

# UNION BANKERS BUILDING

2551 ELM ST.



## DESIGNATION REPORT CITY OF DALLAS

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

December 19, 1984

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The Union Bankers Building, on the western edge of the Deep Ellum district at the corner of Elm and Good-Latimer, was built in 1915-16 by the first black architect to practice in Dallas.<sup>1</sup> Constructed as the state headquarters of the Black Knights of Pythias, the five-story building was a center of social services and activities for the large and still active black fraternal organization.

The Grand Lodge of the the Knights of Pythias was organized in Texas in 1885 as a primarily social order, though it claimed over a million dollars of insurance in the state.<sup>2</sup> As Grand Chancellor, W. S. Willis remarked in a January, 1919, speech at the Pythian temple, that the founding fathers "made Friendship, Charity and Benevolence the cornerstone of their building. They knew nothing of insurance, but observing the poor white man as beneficiary, thereby first sought to join the companies organized by white men and, being refused, at once began the great work of endowment of lodge insurance." The Knights not only insured blacks, but employed and did business with blacks.<sup>3</sup> There were 174 Texas lodges in 1919, and by 1921 the number had grown to 460.

The Knights rented space in the Pythian Temple to a variety of black businesses and professionals, including the state's first black dentist and surgeon. The building hosted many conventions, lectures, dances and other activities as well. The organization went into receivership and lost the building in 1939, as many members defaulted on loans.<sup>4</sup> The building changed hands several times, continuing to house a variety of businesses, until Union Bankers Insurance Company purchased the building in 1959. An unknown writer describing Deep Ellum for the Federal Writers Project in 1940 noted that the "most imposing edifice in the district is the Negro Knights of Pythias Building on the north side of Elm". The unpublished manuscript, titled "Deep Ellum: Harlem in Miniature", describes a "congested Negro shopping district lying on both sides of Elm between Preston and Good Streets".

The architect, William Sidney Pittman, was the son-in-law of American black educator and civil rights leader, Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Pittman was born to an unknown white father and a mother who had been a slave and laundress. He graduated from Tuskegee in 1897, receiving its basic education, but also studying wheelwrighting, structural work and architectural drawing. Washington took note of the talented Pittman and loaned him money for additional training in architecture and mechanical drawing at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia.

In 1900, Pittman returned to Tuskegee to work off his loan and became responsible for all planning and construction on campus. Under Pittman's supervision more than a quarter million dollars' worth of construction was completed, including a dormitory, library, and lecture hall. He also

completed plans and specifications for another one hundred fifty thousand dollars' worth of building in other parts of the South. He left in 1903 to open an architectural practice in Washington, D.C. There, he became the first black architect to win a federal commission for the "Negro Building" at the national tercentennial exposition in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1907. He also designed a \$75,000 black YMCA branch on 12th Street in Washington. With this commission, Pittman earned the money he needed to marry Portia Washington, and on Halloween night, 1907, they were married in the Tuskegee chapel. While in Washington, Pittman developed the Fairmont Heights housing development for blacks in suburban Maryland, where he also lived, and was elected president of the Washington Chapter of the Negro Business League, of which he also edited its monthly magazine, the "Negro Business League Herald".<sup>5</sup>

Sidney and Portia moved to Dallas in 1913, where she became a music teacher in the public schools. In addition to the Pythian Temple, Pittman designed the St. James AME Church built in 1920 at 620 N. Good Street (now owned by Belgian American Investments); Allen Chapel AME Church at 116 Elm street in Fort Worth, listed on the National Register of Historic Places; the Colored Carnegie Library in Houston (razed in 1962), which was built with funds from the city, the black community and Andrew Carnegie; the Atlanta Life Building in Houston; the Paul Quinn dormitory in Waco; and the Joshua Chapel AME Church in Waxahachie.<sup>6</sup>

Pittman insisted on using as many black contractors as possible in his buildings, which were touted as examples of black achievement, and he became president of the Brotherhood of Negro Building Mechanics of Texas in 1925.<sup>7</sup>

Pittman, however, was demanding, temperamental and unpopular. "Few whites sought the services of this first black architect...(and) blacks who could afford his service usually took their business to whites...many of whom he considered inferior workmen", according to Ruth Ann Stewart, a biographer of Portia Washington Pittman. "This kind of reverse racism on the part of his own people enraged Sidney. He became a trial to live with and increasingly more bitter". In 1928 Portia left Pittman, returning to her birthplace, Tuskegee. Pittman's architectural practice dwindled and he began publishing a weekly newspaper called "Brotherhood Eyes", described as a gossipy outlet for Pittman's rage. No copies have been found. Pittman died penniless on February 14, 1958, while living at the Powell Hotel, and is buried in an unmarked grave in Glen Oaks Cemetery.

The Pythian Temple, besides serving as the Knights' statewide headquarters, played a lively role in the community life of Deep Ellum. Lectures, meetings, conventions and dances were held in its auditorium and many black professionals and businessmen rented offices there, providing a source of income for the Knights.

Among the tenants at various times were Dr. Benjamin R. Bluit, who became Texas' first black surgeon in 1888, and Dr. Marcellus C. Cooper, who became Texas' first black dentist in 1894; Drs. G. W. White, Albert H. Dyson and Frank Hawkins, all dentists; Drs. P. M. Sunday, R. T. Hamilton, Edgar Ward and M. P. Penn, physicians and surgeons; T. P. Madison, a real estate agent; Excelsior Mutual Benefit Association; Poro

Beauty School; Hooper's Drug Store; Josh Smith's barber shop; The Dallas Express black weekly; A. S. Wells, a lawyer; A. C. Fernandez Music Studio; Nash Dance Studio; Dallas County extension agents and juvenile probation officers for blacks; American Bible Society; and a Negro adult Education program funded by the Works Progress Administration.<sup>8</sup>

See appendix for additional information.

## ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

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The Union Bankers Building is a visual landmark in Deep Ellum that represents a style and size of building that has rapidly vanished from the Dallas area. It remains one of the few nonreligious buildings in Dallas designed by a black architect.

The eclectic Beaux-Arts style, popular between 1895 and 1920, is characterized by dramatic movements in scale and form, with classical ornament applied for theatrical effect. Built in 1915-1916, the design follows the classical Greek influences. The architect used classical proportions by employing a base, shaft and capital, with the divisions being distinguished through the use of cornices to give the desired monumental effect. Box dentil and egg-and-dart motifs on the second cornice, a foliated scroll detail on the parapeted pilaster wall and arched windows ending with dentil details on the first cornice are classical elements in the structure. The dramatic scale is greatly enhanced by the keystone-centered, arched windows, which extend across the front facade and on two sides.

The Pythian Temple exhibits the same classical elements which can be found in other buildings Pittman designed. (See attachments)

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## Designation Merit

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|--|--|
| <p>A. Character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City of Dallas, State of Texas, or the United States. <u>  X  </u></p> | <p>H. Embodiments of elements of architectural design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship which represent a significant architectural innovation. <u>      </u></p>                             |
| <p>B. Location as the site of a significant historical event. <u>      </u></p>  | <p>I. Relationship to other distinctive buildings, sites, or areas which are eligible for preservation according to a plan based on historic, cultural, or architectural motif. <u>  X  </u></p> |
| <p>C. Identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the culture and development of the city. <u>  X  </u></p>   | <p>J. Unique location of singular physical characteristics representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the city. <u>  X  </u></p>                   |
| <p>D. Exemplification of the cultural, economic, social, or historical heritage of the city. <u>  X  </u></p>  | <p>K. Archeological value in that it has produced or can be expected to produce data affecting theories of historic or prehistoric value. <u>      </u></p>                                      |
| <p>E. Portrayal of the environment of a group of people in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style. <u>      </u></p>                                 | <p>L. Value as an aspect of community sentiment or public pride. <u>  X  </u></p>  |
| <p>F. Embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen. <u>      </u></p>   |  |
| <p>G. Identification as the work of an architect or master builder whose individual work has influenced the development of the city. <u>  X  </u></p>                              |  |

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## Recommendation

The Landmark Survey Task Force requests the Historic Landmark Preservation Committee to deem this proposed landmark meritorious of historic recognition as outlined in city ordinance 19-A.

Date:

Further, this task force endorses the preservation criteria, policy recommendations, and landmark boundary as presented by the Dept. of Urban Planning staff.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairman, Landmark Survey Task Force

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Program Manager, Historic Preservation Programs

# Preservation Analysis

## STRUCTURE

- 1. Surface Materials
- 2. Fenestration and Portals
  - a. style, type
  - b. o/w ratio
  - c. rhythms
  - d. placement
- 3. Trim and Detailing
  - a. style
  - b. unique trim or detailing
  - c. structural members
- 4. Roof
  - a. style, form
  - b. slope
  - c. materials
- 5. Design Concepts
  - a. stylistic demands
  - b. functional concepts
- 6. Utilities
  - a. design
  - b. placement
- 7. Signs
  - a. style, design
  - b. placement
- 8. Exterior Connections
  - a. design
  - b. penetration points

## SITE

- X   1. Prohibited Structure Areas
  - a. approach   X
  - b. view corridors   X
  - c. site feature protection
  - d. vertical additions
- 2. Access/Egress
- 3. Adjacent R.O.W.'s     
  - a. existing treatment
  - b. proposed changes   X
- 4. Landscaping     
  - a. existing plant removal
  - b. new plant selection
  - c. site design   X
- 5. Site Fixtures     
  - a. furniture
  - b. sculpture, art
  - c. paths
  - d. utility units
  - e. signs
- 6. Lighting     
  - a. exteriors
  - b. grounds

## COLOR

- X   1. Surface Materials   X
- X   2. Trim and Details   X
- 3. Roof
- 4. Utilities
- 5. Signs
- 6. Site Fixtures
- 7. Accent Color

# Land Use Analysis

Proposed zoning change:

from: None

to: \_\_\_\_\_

Recommended use variances:

None

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\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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## PRESERVATION CRITERIA

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No development of the property shall adversely affect any historical or architectural feature of a building. All alterations, reconstructions and additions to the property or external portion of any structure shall conform to the following criteria:

### Preservation of Existing Structure

#### 1. Surface Materials

Reconstruction, renovation, or repair of the opaque elements of each facade shall only employ brick to replace brick or cast stone to replace cast stone. Elements of equal texture, grain, color and module size of the original structure shall be employed as practicable.

#### 2. Fenestrations and Openings

All original window and door openings of the protected facades should be restored to their original design. The opaque element in all arched windows shall be removed and replaced with glass.

##### A. Facades A and B

Existing openings in the protected facades A and B shall remain intact. Only restored original openings shall be permitted. If facades A and B are restored, the one story addition on the southeast corner of the building should be removed. (See No Build Areas)

##### B. Facades C and D

New openings will only be permitted on facade D if these openings are the result of abutting new construction. Since restoration of facades A and B will greatly enhance the historic features of the structure, limited development and new openings will be permitted on facade C. If the elevator shaft at facade C is removed, the original window design shall be restored or a similar compatible window pattern shall be created.

#### 3. Roof

The slope and configuration of the existing roof shall be maintained. No vertical extensions shall be allowed, and all existing extensions shall remain, or be restored to their original condition. The parapet should be restored, and original peaks should be added.

#### 4. Embellishments and Detailing

All ornamental detailing enumerated below shall remain intact. Any reconstruction, renovation, or replacement of the listed items shall be as identical in color, composition, size and texture as practicable.

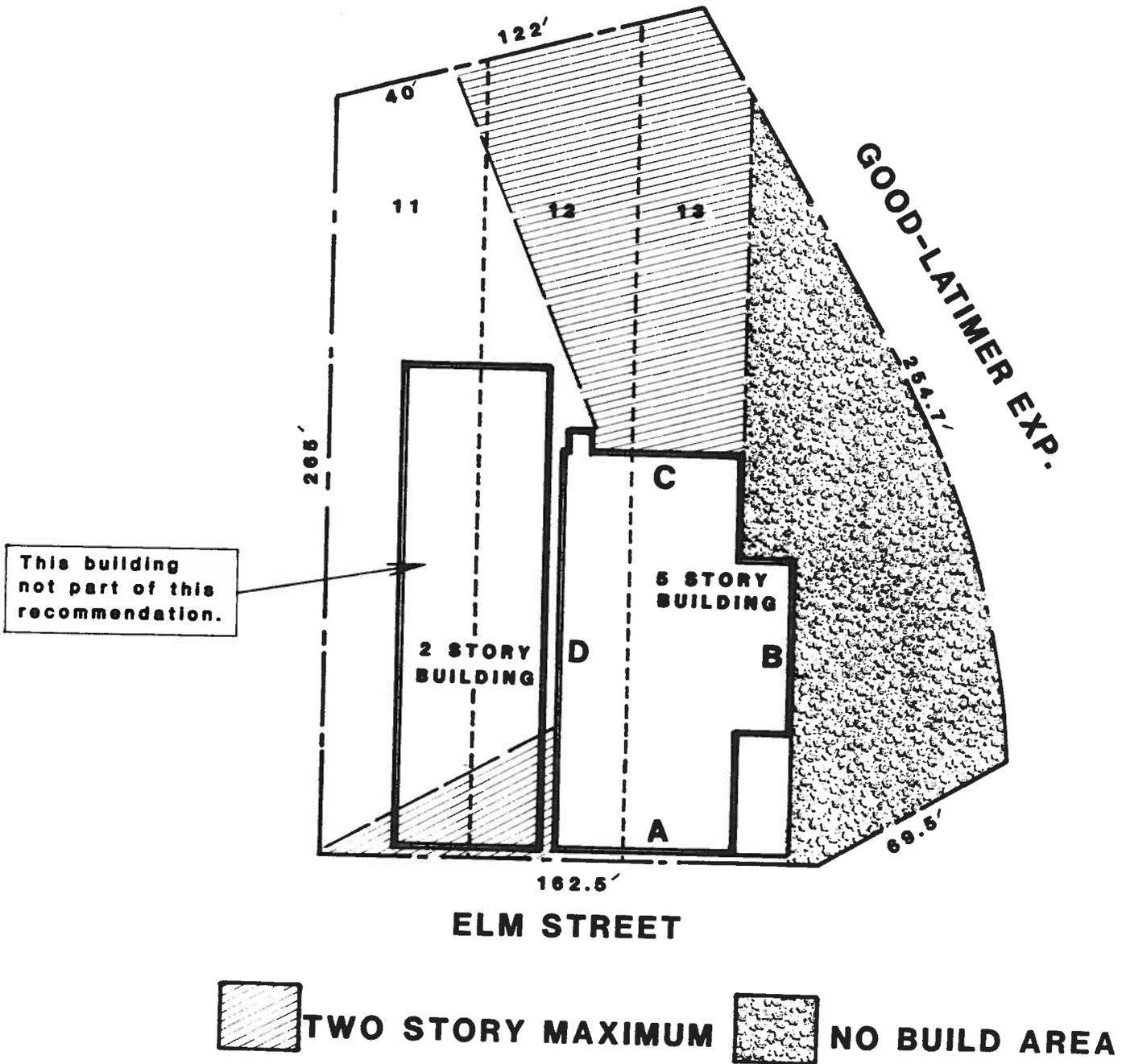
A. Cornices and moldings: The cornices, egg and dart molding, and concrete dentils exhibited at the various levels.

- B. Architrave and Decorative Frieze: The lettering in the architrave and the frieze, consisting of feather detailing and the name of the fraternal order inscribed on the south facade.
  - C. Arches: Semicircular arches above the fourth floor windows, and arches above third floor windows in the rear at the building on the protected facades.
5. Color  
The coloring of the existing facades, including additions, extensions, alterations, and repairs may remain, but the building should be restored to its historic and original unpainted form if any non-color alterations of the existing state are made which cannot be approved by the routine maintenance and review process. The building may be repainted the existing color under the routine maintenance and review procedure.
- A. Predominant Facade Material: The existing color of the brick shall remain, or be removed to expose the original brick. There will be no alterations with the exception of paint removal and brick cleaning as necessary. The color of any additions or alterations of details to the building shall coincide as practicable with the original color.
  - B. Trim and Detailing: The colors of all window/door frames, molding, embellished lettering, friezes and other trim, shall be preserved as near as practicable, once it has been returned to its historic and original unpainted form.
6. Lighting and Landscaping  
Exterior lighting and the placement and removal of trees and shrubs may only be done to enhance the structure and its surrounding setting without obscuring site lines and direct views. Such actions shall be approved by the Landmark Committee prior to commencement of work.
7. Public Improvements  
All proposed public improvements of streets and associated R.O.W. abutting the structure shall be approved by the Landmark Committee prior to commencement of work.
8. Signs  
All new signs shall be designed to be compatible with the architectural qualities of the existing main structure. All new signs shall be approved by the Landmark Committee prior to the issuance of a sign permit and shall abide by the provisions established in the Dallas Sign Ordinance section of the Development Code.
9. Protected Facades  
The existing original structure has two critical facades which are the most visually sensitive parts of the building, the south and east, as shown as facades A and B respectively and shown by map identified as Exhibit A. These facades shall be preserved and protected by "no build" areas shown in Exhibit A.

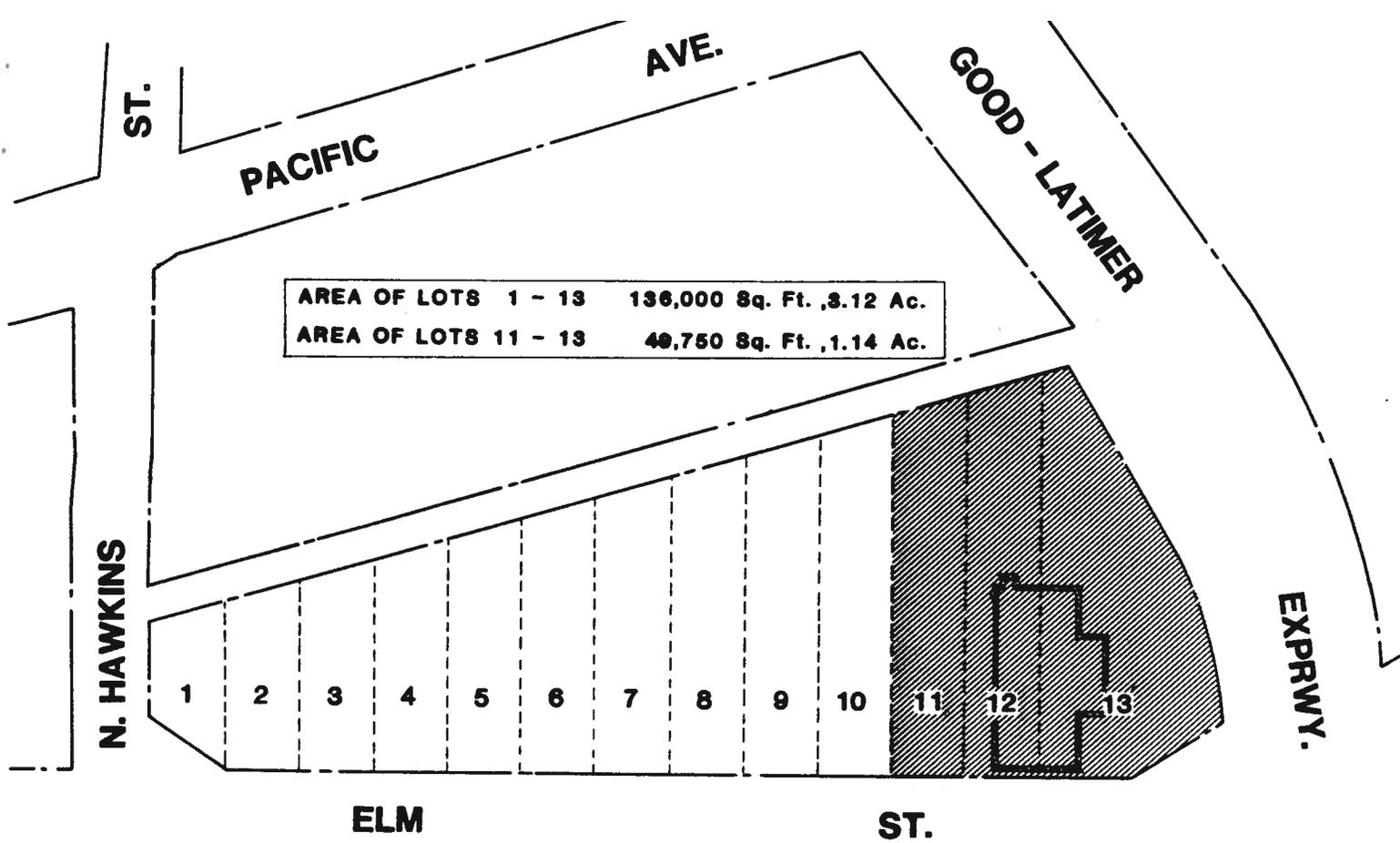
- A. New Construction: Additions to the existing building shall be in harmony with the basic configuration created by the facade rhythm of fenestrations, openings, and shall comply with the requirements specified for a Central Area-2 District and Planned Development District No. 178. No new construction is permitted within the "no-build" areas.
- B. No Build Areas: As illustrated in Exhibit A, there will be "no build" areas to protect the south and east facades. These areas are intended to protect the sight lines to the landmark structure from building encroachment as well as preserve the facades from additional construction or alteration.
- C. Limited Build Areas: These areas are limited to a height of two stories. This height limitation is intended to protect the architectural character of the upper floors of the building.

Exhibit B represents the total area owned by Union Bankers, as well as the area on which the building is located, lots 11 through 13.

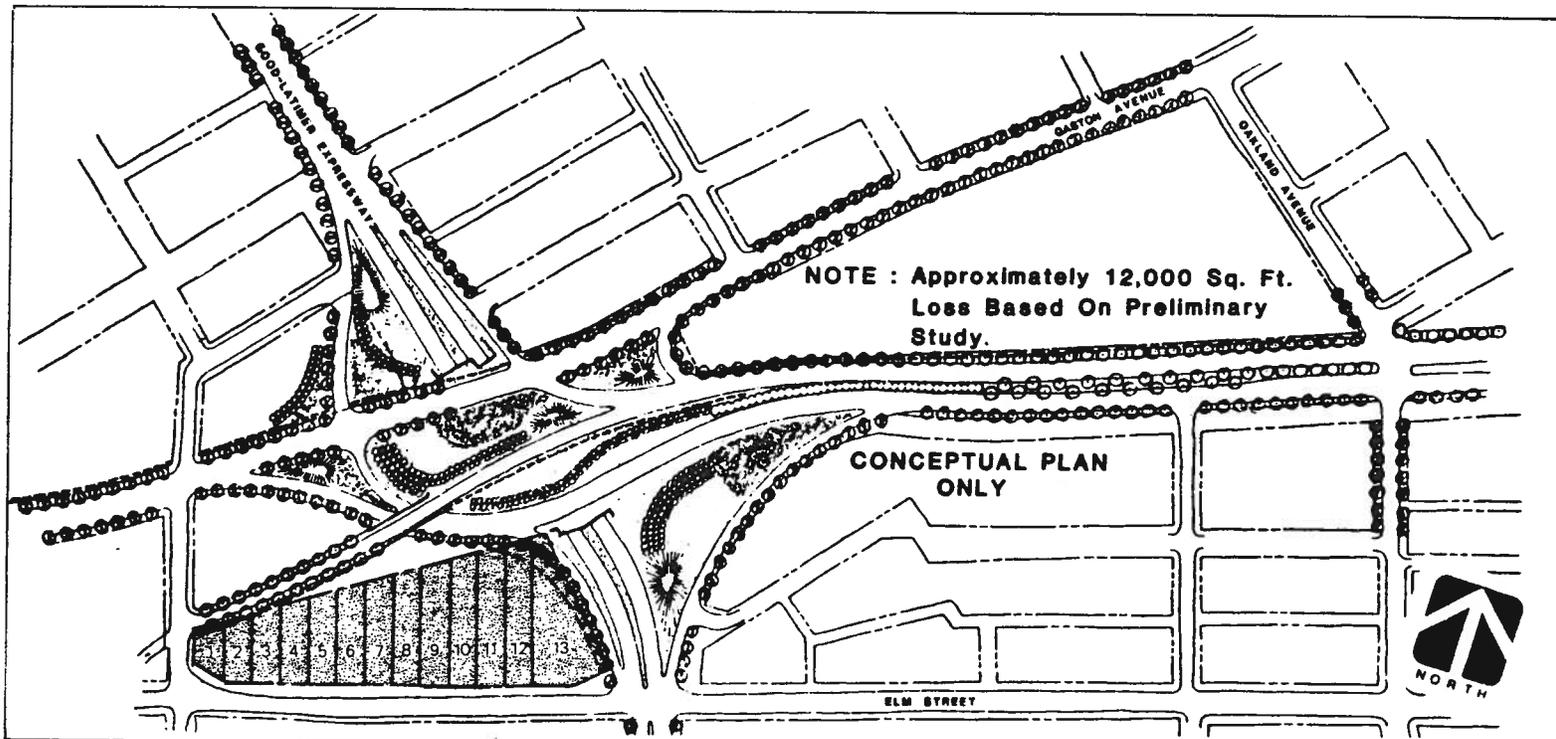
The CBD-Fair Park Link Conceptual Plan shown on Page 11 will be located north of Elm. This new facility provides new traffic lanes which increase the visibility of the Union Bankers Building from the north, and is the primary reason the No Build and Limited Build areas are recommended.



# EXHIBIT A



# EXHIBIT B



**CBD - FAIR PARK LINK CONCEPTUAL PLAN**

DEVELOPMENT DATA:

As noted in Exhibit C on Page 13, the Union Banker's Insurance Company owns lots 1 thru 13, with the Historic designation recommended for lots 11, 12, and 13. However, in order to determine the feasibility of preservation of this building, the entire area of ownership with total development rights must be evaluated. Therefore, the following data is provided:

136,000 sq. ft., lots 1 thru 13  
12,000 sq. ft., approx. loss for Fair Park link  
124,000 sq. ft., net development area

124,000 X 20 (20:1 FAR) = 2,480,000 sq. ft., maximum build-out permitted  
45,800 Union Banker's Building (if preserved)  
2,434,200 sq. ft., maximum new build-out permitted

The no-build and 2-story maximum areas results in 589,296 sq. ft. loss on lots 11, 12 and 13, or 23.6% of total area.

The remaining area 103, 078 sq. ft., can be developed at 20:1 FAR (Lots 1 thru 10 and part of lot 11).

To absorb the loss of Lots 11, 12 and 13 by transferring this square footage to the remaining lots:  $589,296 \div 103,078 = 6$  floors added to remaining lots if buildings are constructed at 100% coverage.

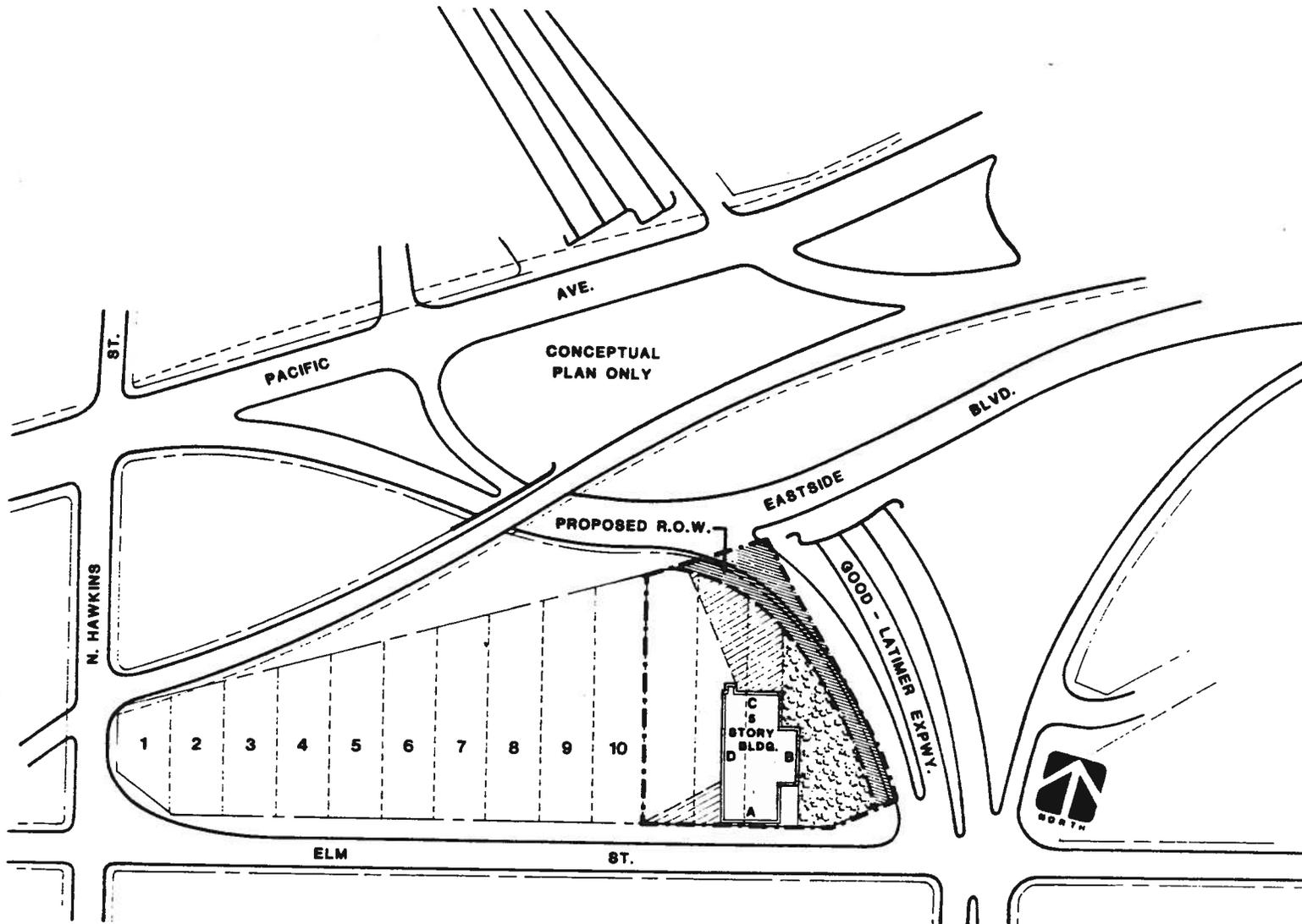
However, in the downtown area approximately 40% of the site is usually covered by the main tower structure. 40% of site area  $103,078 = 41,231$  sq. ft. per floor.

$2,434,200 \div 41,231 = 59$  floors in one building at 40% coverage of site. Since the height is limited to 47 floors by the Airport Overlay District of Love Field, the building footprint would allow 2 towers of 30 floors covering 80% of the site as one design solution.

TAX BENEFITS:

If the building is 50% renovated, the owner could benefit from a City of Dallas tax savings of \$1,649 per year, or a total of \$13,195 for 8 years maximum. In addition, a Federal income tax savings of \$67,076 (which may be utilized over a period of 18 years) could also be realized.

If owner were to construct a parking garage to accommodate parking for the Union Banker's Building, a savings of approximately \$250,000 could be realized through the use of Small Issue Industrial Revenue Bonds, over a period of 20 years financing.



 TWO STORY MAXIMUM

 NO BUILD AREA

 POTENTIAL R.O.W. TAKE

CBD - FAIR PARK LINK CONCEPTUAL ALIGNMENT

# EXHIBIT C

## NOTES

1. Funeral notice of William Sidney Pittman, Feb. 19, 1958, Dallas Morning News.
2. Alwynn Barr, Black Texans, A History of Negroes in Texas, 1528-1971, Austin: Pemberton Press, 1982.
3. "Local Knights Hear Grand Chancellor", Dallas Express, January 25, 1919.
4. Interview with Mrs. J. W. Tillman, Knights of Pythias bookkeeper since 1923.
5. Ruth Ann Stewart, Portia; The Life of Portia Washington Pittman, the Daughter of Booker T. Washington, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977, pp. 88-105.  
Also see Samuel R. Spencer, Jr., Booker T. Washington and the Negro's Place in American Life, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1955, pp. 113-124.  
Also consulted: Louis R. Harlan, Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915, 1983.
6. Dallas Express, January 1, 1921; January 15 and 22, 1921; "Black Architects, Craftsmen Helped Build America, Including Houston", Houston Chronicle, July 18, 1982. Information supplied by Everett and LaBarbara Fly, San Antonio.
7. Stewart, Portia, and the 1925-26 Dallas City Directory.
8. Dallas City Directories, 1916-1940, Dallas Express, 1919-1922; and interview with Mrs. Marzelle Hill, daughter of Dr. Marcellus C. Cooper.

## APPENDIX

### 1. Tenants in the Knights of Pythias Building

Many black professionals and businessmen had offices in the Pythian Temple and advertised in the black weekly, "The Dallas Express". Here are some who bought ads and notices, generally every week, beginning with the January 11, 1919, issue:

Dr. P. M. Sunday, Physician and Surgeon, Room 210  
Dr. G. W. White, Dentist, Suite 216  
Dr. M. P. Penn, Physician and Surgeon, Suite 211  
A. S. Wells, Attorney, Room 213 (Later 206)  
Dr. R. T. Hamilton, Physician and Surgeon, Room 215  
Excelsior Mutual Benefit Association, Room 209  
A. C. Fernandez Music Studio, Pythian Temple Auditorium  
Dr. A. H. Dyson, Dentist, Second Floor (September 13, 1919)  
Dr. E. E. Ward, Physician and Surgeon, Room 205, (January 1, 1921)

### 2. Knights of Pythias Activities

The "Dallas Express" published many articles about Knights of Pythias conventions, although much of the coverage consisted of detailed listings of standing committees, officers, meeting agendas and financial statements.

A January 25, 1919, page one article, headlined "Local Knights Hear Grand Chancellor", states that "A goodly number of the 800 Knights of Pythias resident in Dallas turned out Monday night to hear Honorable W. S. Willis, the Grand Chancellor, in his annual address".

Willis is quoted as saying, "Today, the white man's industrial insurance company is our competitor..." He cited the American National Insurance Company as one of the white concerns which had built an alabaster skyscraper at Galveston, in which it did not use even a colored janitor, "notwithstanding 90 percent of its funds came from Negro insurance. He contrasted the skyscraper in Galveston with the Grand Pythian Temple at Dallas and told the crowd to draw its own conclusions."

A June 14, 1919, article covered the "35th Annual Session of the Grand Knights of Colored Pythians". A credentials committee report said 174 lodges were "in good and regular standing". Grand Chancellor Willis said membership had increased by 3,000 in a year, although no total membership figures were given.

A financial statement by M. M. Rodgers, Grand Keeper of Records and Seal, indicates the size of the organization. Annual receipts were \$58,677.78, including \$3,534.80 from rents in the Pythian Temple. Separate endowment receipts totaled \$78,828.15. "Endowment funds paid to beneficiaries" totaled \$61,550.42. The Knights had a balance on May 31, 1919, of \$22,972.58; notes receivable of \$29,844.75; for total assets of \$52,817.33.

A Knight advertisement in the January 22, 1921, "Dallas Express" quoted the state commissioner of insurance and banking as saying, "The Order finds itself in a healthier financial condition than it ever has been". The ad invites readers "to join one of our 460 Lodges located in every nook and corner of Texas".

### 3. New St. James AME Church

This church, designed by W. Sidney Pittman, was held up as an example of black achievement. A January 1, 1921, advertisement for opening ceremonies January 9 through January 24, said, "The structure is modern in all its details and will ever stand as a monument to Negro labor. It has been designed and constructed by Colored men. Mr. W. Sidney Pittman was the architect and Mr. C. C. Brewer has superintended the construction assisted by Mr. J. L. Sneed. This church is conceded to be among the best owned by the race in the country. Every Negro should feel a measure of genuine pride in this building as it proves that there is no color in the line of the building art, that the black man can do anything, if given the chance, anyone else can do."

"Dallas Express" coverage of the church's opening in the January 15 issue, "Great Throngs Attend Dedication of New \$50,000 St. James AME Church", said, "One of the unusual things about the building of this magnificent Temple, the beautiful, ornate, commodious edifice, is that it was designed by a young architect, W. Sidney Pittman. Practically all the work done on it was done by Negro workmen, including being 'wired and lighted' by Lemon Bros. and 'concreted and plastered' by S. Johnson."

Soon after its completion, the church hosted the Bishop's Council of the AME Church in February, 1921. Weekly articles before that meeting detailed every contribution made in a widespread community effort to a "Citizens Committee for the Entertainment of the Bishop's Council."

### 4. American Realty and Construction Company

This firm, chartered by local black businessmen, hired Pittman to design a \$100,000 office building, according to a January 22, 1921, "Dallas Express" report on the firm's second annual meeting, held in the St. James Church. The firm, "in the year's biggest deal, bought a large building bordered by Bryan Street, Central RR and Cottage Lane, and plans to erect an office building. Plans are being drawn up by W. Sidney Pittman, well-known architect of Texas, who designed the Pythian Temple, St. James AME Church and Paul Quinn dormitory, soon to be erected."