1. Design Character of Houston Street

Houston Street is at the core of downtown San Antonio and is the most important, commercial street in downtown. It has occupied this position since all but the earliest days of the settlement of this area. This chapter summarizes the key features that defined its character historically and that are found today.

Key Themes Exhibited by the Historic Development of Houston Street

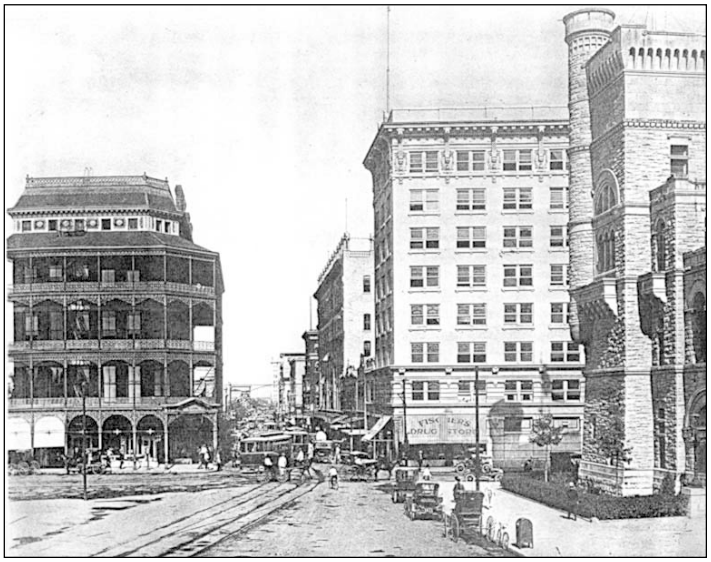
In order to understand the character of Houston Street, it is useful to review how the street developed. Houston Street had two periods of major development: the late 1800s (i.e., from 1880 to 1890) and the 1910s and 1920s. Additionally, in the 1950s some business and building owners along Houston Street "modernized" by remodeling many of the structures, covering up earlier features with false fronts, and changing windows and entries.

The Gunter Hotel, ca. 1909: The tripartite composition of the skyscraper was exhibited, with a base composed of the first two floors, a middle shaft, and a cap of the top floor and cornice.

When reviewing historical information about the development of the street, a number of themes emerge regarding design elements, character and commercial uses. These themes cover the following issues:

- Character of the streetscape
- Street-level character of buildings
- Building materials used
- Composition of the block wall
- Use and treatment of signs
- Historic styles of buildings

These themes are discussed on the following pages.



Looking west on Houston Street, from the intersection with Alamo Street, 1910: Street cars animate the street and high-rise buildings are mixed in with shorter structures. The Maverick Bank Building on the left, and the early courts building, on the right, have been replaced.

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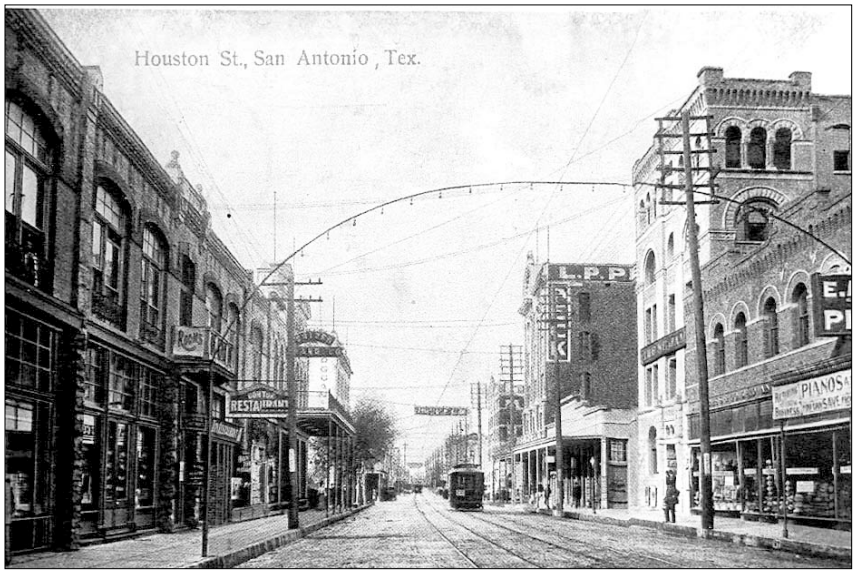
Character of the Streetscape

Since its early days, Houston Street was pedestrian-oriented and had features that encouraged pedestrian traffic and commercial trade:

- Stone curbs between the street and the sidewalk (even when both were still just dirt/mud) delineating the sidewalk and helping protect pedestrians from traffic
- Paving that varied from gravel, to hexagon-shaped mesquite blocks, to vitrified brick, asphalt and concrete
- Sidewalks made of gravel, smoothly cut limestone and sandstone slabs, and finally concrete
- A street width greater than other streets in downtown
- A transit system serving the street, from the mule-drawn trolley system built in 1878 to the electric trolleys that replaced their mule-drawn predecessors and operated until 1934
- Fixed canopies and awnings (important design elements of the street) sheltering the sidewalks



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Street-level Character of Buildings

Houston Street has always been pedestrian-oriented. It was a commercial area with retail activity dominating the street level of buildings, with offices and service businesses located on upper floors. The character of the buildings reflects the following design features in their first floors:

- Storefront windows along the front wall (and side wall if the building was on the corner of two streets) with traditional transoms above the display windows
- Recessed entries into the building
- Awnings or canopies extending from the building to the sidewalk's edge providing shade and protection from the weather for pedestrians

Traditional commercial buildings contained the following design features, storefront windows along the front wall with traditional transoms above the display windows.

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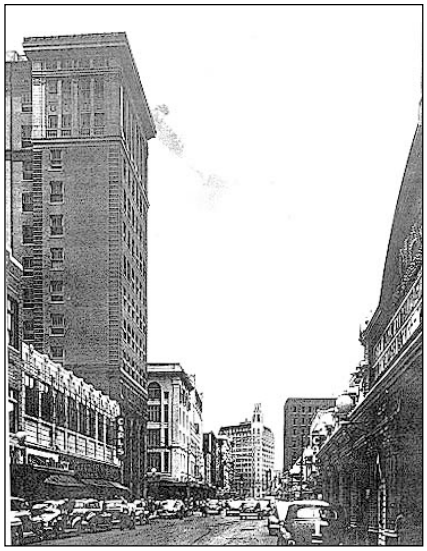
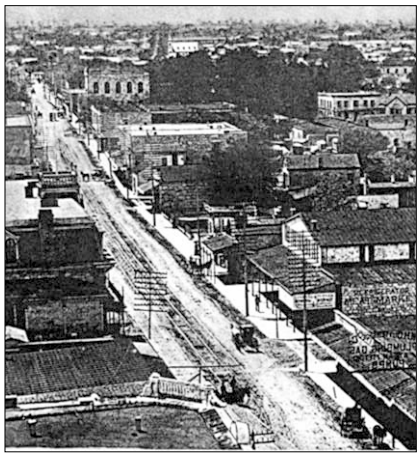


Houston Street, looking east to the Medical Arts Building, 1930s: Although a greater variety of building styles had now been introduced, masonry materials unified the scene. The horizontal emphasis of canopies and moldings had also contributed to the sense of visual continuity.

Houston Street at Soledad, looking east, 1890: Masonry building fronts were prominent and cornices and moldings aligned along the block. The first floors were primarily transparent, with large display windows.



In the late nineteenth century, sidewalks were clearly defined and many buildings had canopies that sheltered the street. Utility line poles were positioned along the curb. (Photo: 1884)

Building Materials Used

The larger buildings on Houston Street were constructed during the second major period of development and several were designed by the same architect, Alfred Giles. Because of this, many of the buildings were built of the same or similar materials. During this time the materials most commonly used were:

- For building walls, stone (often Texas limestone, from north of San Antonio) and lumber in the late 1800s and stone and brick during the 1900s
- Cast iron, stamped metal, wood and terra cotta for cornices, moldings, and decorative work
- Large plate glass display windows

Composition of the Block Wall

When viewing Houston Street on a block-by-block basis, a pattern emerges that is quite consistent. Building styles and heights varied a bit from block to block and even within a block, however the texture of the buildings and the rhythm of the buildings on the block were quite consistent. Some key features were:

- Buildings built in the late 1880s period were generally one- and two-stories tall, with an occasional three-story building; buildings built in the early 1900s period were often taller (e.g., six, nine, and fifteen stories)
- Building fronts aligned at the sidewalk edge
- Buildings were separated from the street by a wide sidewalk
- Buildings were closely spaced together, with side walls touching (not so much during the 1880s construction, but clearly so during the early 1900s construction)
- Each individual building was generally balanced horizontally and vertically; this changed somewhat with the taller buildings of the 1900s
- Each block of buildings along Houston Street generally had a strong horizontal feel, with windows, cornices, horizontal moldings, and awnings or canopies generally aligning, loosely tying to those on the next building and so on down the block; even when the heights and/or styles of buildings were different, the tripartite design of each continued to create a horizontal feel
- Exceptions to the horizontal continuum occurred when an Art Deco style building was interjected, where the building had a strong vertical orientation of design

Use and Treatment of Signs

Commercial areas need signs, and signs have played an important role on Houston Street since it began to develop as San Antonio's major downtown commercial street. Traditionally there were four types of signs used along the street:

- Medium-sized square or rectangularly-shaped signs that projected from the building above the awnings or canopies; printed on both sides
- Small, horizontally-oriented rectangular signs that protruded from the building below the awnings or canopies but above pedestrians' heads; printed on both sides
- Medium- to large-sized horizontally-oriented rectangular signs attached flat against the building, above and/or below the awnings or canopies; printed on one side only
- Large "blade" signs (i.e., vertically-oriented, tall signs) that projected from the second or third/fourth floors of a building, above awnings or canopies; printed on both sides

By the 1930s, some large blade signs had been added to the street.

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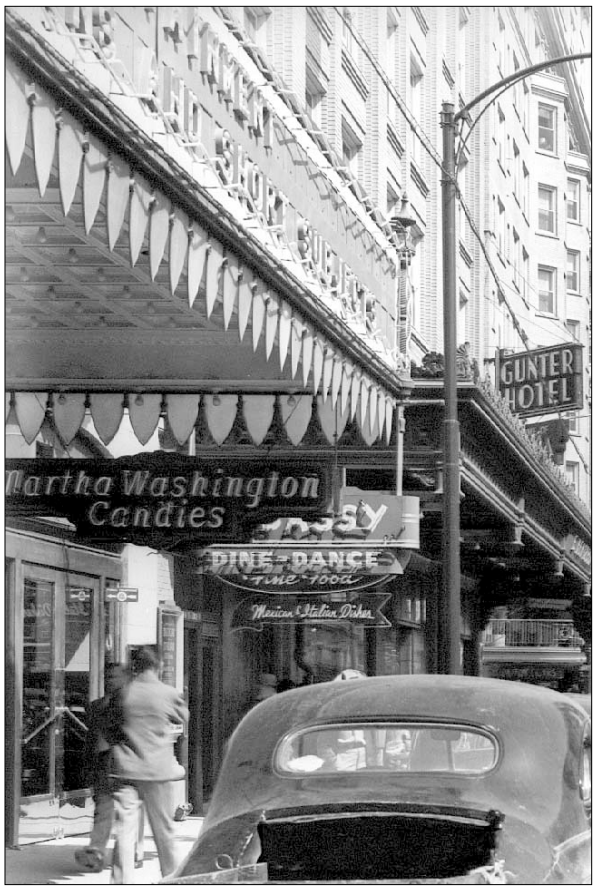
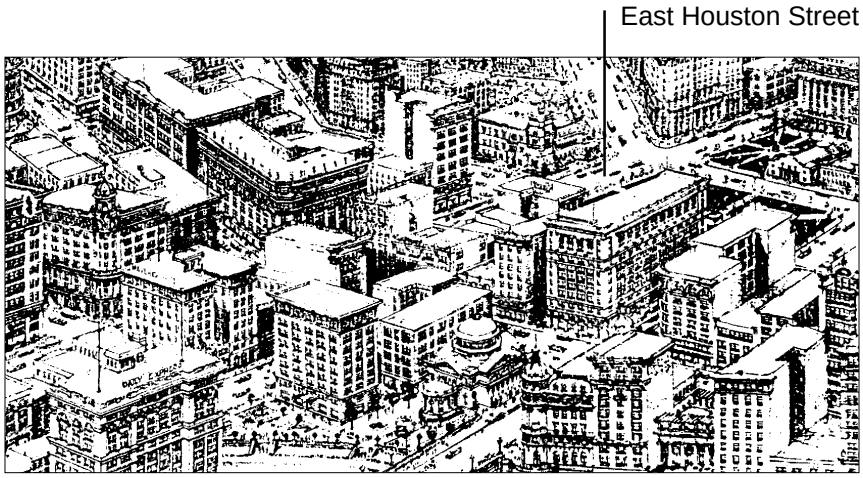
Use and Treatment of Canopies and Awnings

Due to the intense heat and sun in San Antonio during the summer months, Houston Street commercial buildings had canopies or awnings installed that would provide shade on the sidewalk. Traditionally there were several types that could be found:

- Flat canopies, shed form canopy (sloping), sloped fabric awnings, vertical fabric valance; at the edge of a canopy, upper story fabric awing



Some canopies were illuminated such as this one for the Texas Theater.



Alfred Giles an architect who influenced much of Houston Street, developed a series of renderings that illustrated the potential character of downtown. This vision combines buildings of varied heights and styles throughout the core. Even so, he envisioned buildings that continued key traditions: storefronts of similar heights at the street level, building fronts aligned at the sidewalk edge, horizontal moldings aligning and cornices capping buildings.