "somewhat in the nature of a bank or a large building and loan association."<sup>10</sup> For federal projects, grants were made to cover up to 100 percent of the total cost of the project; nonfederal applicants could apply for a loan only, or a loan for up to 55 percent of the total construction costs plus a grant for part or all of the remaining 45 percent. The PWA, with its emphasis on private initiative and enterprise and its funding of projects that usually required skilled labor, was generally looked upon with more favor by Houstonians

<sup>1</sup>Lois Craig, *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics and Symbols in United States Government Buildings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), 342-350.

<sup>2</sup>C. W. Short and R. Stanley-Brown, *Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies between the Years 1933 and 1939 with the Assistance of the Public Works Administration* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 44.

<sup>3</sup>*Houston Chronicle*, June 15, 1939.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, June 16, 17, and 18, 1937.

<sup>5</sup>*Houston Chronicle*, June 15, 1937.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, June 16, 1937.

<sup>8</sup>Short and Stanley-Brown, *Public Buildings*, 3.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

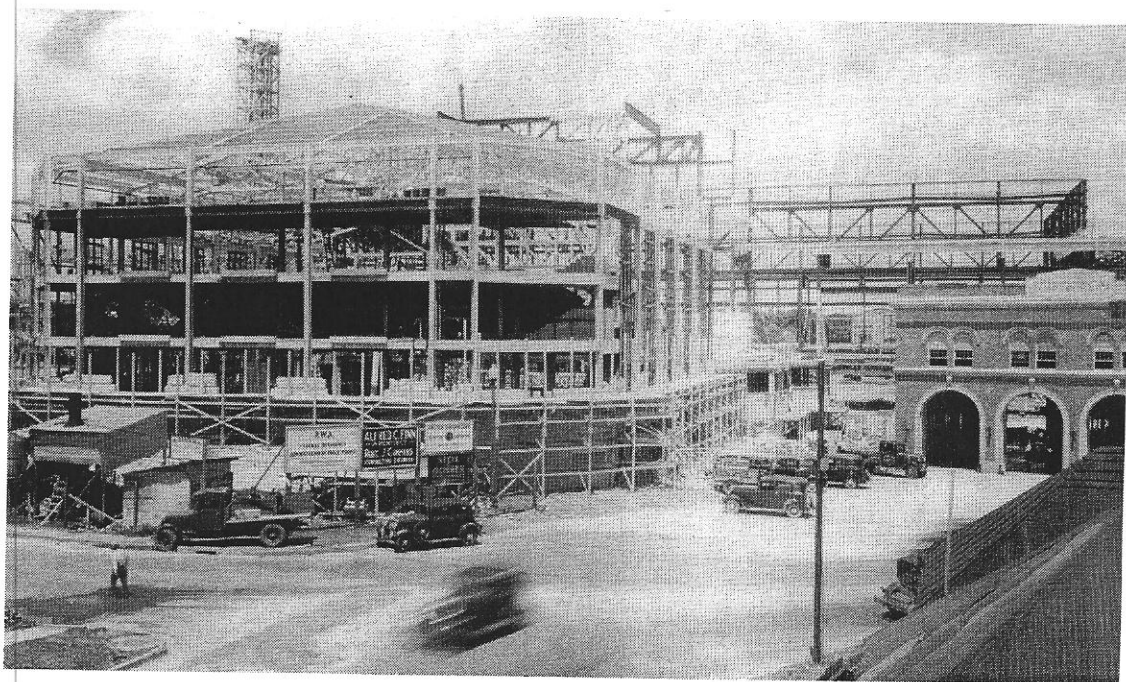
than the WPA, which frequently hired the most destitute, unskilled laborers and constituted direct federal employment rather than involving private business. With \$3,821,000 in school construction grants, PWA labor built 25 elementary schools, 16 high schools, and rehabilitated 37 other educational buildings in Houston.<sup>11</sup> In addition, many of Houston's most important civic structures, including the San Jacinto Monument, the current City Hall, the Jefferson Davis Hospital, the De Pelchin Children's Center, and the Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall, were built with the assistance of PWA grants. Even the Houston Ship Channel was dredged an additional two feet, from 30 to 32 feet in depth, with a PWA allotment of \$2,848,560.<sup>12</sup>

All of these projects created a sense of hope and pride for the citizens of Houston during the 1930s. To this day, both natives and newcomers to Houston, who may never have heard of the PWA or who may have no knowledge of its local involvement, will point out PWA-constructed buildings to their fellow Houstonians, aware at some level of the quality of workmanship that is exhibited in these structures. Aside from the immediate short-term effects that these buildings had on the city in the way of providing jobs and hope for the future, the PWA structures that proudly constitute a part of our city's fabric provide a lasting monument to the perseverance and determination of the people who endured against the hard economic times of the Great Depression. The photographs and illustrations that follow document just a portion of the PWA's legacy to the people of Houston, fulfilling the hope of authors Short and Stanley-Brown that "Perhaps future generations will classify these years as one of the epoch-making periods of advancement in the civilization not only of our own country but also of the human race."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>*Houston Chronicle*, June 17, 1937.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, June 19, 1937.

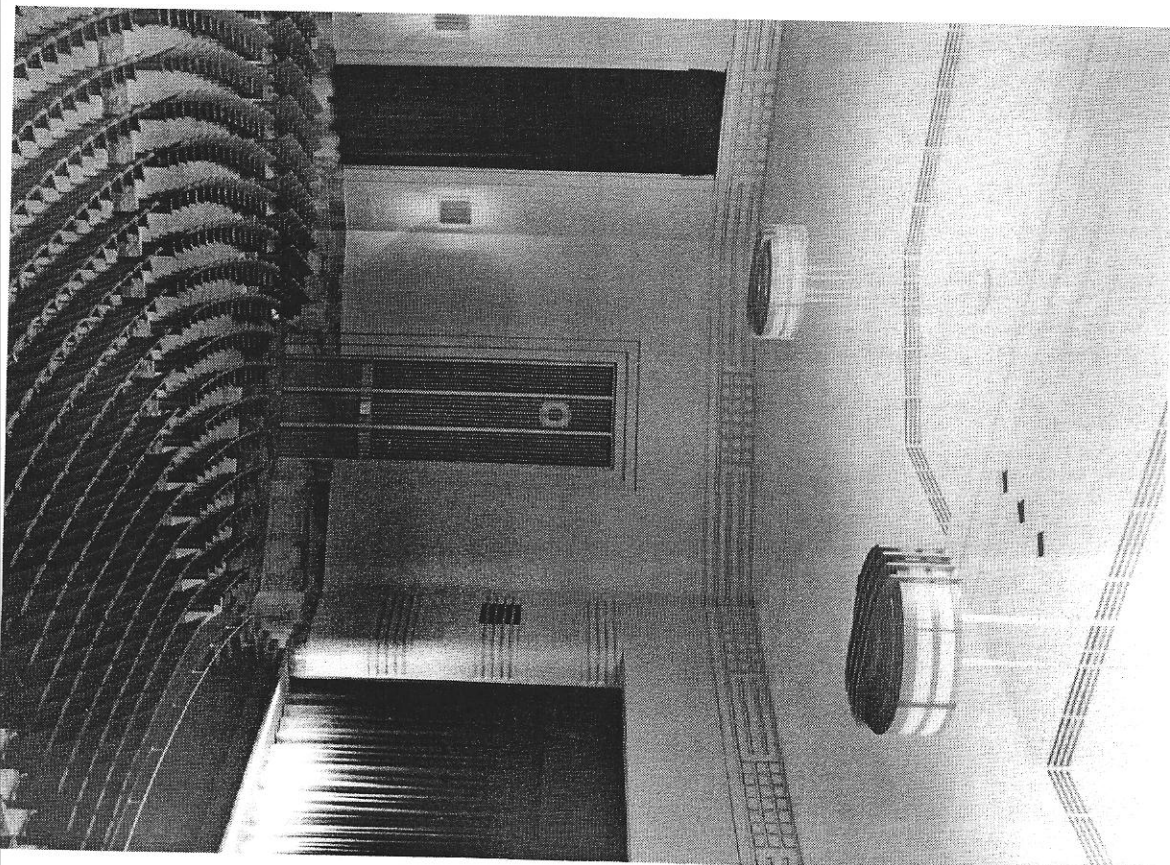
<sup>13</sup>Short and Stanley-Brown, *Public Buildings*, III.



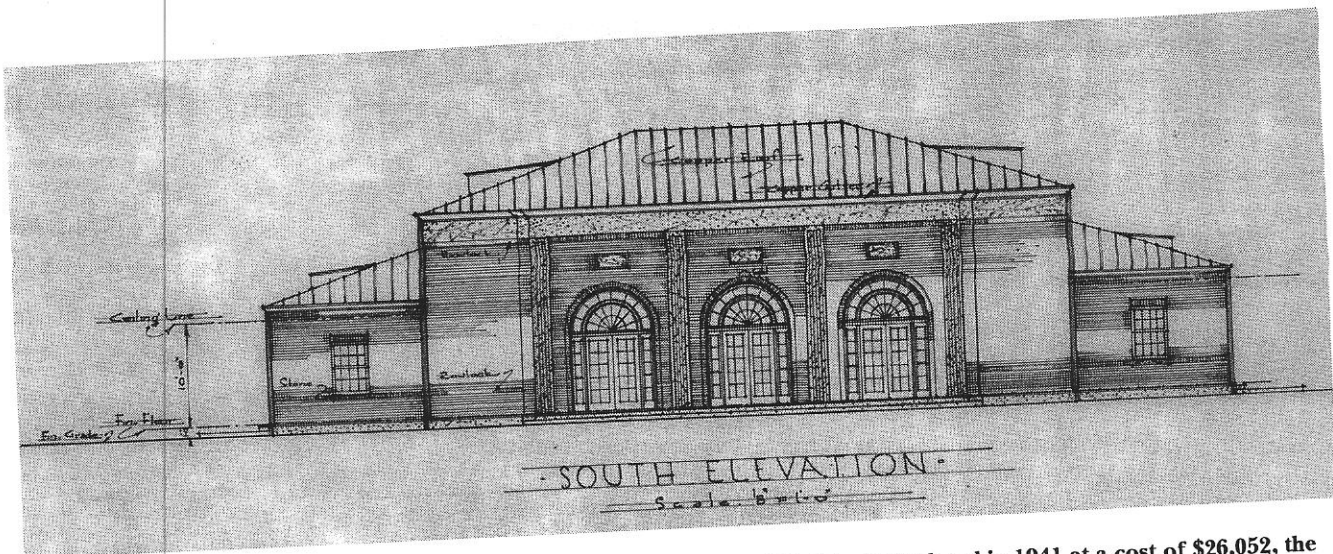
Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall under construction, ca. 1937. The building was referred to as the "Jesse H. Jones Coliseum" in early press accounts of its construction, and Jones took a personal interest in its progress. Jones's favorite architect, Alfred C. Finn, designed the buildings. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held on November 4, 1936, and formal dedication services on November 26, 1937. The PWA contributed \$1,329,508 to the project.



The Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall became one of Houston's foremost public buildings as the site of circuses, symphonies, the Fat Stock Show, athletic events of all kinds, and conventions. Numerous changes have occurred over the years to alter the appearance of Finn's original 1936-37 Moderne design, particularly when the seating capacity was expanded and the building "modernized" by the firm of Lloyd and Morgan during the mid-1950s. The Coliseum and Music Hall are scheduled for demolition in 1998 so that a new, larger music hall can be built on the site at Bagby and Walker streets.



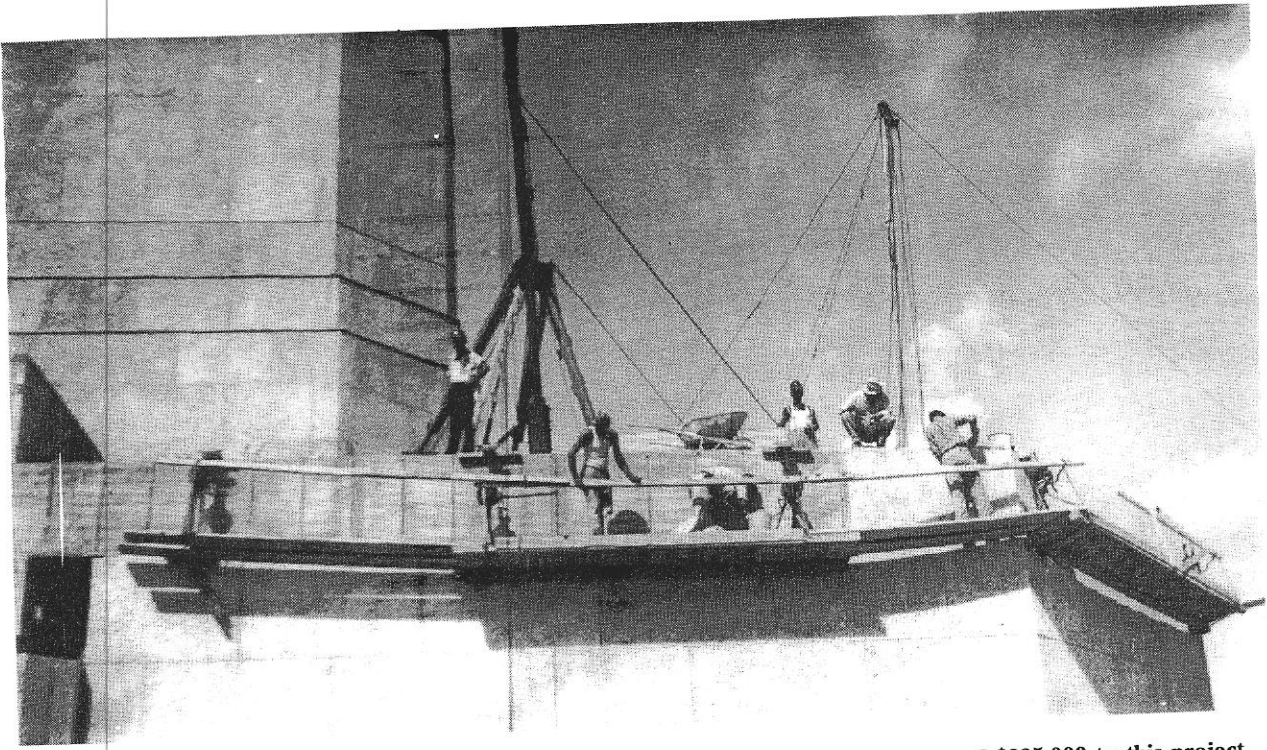
Interior scene of the newly completed Music Hall, ca. 1937, shows the simple finishings employed by Alfred Finn, with a Moderne frieze band used as the principal decorative motif.



Design for South Elevation, Houston Garden Center, by William Ward Watkin. Completed in 1941 at a cost of \$26,052, the Houston Garden Center was built in Hermann Park as a clubhouse for the Houston Federation of Garden Clubs and it still serves that purpose today. The botanical gardens and grounds surrounding the building were landscaped by the Kansas City landscape architects Hare and Hare. The Houston Metropolitan Research Center's Architectural Archive contains many drawings of Houston's parks donated by Hare and Hare and by the Parks and Recreation Department, such as the one shown here. HMRC's Architectural Archive also holds original drawings for the San Jacinto Monument, the Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall, Jefferson Davis Hospital, and Stephen F. Austin Senior High School.



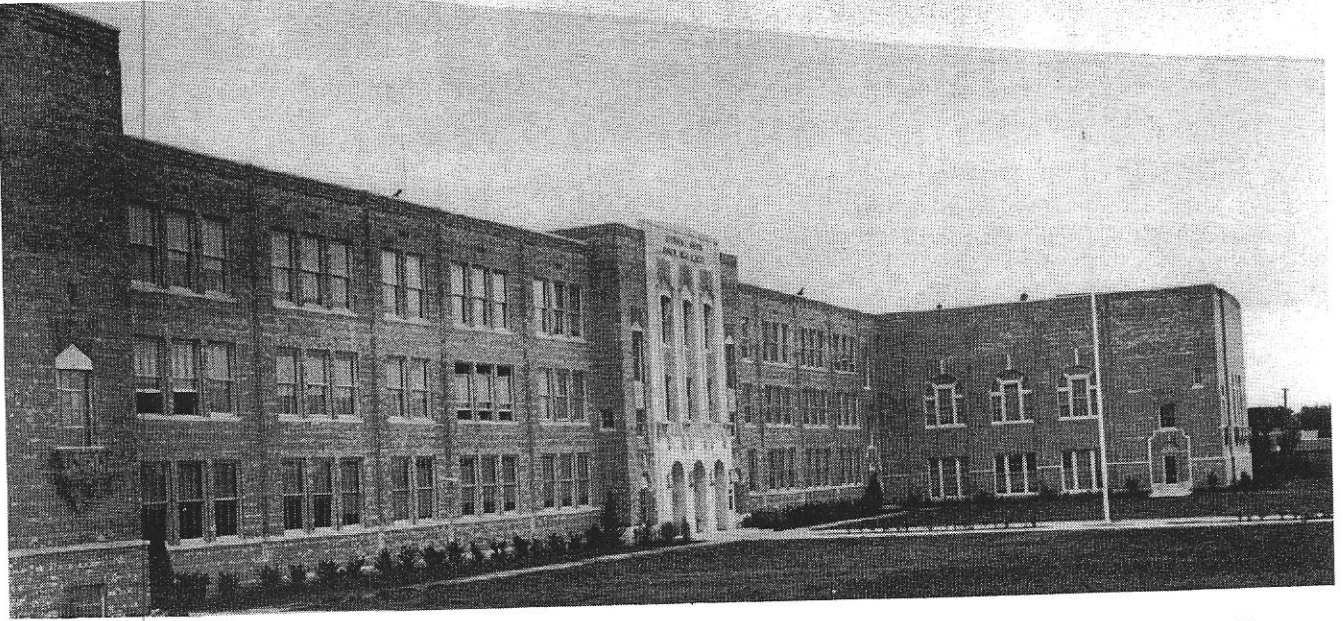
Architect Alfred C. Finn (left) and engineer Robert J. Cummins (right) proudly display a model of the design for the San Jacinto Monument. In a letter dated July 24, 1935, architect Joseph Finger wrote to the chairman of the monument's building committee: "As I understand it, Mr. A. C. Finn has been working hard on this project and I do not believe that you would be making a mistake in doing everything you can on Mr. Finn's behalf in securing this commission. If you remember, many years ago you told me that if I do not do a certain thing I would not enter the gates of St. Peter. I will now say the same thing: If you do not follow my suggestion, neither of us will enter the gates of St. Peter."



Construction workers on roof of base, San Jacinto Monument. The PWA gave a grant of \$225,000 to this project, which ultimately cost approximately \$1,500,000 and was also funded by a wide variety of other sources during its construction years of 1936-39. Robert J. Cummins was the consulting engineer and the general contractor was the W. S. Bellows Construction Company. Widely regarded at the time as an engineering marvel, the monument was cited as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark in 1992 for the innovative construction techniques used in its building.



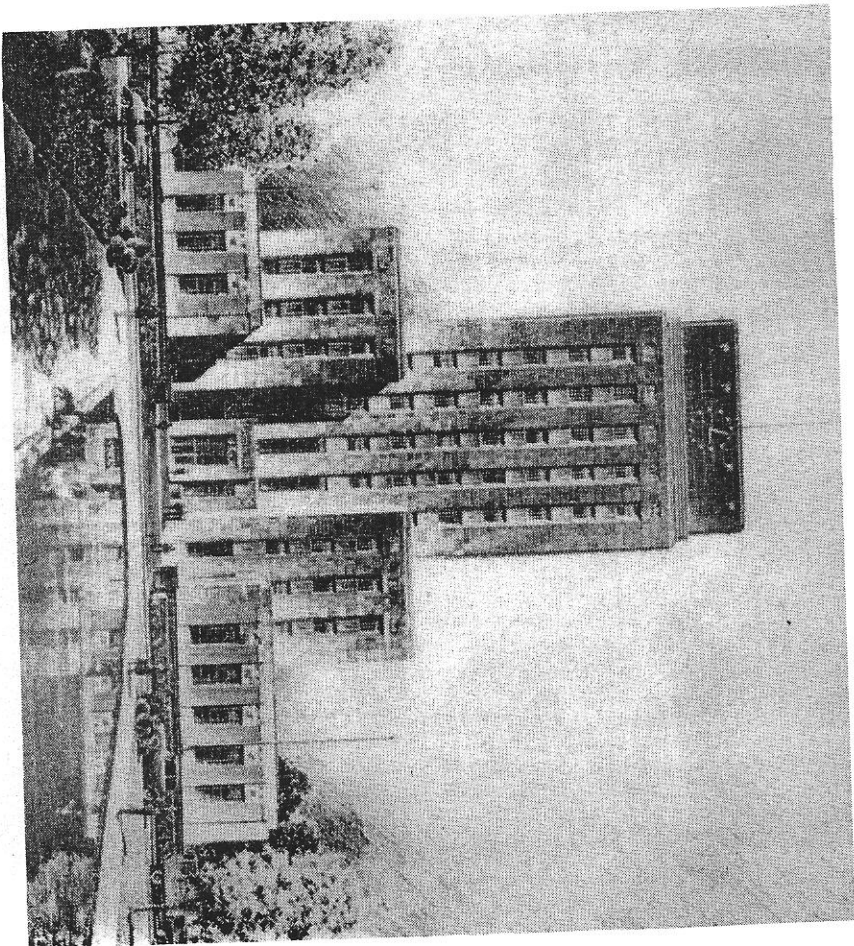
Portion of carved, allegorical frieze panels that surround the bottom of the San Jacinto Monument shaft. Designed by William McVey of Houston, the panels depict the nineteenth-century settlement of Texas. Sculpture was an integral part of many PWA buildings.



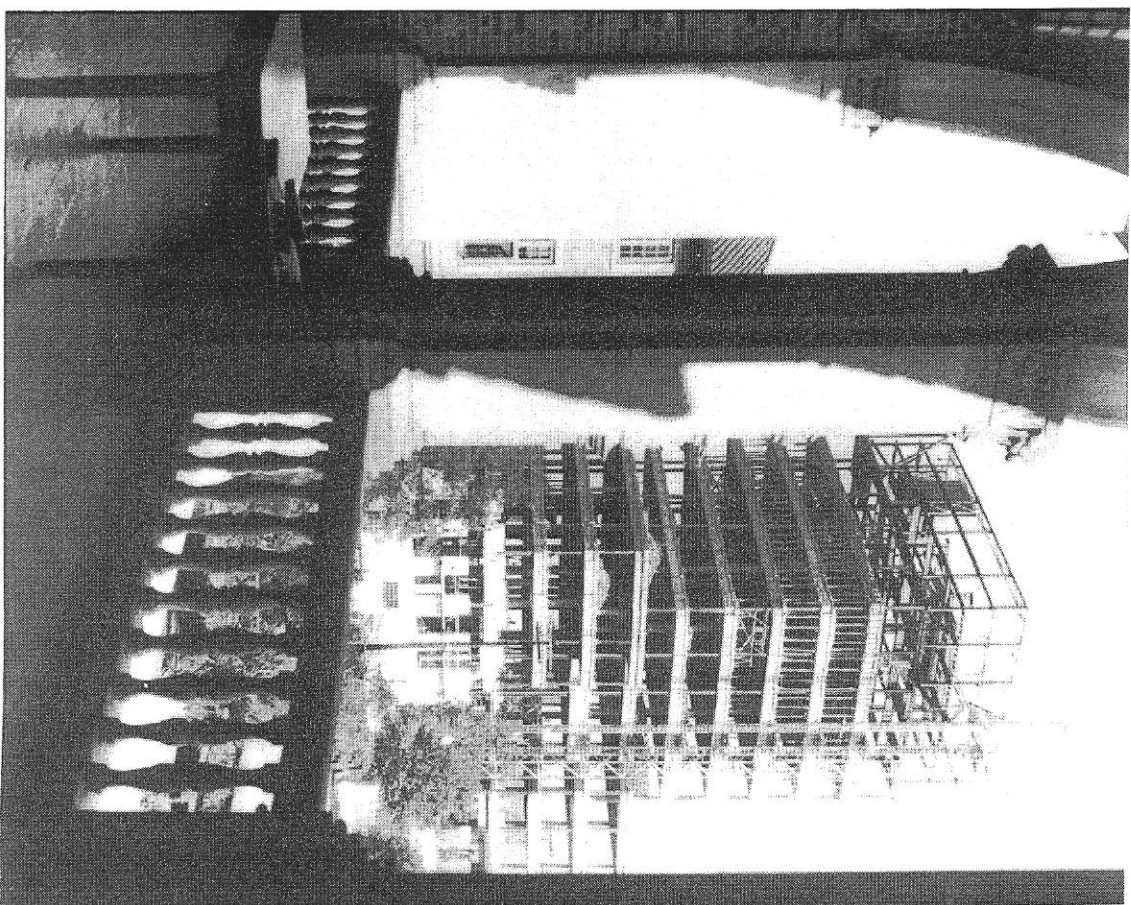
Stephen F. Austin Senior High School, by Birdsall P. Briscoe, Maurice J. Sullivan, Sam H. Dixon, Jr., and Joseph Finger, at 1700 Dumble, completed in December 1937. For what was then known as the East End High School, the architects employed a more conservative architectural style than was used for other Houston PWA buildings, using red brick trimmed with limestone.



Mirabeau B. Lamar High School, by John F. Staub and Kenneth Franzheim, with Harry Payne, Lamar Q. Cato, and L. A. Glover as associate architects, at 3325 Westheimer, also completed in December 1937. Designed in the Moderne style and built of white brick and Texas limestone, with a large bas-relief map of Texas carved over one entrance, Lamar looks quite different from Austin even though the floor plans of the two schools are almost identical. A controversy ensued when an East End parent publicly protested that Austin had been built in a shoddy manner and was of poorer quality than Lamar, then known as the South End High School. PWA and school officials, as well as architects and contractors, vigorously protested and pointed out that the expense per classroom at Austin was actually \$1,000 more than for Lamar and the auditorium at Lamar had a beech floor while Austin's auditorium floor was built of more expensive maple. Lamar's higher total cost was expected from the start as Lamar had to accommodate a larger student body than Austin.

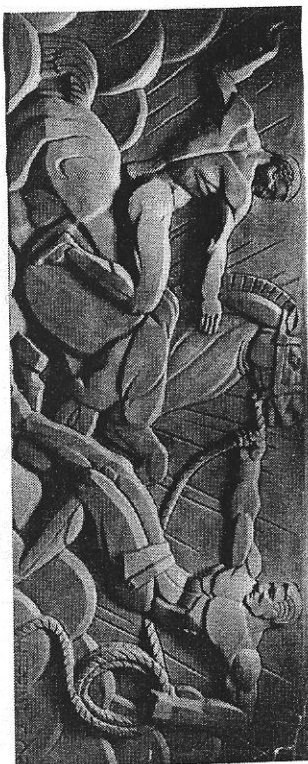


Joseph Finger's rendering of the Houston City Hall showing swans swimming in the reflecting pool. Mayor R. H. Fonville protested that Finger's design clashed with the existing Spanish Renaissance architecture of the Houston Public Library. He advocated the selection of William Ward Watkin or James Ruskin Bailey and Alfred C. Finn, who had already worked on preliminary designs for the City Hall, so that the civic center buildings would form a cohesive architectural whole. This was already an impossibility, since the Library was hardly in harmony with the new Music Hall and Coliseum. Finger's classical Moderne design, which Fonville called "ultra-modernistic," was typical of other skyscraper public buildings of the period such as the Los Angeles City Hall and the Nebraska and North Dakota capitols. Finger was chosen as City Hall architect by a unanimous vote of the city council over the mayor's objections, and the 10-story structure was completed in 1939 with the assistance of a PWA grant of \$818,811.

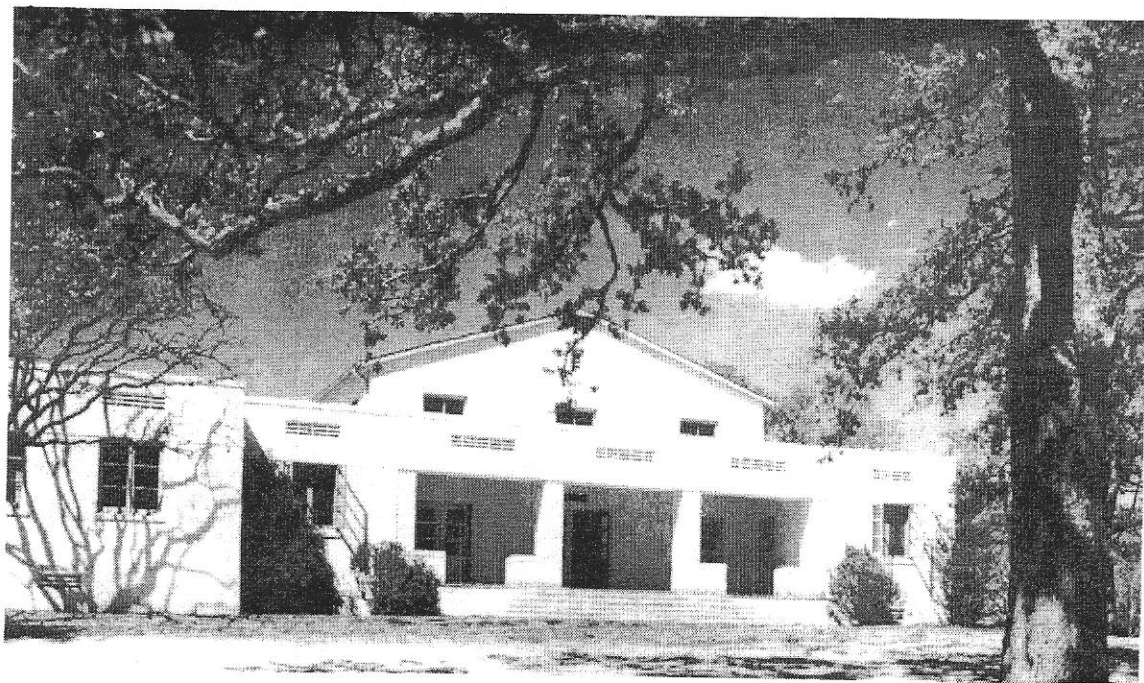
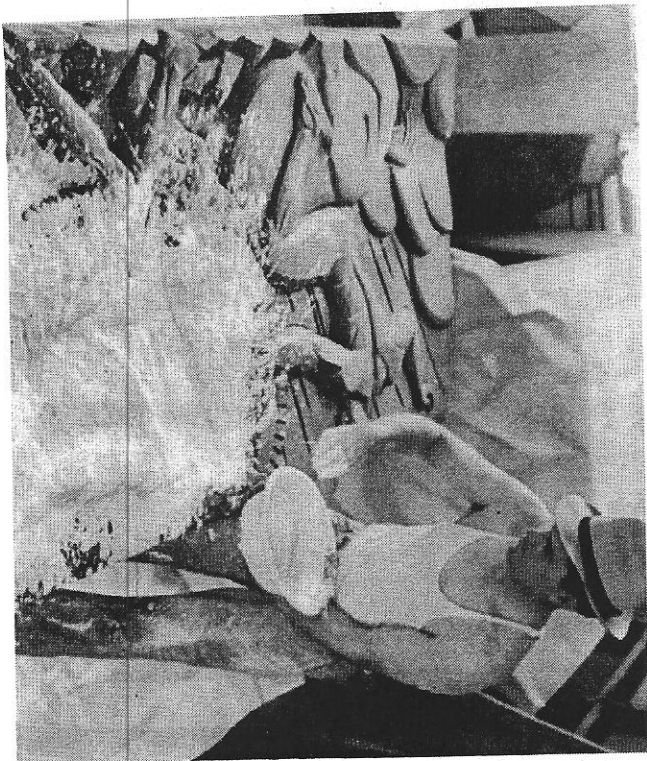


Construction of City Hall as seen from the loggia of the Houston Public Library (now the Library's Julia Ideson Building), ca. 1939.

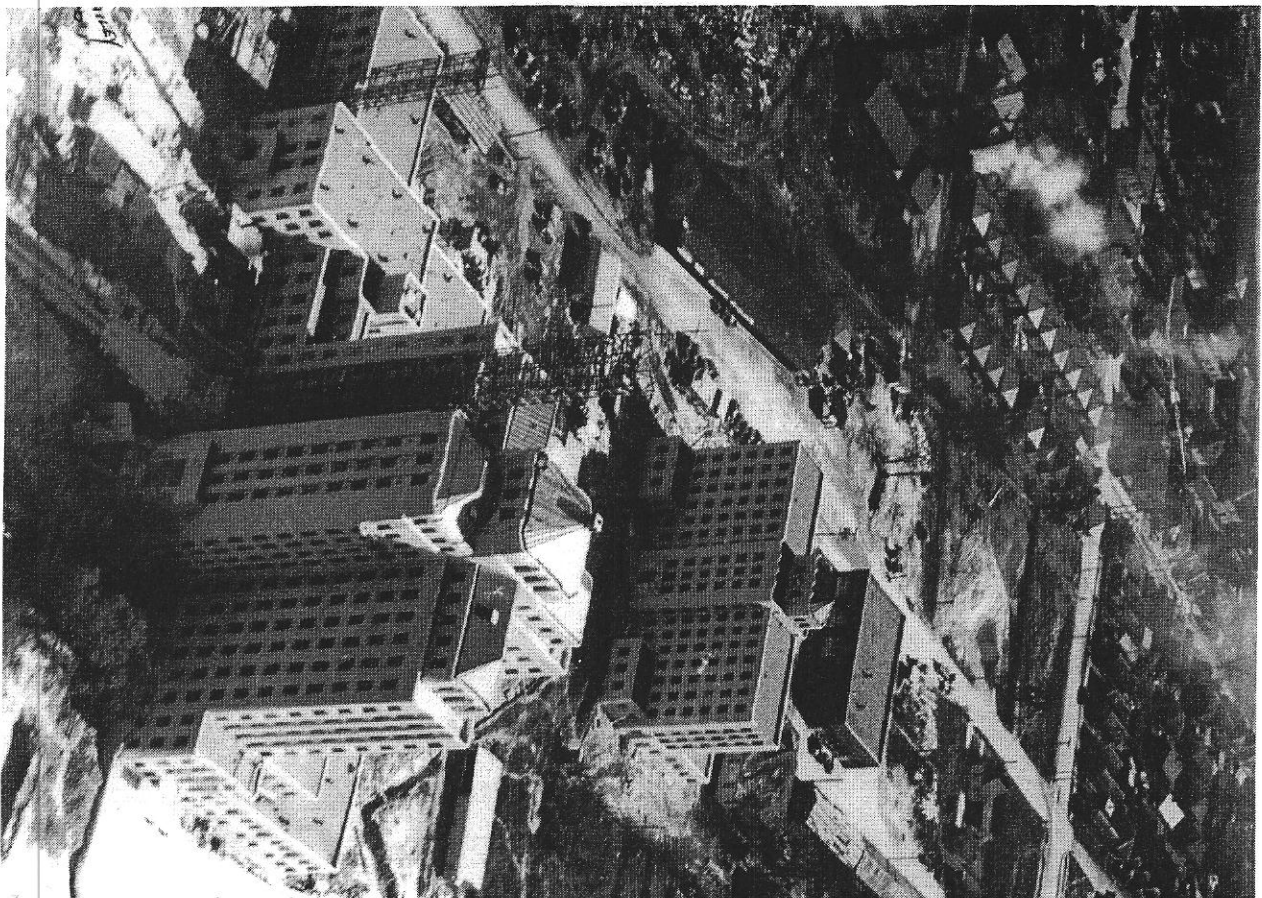




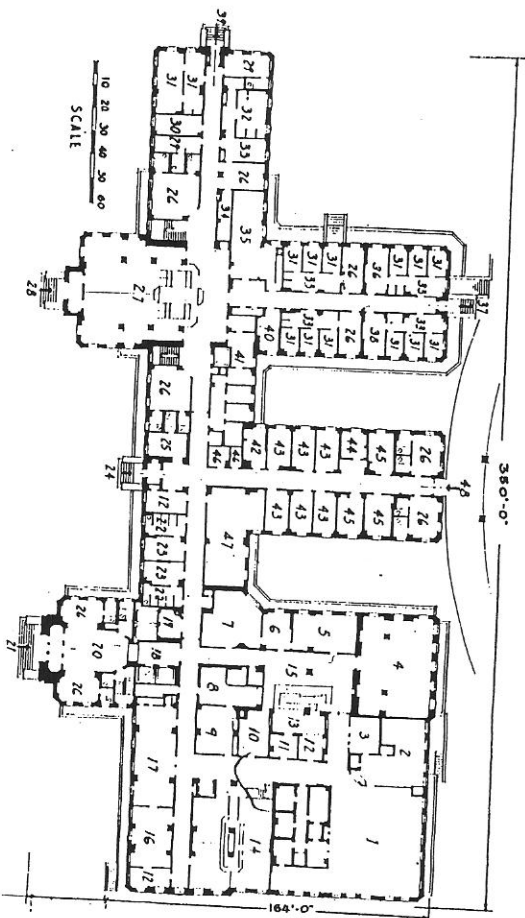
The stone sculpture above the City Hall's front entrance represents men uniting in government to control the chaotic forces of nature. The sculpture was designed by Beaumont native Herring Coe with the assistance of Raoul Josssett of Dallas. Below, Coe prepares a plaster cast from his clay model. Stone carvers then worked from the cast to reproduce the sculpture in limestone. Coe's City Hall work is strikingly similar to other pieces executed for public buildings by sculptors around the world during the 1930s, from the statuary at the entrances of the Los Angeles (1932) and Berlin (1936) Olympic stadiums to monuments ranging from Tokyo to Pretoria.



Dining Hall, De Pelchin Faith Home and Children's Bureau (now De Pelchin Children's Center), by Stayton Nunn and Milton McGinty located at 100 Sandman just off Memorial Drive. Construction of the complex began in December 1937 and the five cottages, dining hall (shown here), administration building, and hospital were completed in July 1938. Concrete floors, stuccoed walls, and wood roof framing were used in the construction of the buildings. The De Pelchin Faith Home was established in 1892 as a nonsectarian, community-funded institution to provide care for abandoned and homeless children in Harris County and in 1940 gave assistance to 1,087 children.



Aerial view showing Jefferson Davis Hospital and the adjacent nurses home under construction, ca. 1937. The corner stone of the hospital was laid on July 8, 1936, and the building was completed on October 28, 1937. The hospital was located on Buffalo Drive, which was later replaced by the Allen Parkway.



- 1 - KITCHEN
- 2 - BAKERY
- 3 - FREEZER R.M.
- 4 - NURSES D. R.
- 5 - HEAD NURSES D. R.
- 6 - STEERING R.M.
- 7 - STAFF DINING R.M.
- 8 - CHANGING R.M.
- 9 - DISH WASHING R.M.
- 10 - OFFICE HELP D. L.
- 11 - DAILY SUPPLIES
- 12 - OFFICE
- 13 - COURT
- 14 - WHITE & COROLED HELP CATERING
- 15 - CATERING
- 16 - SPECIAL DIET KIT.
- 17 - CENTRAL STAIRING R.
- 18 - ELEVATOR LOBBY
- 19 - SERVICE ELEVATORS
- 20 - LOBBY
- 21 - MAIN ENTRANCE
- 22 - DRESSING R.M.
- 23 - BATH
- 24 - PATIENTS ENT.
- 25 - RECEPTION R.M.
- 26 - WAITING ROOM
- 27 - CENTRAL STAIRING R.
- 28 - OUT PATIENTS ENT.
- 29 - LOCKER ROOM
- 30 - OVER TOW
- 31 - TREATMENT R.M.
- 32 - ELEM. TREATMENT R.
- 33 - WORK ROOM
- 34 - WASHING TUB
- 35 - PHARMACY
- 36 - MEDICINE
- 37 - ELEVATOR LOBBY
- 38 - PATIENTS ENT.
- 39 - PHYSICIANS
- 40 - CLINIC LABORATORY
- 41 - SOCIAL SERVICE R.M.
- 42 - LABORATORY
- 43 - WARD
- 44 - UTILITY ROOM
- 45 - EMERG. OPERATING R.M.
- 46 - STORAGE ROOM
- 47 - PATIENTS CLOTHES
- 48 - AMBULANCE ENTRANCE

Plan of first floor, Jefferson Davis Hospital. Designed by Alfred C. Finn and Joseph Finger in the Moderne style, the central portion of the main building has 11 stories, and each of the wings has 10 stories. The hospital was known as the City-County Hospital during its construction to avoid being confused with the already-existing Jefferson Davis Hospital, which was located at Elder and Girard streets. The 1937 Jefferson Davis Hospital remained in active use until 1989, when the Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital opened as its replacement in northeast Houston. Currently, both of the old Jefferson Davis Hospital buildings stand vacant.