

## United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

## 1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Kress Building

Other name/site number: S.H. Kress and Co. Building

Name of related multiple property listing: NA

## 2. Location

Street &amp; number: 211 N. Mesa Street

City or town: El Paso

State: Texas

County: El Paso

Not for publication: ☐Vicinity: ☐

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this

☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:

☐ national ☒ statewide ☒ localApplicable National Register Criteria: ☒ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

State Historic Preservation Officer

Signature of certifying official / Title

8/19/22

Date

Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register  
☐ determined eligible for the National Register  
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.  
☐ removed from the National Register  
☐ other, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

## 5. Classification

### Ownership of Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Private
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Federal

### Category of Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

### Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions:** Commerce/Trade: department store

**Current Functions:** Vacant

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification:** Modern Movement: Art Deco

**Principal Exterior Materials:** Steel, Concrete, Terra Cotta, Glass, Clay Tile

**Narrative Description** (see continuation sheets 7-6 through 7-15)

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>A</b>	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>B</b>	Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>C</b>	Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>D</b>	Property has yielded or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations:** NA

**Areas of Significance:** Commerce (*local level of significance*), Architecture (*state level of significance*)

**Period of Significance:** 1937-1967

**Significant Dates:** 1937, 1938, 1955

**Significant Person** (only if criterion b is marked): NA

**Cultural Affiliation** (only if criterion d is marked): NA

**Architect/Builder:** Sibbert, Edward (Architect); McKee, Robert E. (Builder)

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see continuation sheets 8-16 through 8-30)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

**Bibliography** (see continuation sheet 9-31)

### Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☒ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. (*Part 1 approved 9/7/21*)
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

### Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- ☐ Other state agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other -- Specify Repository:

**Historic Resources Survey Number** (if assigned): NA

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property:** less than 1 acre

**Coordinates** (either UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates)

### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

Latitude: 31.758955° Longitude: -106.488008°

**Verbal Boundary Description:** The nominated boundary is the legal property described by El Paso CAD as: (Property ID# 70519) 5 MILLS 65' ON MILLSX80' ON OREGON & 59' ON OREGONX110' BEG 80'S OF NWC & 53' ON MESAX95' BEG 80' S OF NEC and shown on MAP 3. (UCAD accessed August 5, 2021)

**Boundary Justification:** The boundary includes all property currently and historically associated with the nominated building.

## 11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: William C. Helm II, AIA / Architect with assistance from Sofia Rojo (intern)

Organization: In\*Situ Architecture

Street & number: 112 Texas Avenue

City or Town: El Paso State: Texas Zip Code: 79901

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Telephone: 915.533.7488

Date: July 9, 2021

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see continuation sheet Map-32 through Map-33)

**Additional items** (see continuation sheets Figure-34 through Figure-48)

**Photographs** (see continuation sheet Photo-49 through Photo-58)

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.



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**Photographs**

Property Name: Kress Building  
Address: 211 N. Mesa St.  
City/County: El Paso, El Paso County, Texas  
Photographer: William C. Helm II, AIA  
Date(s): 6/30/2021, 7/8/2021, 8/3/2021, 8/11/2021, 10/28/2021

**Photo 1**

Contextual view of Mesa Street elevation. (8/3/2021)  
Camera facing north

**Photo 2**

Contextual view of Kress Building's Mills and Oregon  
Street elevations (6/30/21)  
Camera facing southeast

**Photo 3**

Northwest oblique at Mills/Oregon (6/30/21)  
Camera facing southeast

**Photo 4**

Southwest oblique at Oregon Street (10/28/2021)  
Camera facing northeast

**Photo 5**

Detail over entrance at south end of Oregon Street  
(10/28/2021)  
Camera facing east

**Photo 6**

Detail at window infill at north end of Oregon Street  
(10/28/2021)  
Camera facing northeast

**Photo 7**

Northeast elevation at Mesa Street (8/3/2021)  
Camera facing southwest

**Photo 8**

Ground Floor – oblique view of retail sales floor  
Camera facing north (8/4/2021)

**Photo 9**

Ground Floor at Mills Avenue entrances (8/3/2021)  
Camera facing north

**Photo 10**

Ground Floor at Mills Avenue right entrance detail  
(8/3/2021)  
Camera facing north

**Photo 11**

Ground Floor at detail at north end of lunch counter  
(8/3/2021)  
Camera facing south

**Photo 12**

Basement perspective view of north leg of building  
(8/3/2021)  
Camera facing north.

**Photo 13**

Basement east stair to ground floor (8/11/2021)  
Camera facing east

**Photo 14**

Second floor perspective view of east leg of building  
(8/11/2021)  
Camera facing west

**Photo 15**

Second floor detail of entrance to stair (8/11/2021)  
Camera facing west

**Photo 16**

Interior of concealed open air top story of tower  
(7/8/2021)  
Camera facing east.

**Photo 17**

Detail of tower roof structure at concealed top story  
(7/8/2021)  
Camera facing up

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## Narrative Description

The Kress Building is an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Art Deco department store in downtown El Paso, El Paso County. Built in 1937-1938, it is an L-plan 3-story steel and concrete structural frame building with buff-colored stucco cladding and flat roof with red Spanish tile visor segments. Original blade “KRESS” neon signage is intact and considered a significant associative feature. Designed by S.H. Kress & Company architect Edward F. Sibbert, the department store has three street-facing elevations and a prominent 5-story corner tower exhibiting Art Deco’s streamlined composition and vertical emphasis with Moorish-influenced bright polychrome terra-cotta ornament. Exterior features that express Sibbert’s eclectic design include: the rectangular tower decorated with polychrome terra-cotta tiles, screens, and gold leaf minarets (finials); red Spanish tile visor roof segments along the parapet; and windows with rope motif surrounds and false wrought iron balconies. Historic curved storefronts on all elevations lead inside where the department store’s ground and basement floors retain open layouts supported by structural columns. In 1955, S.H. Kress & Company remodeled ground-level storefronts and installed interior amenities—lunch counter and escalator—that reflected the company’s effort in the postwar period to compete with suburban department stores. After years of deferred maintenance under previous ownership, the current property owners are using federal tax credits to rehabilitate the Kress Building. It retains excellent integrity to communicate its historical and architectural significance.

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## Setting

The building occupies a prominent south-east corner location in the central business district of downtown El Paso, Texas at the intersection of Mills Avenue and Oregon Street. The Kress Building’s primary corner (marked by a prominent square tower facing north-west) is directly opposite the central San Jacinto Plaza of El Paso—a public park that dates to the city’s founding. Neighboring commercial buildings on the block were built contemporaneously; these are low to mid-rise masonry and reinforced concrete frame construction. The Kress Building has a 15,907 SF gross footprint within its block which slopes gently from north to south along the length of the block. Due to its sloped site, the entrances along Mills Street are two feet higher than the Oregon Street and Mesa Street entrances, which enter at the finish floor height of the interior sales floor.

## Kress Building

### *General Characteristics (Photos 1-2)*

The Kress Building is an early 20<sup>th</sup> century department store with a L-plan that extends through a downtown city block bounded by N. Mesa St. (northeast), Texas Ave. (southeast), N. Oregon St. (southwest), and E. Mills Ave. (northwest). **(Map 2)** Compared to other Kress stores in Texas stores with one or two primary elevations, the nominated building is unique for its three street-facing facades. These ornate elevations share materials, palette, and ornamental details but differ in massing, height, and fenestration. The stucco building was constructed in two phases **(see Figure 2)**. In 1937, the first wing was built at Oregon and Mills streets. Upon its completion in 1938, the original Kress store (at 211 Mesa) was demolished, and the second wing of the nominated building was constructed over its footprint.

The nominated building has three façades that face N. Mesa and the intersection of N. Oregon and E. Mills. It is steel and concrete frame construction and has a concrete foundation with three interior floors and a basement. The ground floor is double height with a mezzanine. Exterior walls are clad in smooth, terra-cotta buff-colored square tiles with a darker shade used to highlight pilasters, pediment decoration, and window and door moldings. Historic-age one and two-part commercial blocks share brick party walls with the nominated building’s remaining elevations. The body of the exposed side of party walls that face other buildings inside the block are buff colored brick—a standard for Kress Buildings. At

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Mesa Street and Mills Avenue where these party walls are close enough to the street to be visible from pedestrian view these party walls are also ornamented at the tops with terra-cotta caps and “Kress” insignia.

Architectural historians described the Kress Building as Pueblo Deco, an eclectic style that combines streamlined Art Deco form with abstracted ornament that references the southwestern United States’ pre-Columbian, Native American, and/or Spanish past. Contextually, it relates to Henry Trost-designed 1914 Alhambra Theater at 209 S. El Paso Street, which features a highly ornamented Moorish Revival façade. The nominated building’s ornament—like the Alhambra Theater—recalls Spanish Colonial and Moorish Revival, rather than “Pueblo.” Exterior features that express Sibbert’s exuberant translation of the style include: the massive 80-foot-tall corner tower framed by pilasters topped with conical finials and a polychrome tile screen lantern; red Spanish tile visor roof segments along the parapet; windows with rope motif surrounds and false wrought iron balconies; and terra-cotta geometric details in vibrant hues of red, blue, yellow, turquoise, black, white, tan, and metallic gold. Importantly, the Kress Building communicates the S.H. Kress & Company’s architectural branding under Edward F. Sibbert, which prioritized streamlined modern compositions with simple ornamentation and colorful highlights. Remarkably, Kress signage is intact across the exterior, strengthening the building’s association with the once-prominent retail chain.

Each street-facing elevation has large storefronts with curved glass display windows to entice customers through its inset doors. Mesa Street and Mills Street façades each present two pairs of these entrances while the Oregon Street façade presents a single pair at the southwest entrance to the retail store. These historic display windows are original in plan configuration to the nominated building’s original storefronts and typical of the era’s Kress stores. However, the storefront glazing originally extended up within a few inches under the canopies (**Figure 11**). In 1955, the company replaced the storefront glazing with shorter glass panels and installed glazed metal infill panels—which matched the surrounding terra-cotta block. Additionally, one storefront window on the Oregon facade (**Photo 6**) was removed entirely and replaced with the same glazed metal infill panels. Presumably, this window was removed to make way for a new interior stair connection added during this renovation. All the windows above ground floor are hollow metal frame, double hung, operable windows. Generally, these operable windows are glazed with obscured translucent glass.

*Northeast Elevation (Photo 7)*

The **northeast elevation** faces N. Mesa Street and is 53-feet-wide. It is four stories tall, but the fourth level is a small mechanical penthouse.

At street-level are two pairs of curved store windows leading to double recessed entrances and a base of rose-colored polished marble extends across this elevation. In a style reminiscent of the metal balconies at the Fort Worth Kress store,<sup>1</sup> a streamlined art deco metal canopy hangs above. Its wrought-iron railing posts are framed by cumulous cloud-shaped details—what scholars note as the building’s singular Native American reference.<sup>2</sup> Hidden staircases built into the canopy was designed as a fire exit.

Above, the façade rises three stories terminating with a zig-zag roofline that projects above the roofline. It is symmetrically organized in an ABA arrangement with two shades of buff cream terra Cota facing that emphasizes the façade’s vertical elements. All windows on the façade are 2/2 double hung hollow metal steel frame with horizontal mullions and frosted glazing but range in size and level of detail in ornamental surrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernice L. Thomas, *Americas 5 & 10 Cent Store, The Kress Legacy* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997): 153

<sup>2</sup> Whiffen and Carla Breeze, *Pueblo Deco, The Art Deco Architecture of the Southwest* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1984): 95.

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The outermost bays (A) are faced in light buff square tile with a window opening at each of the three floors: the lowest levels have approx. 3-foot-tall windows with no decorative surrounds; the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor windows are also 3-feet-tall with simple dark cream tile molding; and third floor windows are approx. 5-feet-tall with dark cream molding, lunettes infilled with checkered tile pattern, and false wrought iron balconettes. Spanish red tile visors cap the roofline with arched corbeling along the parapet below. Polychrome reliefs in a variety of geometric patterns—checkered, lattice, herringbone, and diamonds—infill each arched opening.

The center section (B) features three piers clad in dark cream tile that rise one-story above the Mesa Street elevation's roofline. Gold-tipped conical finals atop each further enhance the façade's verticality. Each pier is framed in square grid tiles with diagonal diapered tile running through the center. Single window openings punctuate the outer piers at three floors. One of these openings, however, is a door (designed to look like a window) that is a fire exit onto the canopy. The centermost pier (unfenestrated) holds the original neon blade KRESS sign, which is vertically hung. Wide tile molding with cast stone rope frame both openings on the second floor; an abstracted leaf and floral cap is centered on each. Eight tiles of floral reliefs separate the second and third floor windows, which had simple molded frames. The three piers are separated by shorter, vertically fluted decorative piers with stepped tops faced in light buff tile.

*Northwest Elevation (Photo 3)*

The **northwest elevation** faces E. Mills Avenue and is 65-feet-wide. It is organized into two segments—a three-story section and the corner tower—with symmetrical ground floor storefronts.

At ground level are two storefronts with Kress' signature curved display windows that lead to the recessed entrances. Historic granite bulkheads and original glazed steel frame doors with "KRESS" on the metal hand plate are present. The display windows are a mix of historic and original (to the 1955 alterations). Tile panels above the storefront date to the 1955 remodel (Figure 17).

The metal balcony with openwork railings projects out from the Mills Avenue elevation curving around the tower to the Oregon St. elevation. It is an operable canopy with mechanized sunshades and automatic fire escape, with an emergency exit door at the interior mezzanine exits onto the balcony. The applicant believes the original concealed emergency, counterbalanced, and motorized from an interior chase, are intact. Over the centerline of each entrance door the internally lit KRESS logo is emblazoned within the metalwork of the canopy. While fabric awnings and sunshades are not likely to be the original fabric, they do appear to resemble the vertically oriented stripe patterns of fabric found in historic photos and do match both the pattern and color of that found in HABS photos of the building dating from the late 1970 (Figure 17).<sup>3</sup>

The façade's left section is comprised of a three-story mass above the ground floor punctuated by a series of five 2/2 windows at the second floor (which reads as the third story on this elevation because the height at which they are set.) Each window has flat tile molding surrounds with dentilled sills. The mezzanine level of this elevation is largely blank except for the emergency exit on the left bay. A red tile visor roof with arched corbels (like on Mesa Street) tops this section.

The right segment is dominated by the store's five-story (80 foot), four-sided tower that emerges from the third floor and is described in further detail below. A central pilaster with the vertical "KRESS" neon sign starts at the metal canopy and

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<sup>3</sup> Historic American Buildings Survey, C. (1933) *South El Paso Street Historic District, South El Paso, South Oregon & South Santa Fe Streets, El Paso, El Paso County, TX*. El Paso El Paso County Texas, 1933. Cary, B., trans Documentation Compiled After. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/tx0461/>.

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extends above tower roof. Single 6/6 double-hung rectangular windows with scrolled sills flank the pilaster at the second floor.

*Tower*

The Kress Building takes full advantage of this prominent corner of its site with a five-story tall tower that extends two-floors above the main roof line. Sibbert designed the tower for this southeast corner of the Mills/Oregon intersection to face opposite San Jacinto Plaza to the northwest and the Henry Trost-designed Art Deco Plaza Hotel to the southwest. Additionally, the Kress Building tower was a direct contextual design response to the Henry Trost designed Mills Building standing across the intersection, a twelve-story office building rendered in the style of Louis Sullivan's concept for the tall modern office building that faces the Kress Building from across the Mills/Oregon intersection to the northwest.

Both the Mills Avenue and Oregon street sides of the tower are nearly identical and are symmetrically organized around a centerline that features the intact blade signs featuring the company name in individual neon letters spelling KRESS from top to bottom. The tower reaches its height incrementally by one square section set upon another. Like the primary elevations, the tower is clad in terra-cotta. Besides the two neutral colors of the cladding, the ornamentation includes eight more colors: red, blue, yellow, turquoise, black, white, tan, and metallic gold.<sup>4</sup> Culminating in a four-sided hip roof on which sits, what Sibbert's elevation drawings call, the "tower apex:"<sup>5</sup>

Composed of three sections: a circular colonnaded tower, an undulating cornice, and finally, a round gold circular crown with a cap of buff terra-cotta. Much of the surface is covered with small pieces of terra-cotta, each one requiring an individual model. Even the four surfaces of the hipped roof are covered with ornamental fragments. Moorish inspired finials sit atop the four corners of the first stage of the tower, wearing their own miniature gold crowns.<sup>6</sup>

Author Carla Thomas added:

The second stage of the Kress tower, with its colorful latticed wall sectioned and framed with buff-colored blocks, calls to mind the square towers attached to mosques in Muslim Spain. The Giralda Tower in Seville is a prime example....The notion of the tower as Spanish-Moorish architecture is emphasized by the cushioned finials at the corners of the lower stage.<sup>7</sup>

The tower's Moorish influence references the nearby context of architect Henry Trost's Alhambra Theatre. More precisely, however, it presents an awareness of the Alhambra in Spain. Sibbert transformed decorative elements from the latter, especially the rosette motifs, streamlining and simplifying them. The lattice covering the tower resembles those on balconies at the Alhambra, and a Spanish rope motif surrounds the windows.<sup>8</sup> Pre-Columbian (Mayan) motifs are another recurring theme shown in the blocklike, stepped tower and:

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, 150-151.

<sup>5</sup> Original drawings have not been located, but elevation drawings were first published by Carla Breeze in the following: Marcus Whiffen and Carla Breeze, *Pueblo Deco: The Art Deco Architecture of the Southwest* (University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, 154-155.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Breeze, 95.

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The honeycomb latticework in rectangular frames on the walls of the finished penthouse is highly reminiscent of the sections of the walls of the Nunnery, the Mayan temple that...had been reconstruct from plaster casts at the 1933 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago.<sup>9</sup>

However, the effect of tower is not simply visual. The upper stage of the tower is open to the elements at the interior was designed to function as a carillon wired for chimes or lighting.<sup>10</sup> That feature was never installed-presumably as a construction cost savings. Recent inspection inside the tower confirms the original "pre-wiring" conditions reported by the newspaper accounts does however exist inside the top open-air portion of the tower behind the perforated terra-cotta brise soleil block. Additionally, the Kress tower's third story concealed mechanical equipment for the refrigerated air conditioning system.<sup>11</sup> Accessed from the roof side of the tower, this equipment pulled fresh air into the building via large louvered openings at the two sides of the roof where refrigerated coils cooled the air and distributed it down to the interior sales floor.

*Southwest Elevation (Photo 4)*

The **southwest elevation** faces N. Oregon Street and is 141.5-feet-wide.

The southwest elevation is organized in three sections. The first of these sections is the aforementioned five-story tall tower with its elevation on Oregon an almost identical match to the side facing Mills Avenue above the canopy. At the corner, the dark-metal balcony turns from Mills Avenue and terminates just beyond the southern line of the tower above. Below the canopy a store display window was originally located that has been subsequently filled in.

To the south of the tower is a three-story mass with no fenestration at the ground level but punctuated with diamond patterned terra-cotta tile blocks set in window frames. These blocks which are a device to break this expanse of blank wall appear to mimic the perforated brise soleil panels at the top of the tower, although they are completely solid block. At the second-floor level, a series of seven equally spaced double hung windows punctuate the horizontal expanse of this section of the façade. The sills of these windows are expressed with a series of six corbeled block courses and the heads of these windows are topped with arched block filled with quilted block—again mimicking brise soleil block. Here as on the other two facades, the top of this section of façade is capped at the parapet with a row of dentils, polychrome terra-cotta crowned with round tops and is terminated with two courses of Spanish clay roof tile.

The building's southwest elevation is the largest façade and has the largest portion of blank wall. Sibbert's design for the store kept the sales floor at the ground floor devoid of any fenestration to the exterior except the entrances from the street. As one of the long legs of the sales floor in plan, this clear example of form following function explains the overall lack of window fenestration at the ground floor on this façade. Additionally, the most significant alteration of the building's exterior resulting from the 1955 renovation was the entire removal of the store window at the north end of the façade under the canopy as it turns the corner from Mills Avenue. Historic photos and postcards show this store window in place in during the 1930's-1940's, but its location was infilled with the same glazed metal panels used to shorten all the storefronts on all three facades.

The third main section of the southwest elevation frames the demurest of the three store entrances. Here at the ground floor a single pair the traditional curved glass storefronts led to two pairs of store entrances. This entry is divided down the middle by a structural column aligned to the front face of the building that floats free in the vestibule in front of these doors. The left set of doors have been removed and infilled with blank wall during a prior renovation, so the right pair of

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas, 155.

<sup>10</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "125 Salesgirls at Mahogany Counters to Open Kress Store," May 20, 1938.

<sup>11</sup> Breeze, 95.

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doors are only extant set at this entry. Where the left set of doors is the building's temporary electric meter and disconnect.

Unlike the other two primary entrances to the store, this entry does not feature a projecting metal canopy. Instead, this entry has an operable fabric canopy built into a recessed metal pocket in the facade that could be extended to protect these store windows from the western sun exposure. Above this canopy pocket, five corbeled blocks support a projecting band of polychrome terra-cotta emblazoned with gold KRESS signage in its center. From this header, the facade is divided into four bays of terra-cotta block striated with vertical fluting rising to four Juliet balconies that frame four windows at the second floor. Slightly taller than the other windows on the facade, these four windows are framed at their tops with an organic design of the polychrome block. Above these four window bays, this the parapet wall terraces up two steps adding vertical emphasis over this Oregon Street entrance with an ornamental terra-cotta block cap.

### *Exterior Alterations*

A back of house stair at the corner of Mills Avenue and Oregon street was added connecting first floor with the second floor as part of the 1955 renovations. Evidence that it dates to this era is that its perimeter walls are also composed of concrete masonry unit construction. Additionally – as previously mentioned - what was originally a store display window located on the Oregon Street side of the building at this Mills/Oregon corner was filled in entirely with the same glazed metal panels that were used to shorten the height of the remaining storefronts in this renovation. Besides this alteration to storefronts there does not appear to be any other substantive alterations to the exterior that occurred during the 1955 renovation. Subsequently however a metal soffit panel was added to the bottom of the canopies which conceals the fire escape stairs buried within the construction.

### **Interior**

The L-shaped building has three interior levels connected by two freight elevators that, historically, transferred merchandise from the Oregon Street freight entrance at the far south end of the building and moved it vertically through the building.<sup>12</sup>

### *Ground floor (Figure 4, Photos 8-11)*

An expansive open floorplan and double-height ceiling characterizes the former department store's **ground floor**. Structural columns form a single row down the center of the L-shaped building, which minimized customers' visual obstructions to the store's stock. Originally, floor-to-ceiling mirrors lined each structural column's sides, effectively making them disappear into the background (**Figure 12**). Conceptually the Kress Company wanted their patrons to be able to see across the entire store as they entered from the sidewalk. The basement and second floor offered office and storage space connected a pair of freight elevators. A 1955 interior renovation completed again by the original contractor Robert E. McKee converted the storage space at the basement level into an additional sales floor featuring a set of Otis escalators from the first floor, additional air conditioning for the basement and a fire sprinkler system.<sup>13</sup>

The curved glass storefronts led patrons from the sidewalk into double pairs of entry doors at each end of the store which led the pedestrian traffic directly into two primary aisles running the length of the store. The merchandise counters were

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Wilkerson, "A Guide to the Building Records of the S.H. Kress & Co. 5-10-25 Cent Stores at the National Building Museum. National Building Museum, Washington DC 1993," xii.

<sup>13</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "\$250,000 Store Remodeling Planned," July 19, 1955.

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placed crosswise down the length of each leg of the store. In this manner the main aisles would funnel customers through the store from front to back yet encourage them to detour past counters of merchandise enroute.<sup>14</sup>

In the original 1938 construction, the counters along the long exterior perimeter walls were organized into bays with arched insets into the plaster walls. Within each arch inset was a molded plaster Kress logo to reinforce the Kress Brand. In the existing conditions as found, these walls have been covered over with subsequent furr-out walls, but evidence of some of these arch insets and Kress logos have been found existing behind the layers of subsequent construction. As typical of other Kress stores a lunch counter was slung along one perimeter wall. In the case of the El Paso Kress, this lunch counter wraps the inside corner of the “L” of the store. A substantial portion of what appears to be the original curb for the lunch counter is monolithically cast into the terrazzo floor. On the east leg of the building a portion of this curb was demolished in prior renovations. Wrapping the corner of the L-Plan a portion of the lunch counter still exists with a cookline behind it. The millwork of the lunch counter itself appears to date from the 1950’s and not actually be original construction. None of the lunch counter seats are remaining.

The public spaces in any Kress store all had the same color scheme tan and cream-colored plaster walls with ivory trim. Uniformity was assured by the fact that contractor had to buy the paint from the Kress Company — a scheme that seems consistent with the contractor photos of original construction and evidence found in the existing building interior. The current paint scheme is in quite poor conditions but appears to be a uniform white/off white color for both walls and ceiling.

The ornate molded plaster ceiling carries the traces of Mayan revival design from the exterior into the selling floor with stylized geometric Mayan designs molded into the plaster. The original contractor photos suggest this plaster ceiling followed the same color scheme as the plaster work at the perimeter walls. The Mayan theme in this instance may point to the presence of an earlier culture underlying modern-day Mexico, a country whose flag once flew over Texas.<sup>15</sup> However Mayan themes ran through the interiors of other Sibbert designed Kress stores including notably the 5th Avenue store in New York. While this molded plaster ceiling retains much of its original historic fabric, entire sections of it have been compromised by years of water infiltration finding its way down from roof penetrations left open by a previous owner during the period of the building’s disuse. Although this ceiling and its substructure are severely degraded enough of the ceiling remains in intact condition to replicate the details and restore it to its original condition.

Along with pre-Columbian Mexico, modern-day Mexican tiles were set in the door elaborate surrounds inside the entrances.<sup>16</sup> These brightly patterned tiles ornament all the surfaces of the zebra wood and satinwood door surround at both the Oregon and Mesa Street entrances, as well as the four risers of an entrance staircase at Mills Avenue. The short staircase at the Mesa entrances was further embellished with three black wrought-iron railings and golden bronze handrails ending in a flourish — one of which remains in place while the second was demolished in a prior renovation. If a similar door surrounds once existed at the Oregon Street entrance, it was removed in a later renovation. Also removed in a later renovation was zebra wood paneling which continued around the perimeter walls of the store projecting from these door surrounds as suggested by the contractor photos.

As is consistent with other Sibbert designed Kress stores, the sales floor at the ground level was marble terrazzo inlaid with strips of bronze. The three kinds of marble to be blended, the amount of each, and the size of the chips were all specified in writing by the company.<sup>17</sup> Limited areas of this original terrazzo floor can be found exposed in the existing

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, 155.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas, 153.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas, 15.



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building with the remainder covered by a VCT floor added later. This terrazzo was also monolithically cast into the step of the lunch original counter which in part has survived as well.

As also evidenced by the contractor photos, the globes of incandescent light fixtures were all the same across the sales floor. When they changed, they changed uniformly in every Kress store. The Kress Company claimed to use more wattage than its competitors in lighting store interiors to ensure a brighter sales floor.<sup>18</sup> In the El Paso Store specifically this was important because there were no exterior windows on the ground floor. This sales floor relied entirely on electric lighting for lighting of the merchandise counters. As part of a later renovation, these were changed to the exposed linear florescent T-12 fixtures currently in place which are in poor condition. The original pattern of lighting can be identified in the plaster ceiling however where remnants of the original junction boxes and hanger locations can be identified in the plaster.

On the main sales floor, as a part of the 1955 renovations plaster fur-downs were added along the length of the side walls of the sales floor. These fur-downs now conceal the plaster arch insets and molded plaster Kress logos. Additionally, all the original exterior walls have been covered over by a layer of furred out walls with the exception of the end wall conditions at the Mesa Street and Mills Avenue facades.

In the 1955 renovation, a pair of Otis escalators were added to the east wing of the sales floor connecting the basement to the ground floor. Additionally, behind the lunch counter on both sides of the L are Otis branded dumbwaiters that connect the lunch counter with the full kitchen above on second floor. These dumbwaiters appear to have been added in the 1955 renovation based on the construction type of the shaft walls and dumbwaiters themselves. The partition walls that were added to surround and conceal the equipment for the 1955 Otis escalators are composed of the concrete masonry unit that was not original to the building construction.

The existing lunch counter millwork seems to date from this 1955 era finished in a 1950's plastic laminate. It is also likely the replacement of all the sales floor lighting to T-12 fluorescent linear pendant fixtures occurred during this renovation. Most of the ground floor terrazzo finish was covered in vinyl composition tile to match the basement level in the 1955 renovation. Most of this tile is extant and concealing the protecting the original terrazzo floor beneath it.

*Second Floor (Figure 5, Photo 14-15)*

At the upper floors of typical Kress stores, ample space was devoted to architect-designed storage bins because Kress believed strongly in warehousing on the premises. In this way a store could avoid having a display counter run out of an individual item.<sup>19</sup> This was the case at the El Paso store as well - with the bulk of the second-floor area and the basement dedicated to warehousing of merchandise. Most of this utilitarian area was left open to structure with the structure directly plastered and painted as a finished exposed structure finish. Only the areas where mechanical equipment was concealed did a dropped plaster finish ceiling occur on the second floor. The remainder of the second floor served as back of house offices, staff locker rooms and restrooms

Additionally, there is a kitchen which served the lunch counter below at the sales floor. It is unclear whether the second-floor kitchen was original or was an addition in the 1955 renovation. One way we can distinguish between original construction and building fabric altered in the 1955 renovation is that all the original interior partitions were built with plastered terra-cotta block — typical interior fireproof construction for this the decade of the 1930's in the El Paso region. All the interior partitions altered or added in the 1955 renovation are built with concrete masonry units. An example of this includes the shaft walls added for the Otis dumbwaiters connecting the kitchen to the lunch counters below. If the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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back of house kitchen at second floor was original, then both sets of dumbwaiters and their associated shaft walls (four in total) were either added or replacements of earlier dumbwaiters.

***Basement Level (Figure 3, Photo 12-13)***

As previously discussed, the basement level was originally built for warehousing of merchandise and its conversion to sales floor seems to be the primary purpose for the 1955 renovations.<sup>20</sup> Apart from the newspaper documentation of this conversation from storage - evidence that this was originally back of house space is reflected in the plastered and painted finish on structure above the dropped ceiling existing today which seems to date from the 1955 conversion. The original plaster finish that is directly applied to structure, is the same as the finish found in the storage areas at second floor. Newspaper reports also noted that originally there were replicas of each store display window built out in the basement for design and staging of the display windows, no longer extant as they gave way for additional sales floor.

**Basement Level Alterations**

The existing dropped ceiling at the basement which is also compromised by years of water infiltration was added in the 1955 renovation to conceal new duct runs for the additional air conditioning, new fire sprinkler piping and recessed linear ceiling lighting. Other wall partitions added at the basement to conceal additional mechanical equipment and fire sprinklers are of concrete masonry construction that was not original to the building. A single stair flight at each of the basement was a public connection to the ground sales floor. These were built for the public eye as they were cast using a terrazzo finish to match the original terrazzo floor at the main sales floor. The main floor of the basement was originally an exposed concrete floor as back of house space but in the 1955 renovation it was covered entirely in vinyl composition tile which is now severely degraded from water infiltration. The Otis escalators that were added to connect the basement sales floor with the ground floor are extant but in poor condition. Walls added to conceal the mechanics of these escalators are also built from the 1955 era concrete masonry unit construction.

**Current Work**

When the current owner of the Kress Building purchased the building at auction, they commenced with an initial mitigation phase of work to make the building safe by securing the building from intrusion of both vandals and pests. This prior work included abatement of dangerous accumulations from pigeon infiltration for decades. Additionally, to prevent further degradation from water infiltration, several roof openings that had been left exposed by the prior owner were capped and a temporary roof coating was applied to the existing roof. Additionally for the benefit of the San Jacinto Plaza district, the new ownership undertook an initial phase of facade cleaning to remove the years of grime that had built up on the polychrome terra-cotta. The entire facade and tower were hand cleaned from top to bottom using lifts. These existing conditions are represented in the photography submitted herein. This is an ongoing tax credit project and work is progressing parallel to this application. Existing conditions may need to be updated prior to final submittal to National Park Service.

**Integrity**

The El Paso S.H. Kress & Co. Building retains a high degree of integrity of its unique physical features in design and materiality that distinguish it as an excellent local example of Commerce Architecture and at the state level as an outstanding example of architect Edward F. Sibbert's commercial architectural works during his tenure with S.H. Kress & Company. Sibbert captured the Kress brand in his design characterized by its massive corner tower, streamlined form, and colorful ornament of modernistic and regional eclectic motifs. The nominated building retains integrity of its original setting and downtown location across from El Paso's San Jacinto Plaza. The original design, workmanship, and exterior

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<sup>20</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "\$250,000 Store Remodeling Planned," July 19, 1955.

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materials are remarkably intact. It retains its original form, terracotta tile façade, polychrome terracotta ornament, historic signage, original canopy, and curved entrances. Exterior alterations that shortened the storefronts and infilled a display window on Oregon Street were completed within the period of significance in the company's effort to modernize the Kress brand. A recently completed façade survey identified that all the original polychrome terra-cotta blocks comprising its three facades and tower are in particularly good condition. The exemplary condition of the terra-cotta facades is due in part to the sophisticated design of the wall systems, workmanship of its construction and due in part to the lack of extreme freeze-thaw cycles in El Paso's dry, mild desert climate. Additionally, the El Paso Kress store is an exceedingly rare example of a Kress store that has survived with what seems to be all its original exterior signage intact. Alterations and deferred maintenance affected the interior's integrity. However, the salesfloor remains a large open room. Intact interior materials include ornate molded plaster ceiling, terrazzo floors, and wood entrance door surrounds. Minor alterations to the sales floor completed in the 1955 renovation did not significantly alter Sibbert's original design intent for the main sales floor. While parts of the plaster ceiling were compromised by water infiltration at the roof, the ceiling can be retained and restored. Because the nominated building has preponderance of high integrity in setting, location, design, workmanship, and materials, it retains its close association and feeling as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century S.H. Kress & Company chain store. Intact signage further strengthens its historical association. The nominated building retains excellent integrity to convey its historical and architectural significance.

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## Statement of Significance

The 1937 Kress Building in El Paso, El Paso County is an exceptional example of master architect Edward F. Sibbert's commercial retail design completed during his 25-year career with S.H. Kress & Company. Lauded for its beauty, the nominated department store embodies Sibbert's "simplified modern" company building program that prioritized good composition, sleek facades, and abstracted ornament highlighted in Kress-branded colors with Spanish Moorish-influenced details that reflected El Paso's regional setting. Built at the height of his career, Sibbert later said it was one of his favorite designs, and it is considered the best example of his work in Texas. Its high architectural quality also speaks to the El Paso Kress store's local commercial significance. S.H. Kress & Company opened its first El Paso branch in 1907. Following three decades of sustained success, the company constructed a larger department store in 1937-1938 for the West Texas city with three street-facing facades, a corner tower, and exuberantly ornamented with Kress' signature signage. As one of the S.H. Kress & Company's most successful variety stores in the United States, the El Paso Kress building initially withstood suburban displacement by modernizing interior features and exterior entrances in 1955. The nominated building continuously operated under the Kress name through 1997. It is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the area of Commerce at the local level of significance and Criterion C in the area of Architecture at the state level of significance. The period of significance begins with its construction date in 1937 through 1967 when S.H. Kress & Company built its first suburban branch in El Paso, signifying the decreasing importance of the downtown store within the larger context of suburban commercial development.

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## Commercial and Architectural Development of Downtown El Paso, 1885-1967

The period of significance for the S.H. Kress & Co. Building in El Paso is 1937-1967. However, the development of El Paso's downtown commercial district is a much broader span that the 1938 Kress Building's construction sits squarely within the latter half of. This commercial development follows downtown El Paso's rise from a dusty town of scattered one-story adobe buildings to a bustling metropolis of mid and high-rise buildings that was sparked by the work of William S. Hills. Hills created the second major plat of El Paso in 1885, refining and extending the Anson Mills Plan. Educated in law at Harvard, W.S. Hills arrived from St. Louis in 1879 to manage the real estate holdings of the estate of Robert Campbell of St. Louis, which had indirectly come into possession of land in the area. W.S. Hills is credited by JJ Bowden with the orderly development of downtown in Hill's effort to plat the huge Campbell Addition. In his plan, Hills brought the balance of the Ponce de León Grant and the Pierce Finley Survey to be added to the City of El Paso:

Through his personal efforts, Hills performed a tremendous service to the city of El Paso by securing rights-of-way for streets and alleys across the numerous small tracts which had been sold before the subdivision of the Campbell Addition. His foresight undoubtedly saved the city from having numerous narrow and crooked streets in its downtown area.<sup>21</sup>

Prompted by the ongoing work of William S. Hills to organize the downtown street grid, in March of 1884 the City of El Paso entered a 'Deed of Exchange' with the owners of the property at Block 5, Lot 28 that bifurcated the north-south Oregon Street to extend the street continuously through the block to connect at San Jacinto Plaza. It was with this exchange of property in March of 1884 that the boundaries of the future site of the 1938 Kress Building was fully formed.<sup>22</sup>

With the arrival of the railroads to El Paso in 1881 and the completion of the W.S. Hills plat of 1885 the orderly sale and development of El Paso's central business district quickly accelerated as commerce poured in. Soon new banks, office blocks, hotels and department stores began to spring up in the business district. The city's oldest bank, State National

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<sup>21</sup> JJ Bowden, "The Ponce de León De Leon Land Grant." 1963

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, C.E. "The Borderland Princess." 2017. Page 62

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Bank, built its first building one block south of the Kress building in 1881. The bank building located at the southwest corner of the intersection of Oregon Street and San Antonio was El Paso's first brick building – heralding the transition from Adobe to masonry construction.<sup>23</sup> This building would be replaced in the same location for State National Bank with a new single-story building designed by Trost & Trost in 1922.<sup>24</sup>

When Samuel Kress opened his first store in El Paso in 1907 his competition was primarily homegrown with players that would eventually include Calisher's (1881), The Popular (1902), The White House (1912) among others. Calisher's predated the arrival of Kress and its business model most closely resembled the S.H. Kress and Company as a competing five and dime store. Calisher's would eventually become part of the J.J. Newberry Company, a five and dime store chain founded in Stroudsburg, PA in 1911. Calisher's began business at the intersection of Mesa Street and Texas Avenue — on the same block where Samuel Kress opened his first store. No doubt, the location of his closest competition influenced Kress's decision of where to purchase property his first Kress store in El Paso.

### **Building Taller, Modern and Fire-Proof**

The market forces of this new influx of commerce began to drive commercial buildings in El Paso above single-story construction. Initially, these commercial building blocks in El Paso's central business district were built as two to three stories, composed of load bearing brick, with internal frames built of wood and cast iron. This construction type was prone to fire with the introduction of electrical systems and many of these first commercial buildings were destroyed by fire. As new construction systems were devised, these buildings would subsequently be replaced with larger multistory buildings of fire-proof construction. The original El Paso Kress store designed by the first Kress Head Architect Julian Zeitner and opened in 1907 followed a similar pattern.<sup>25</sup> On Wednesday, February 5th, 1913, this building was damaged by fire and a significant amount of the building stock was totaled by smoke and water damage.<sup>26</sup> The building was repaired and put back into service before it was enlarged and bestowed with the signature yellow brick storefront in 1916-1917. A second fire in August 1924 gutted the building which again was rebuilt following the blaze.<sup>27</sup> The building was reconstructed later that year and reopened in 1925.<sup>28</sup> After suffering two fires in load bearing brick structures, the Kress Company was surely ready to build a fireproof concrete structure for its store. The company would demolish this last four-story structure to make room for the 1938 Sibbert designed Superstore.<sup>29</sup>

The need for multi-story fire-proof construction in El Paso — precipitated by the multiple fires in the business district — coincided with the arrival of the three Trost brothers in the early 1900's. With Henry leading architectural design and Augustus and Gustavos leading the engineering of structures, the Trost brothers immediately began experimenting with reinforced concrete frame construction to push of the height of commercial buildings in downtown over four stories. The building type was a fire-proof construction type they had experience within their hometown of Toledo, OH where it was used for fire-proof warehouses and daylight factories.

Their technique included ornamental expression in site cast concrete on the facades was first realized in the seven-story Rio Grande Valley Bank Building (Abdou Building) one block south of the Kress Building on Mesa Street and subsequently the Roberts Banner Building which shares a party wall with the Kress Building in 1910. The development of

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<sup>23</sup> "Man, Who Came Here 42 Years Ago Tells of El Paso's Rapid Growth; Recalls the Days of Franklin," *El Paso Herald*, October 20, 1922, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Linda C. Flory; Carol Kennedy (March 7, 1980). "[National Register of Historic Places Registration: State National Bank](#)" (PDF). Texas Historical Commission.

<sup>25</sup> *El Paso Herald*, "Contract Let for the New Kress Building," July 19, 1907.

<sup>26</sup> *El Paso Herald*, "Kress Store is Wrecked by Fire," February 5, 1913.

<sup>27</sup> *El Paso Times*, "Downtown Fire Guts Building; Damages Stock," August 12, 1924.

<sup>28</sup> *El Paso Times*, "New Kress Store Will Be Finest in Texas," December 5, 1924.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, 150.

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the Roberts Banner Building in the history of Kress Building is significant in that Samuel Kress purchased the corner lot to build on and sold the site for the Roberts Banner Building after the development of the first Kress Building at 211 N. Mesa Street in 1907. The Roberts Banner Building now occupies most of the footprint of the northeast corner of the block that fills the inside of the Kress Building's L-shaped plan. The Kress Company additionally sold a small portion of the Federal Building site purchased in 1936 to the Roberts Banner developers so they could retain the air rights adjacent to the southwest face of their building.

During this period, Trost & Trost designed new multi-story, concrete frame buildings for Calisher's at the intersection of Stanton Street and Texas Avenue (1911), The White House Department Store on Mills Avenue (1912) and The Popular Department Store at Mesa Street and San Antonio Avenue (1914). By 1929 the Trost Brothers with Henry leading architectural design and Augustus and Gustavos leading the engineering of structures had perfected this technology to the point of building the nineteen-story Hilton skyscraper across Oregon street from the future Kress Building site. The El Paso Hilton (Now known as Plaza Hotel Pioneer Park) remained the tallest building in El Paso until it was surpassed by the El Paso Natural Gas Building (Blue Flame Building) in 1955.

### **Kress Sets a New Standard for Commercial Architecture in El Paso (1938-1967)**

It was during this flurry of vertical construction and development of reinforced concrete construction techniques that the 1938 Kress store was built to satisfy the demands for more space in a fully modern, fire-proof structure. The new Sibbert designed superstore was iconic in every way — offering for the first time a destination shopping experience whose retail brand identity was bound to the architecture of the Kress store. The five and dime stores and department stores of this era that the S.H. Kress & Company was competing against included the Calisher's (J.J Newberry), White House Department Store, the Popular and Lerner Stores, among others. The architectural language of Sibbert's design offered a clear distinction from all of Kress's competitors who all occupied buildings of a similar Chicago style of architecture — all designed locally by Henry Trost. Upon its completion, the nominated building also distinguished itself by offering El Pasoans the first fully refrigerated air-conditioned shopping experiences — a technological marvel when the store opened that distributed refrigerated air throughout the sales floor.<sup>30</sup>

The S.H. Kress & Company enjoyed a long history as the premier five-and-dime store in El Paso, beginning with Samuel Kress's purchase of the property at 211 N. Mesa in 1907. The chain maintained continuous operations in downtown El Paso until the chain's bankruptcy in 1980 — well past 1944 when the chain began moving away from development of "Main Street American" and into the development of big box stores in more suburban locations. Even the demise of the Kress Company did not result in the El Paso store's closure as the location was purchased first by Genesco Inc. and then McCrory Stores in 1981 who continued to operate the store under the Kress name. Due in part to its expressive architectural design, the El Paso Kress store remained a major retail force in the central business district until it closed permanently in 1997 when McCrory's closed the location as one of 300 that the chain closed that year.<sup>31</sup> To this day, when El Pasoans remember the downtown shopping experiences of their youth, the store that is always mentioned specifically by name is the Kress Store. This collective memory of downtown retail in El Paso is due in no small part to the beauty of Edward Sibbert's gleaming terra-cotta masterpiece facing San Jacinto Plaza.

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<sup>30</sup> Breeze, 95.

<sup>31</sup> *El Paso Times*, "Kress serves its last lunch," February 23, 1997.

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## S.H. Kress & Company

### *Kress Company Period of Building in Urban Downtowns: 1905-1944*

When Samuel Kress started his chain, he placed his stores in rented spaces in the commercial districts of southern cities. The chain prospered immediately, expanding in the number of stores and geographic areas covered and moving into small cities. In the first decade of the 1900's the Samuel Kress embarked on his career as a builder when he began to use new structures. Kress quickly became known in the dime-store community for preferring to build rather than to lease its stores.

With few exceptions, S.H. Kress & Co. used company architects who designed most of the buildings, resulting in the stylistic consistency of most early stores (1905-1930)<sup>32</sup> Within the category of five-and-ten cent-store architecture, S.H. Kress & Co. stores had certain design elements that made each one identifiable as a Kress. Early in its building program, the company adopted design feature that would persist, with modifications, throughout its building history — each company architect building upon the developments of his predecessors.<sup>33</sup>

An in-house head Architect typically signed the plans, but the designs were a collective effort.<sup>34</sup> Samuel Kress had a strong interest in the appearance of the stores his company built and was especially concerned with the storefronts.<sup>35</sup> S.H. Kress & Co. pioneered retail identity architecture through its use of a “signature storefront.” Each Kress store combined an original design with standardized parts, inside and out carried forward from previous stores.<sup>36</sup> Samuel Kress let no plans leave the home office without his approval, often signified by the initials SHK on the outside of the drawing roll.

### *S.H. Kress & Co. Store in El Paso*

It was in this initial period of building that S.H. Kress & Co. built its first store in El Paso. The El Paso Herald Post reported in April 1907 that Samuel Kress himself came to El Paso to select a site seeking a prime location in the best business district of the city. The property settled upon was a prime corner facing the southeast corner of San Jacinto Plaza at the intersection of St. Louis Street (Mills Ave.) and Mesa Street.<sup>37</sup> The property had a frontage of 95-feet on what is now Mills Avenue and 133 feet on Mesa. Kress purchased it for a price of \$1,000 per linear front foot or \$133,000. Samuel Kress was quoted during his visit on his plans for the property:

*We will erect a modern building on a portion of the property for our own store and will hold the remainder as an investment... We wanted to get located in the best part of the business district, as we cater to the best class of trade, and the store will be established in El Paso will be equipped and maintained on the same high basis as all our stores in the south.*<sup>38</sup>

On July 19th of the same year a design that was completed by the first Kress head architect Julian Zeitner was contracted for construction. The building would be two stories plus a basement with provisions for additional stories to be added to it to accommodate future growth. The contract for construction was awarded to R.W. Ward for a sum of \$26,250.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Wilkerson, x-xi.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>37</sup> John F. Worley Directory Company. El Paso Directory for 1908, book, 1908; Dallas, Texas.

(<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph285886/>: accessed August 10, 2021), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting University of Texas at El Paso, 626.

<sup>38</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, “Degroff sells St. Louis and Mesa Ave. Property to New York Man for \$133,000,” April 25, 1907.

<sup>39</sup> *El Paso Herald*, “Contract Let for the New Kress Building,” July 19, 1907.

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Heralded as one of the quickest construction projects in the city, the store was completed in November and opened on December 6th, 1907 as the 70th Kress store in the system.<sup>40</sup> The store occupied 211 and 213 N. Mesa and left open the valuable corner parcel which would later be sold to developers for the construction of the Henry Trost designed Roberts Banner Building.

To this day, the Kress building retains is 211 N. Mesa Street address. The building presented a typical Kress signature storefront to Mesa Street. The store at this location suffered from multiple fires in 1913 and again in 1924. In 1917, the Kress store would be added to with a three-story additional also designed by company architects and be given a new storefront in the characteristic Kress yellow brick. The renovation and addition would add new elevators and expand the selling floors to three levels.<sup>41</sup>

*Great Depression Building Boom*

America's Great Depression presented Samuel Kress with an opportunity for expansion of the Kress Company's construction program. This period coincides with Edward F. Sibbert's rise to the position of head architect around 1930. Presumably, Kress and Sibbert shared a vision for a shift in the quality of the retail architecture they were building and the low cost of labor and materials in the midst of the Depression provided the means to implement this. Although Kress built expensive buildings using fine materials before the 1930s, the Great Depression provided an opportunity to build Class A stores, or Superstores as they eventually were known. Edgar Kerby, former head of Kress's building division explained it this way in a 1983 interview:

Samuel H. Kress fully realized that the depression would not last forever, and he, more than any of his competition, took advantage of the extremely low cost of labor and construction materials to embark on a large construction program - building what we then considered Class A store buildings in many cities including the flagship store at 444 Fifth Avenue.<sup>42</sup>

*Purchase of U.S. Courthouse Site*

In 1936 after the completion of a new Federal Courthouse in El Paso, the Federal Government determined to sell off its old Federal Building and the property it sat upon at the corner of St. Louis Street (Mills Ave.) and Oregon Street. It was reported in September 1936 that the Kress company was considering the purchase of the property that adjoined the backside of Kress' existing property and store fronting Mesa. Company officials denied negotiations for the purchase of the property because the federal regulations required that the property be auctioned for liquidation. However, the Kress company did have a survey of the property completed which has survived in the Kress Collection at the National Building Museum in Washington D.C.<sup>43</sup>

In November of 1936 when the bids were opened the S.H. Kress & Co. bid of \$235,550 was accepted and a letter notifying the company of the awarded was sent to the home office in New York. Conceptual plans for the expansion of the Kress Store were already being considered.<sup>44</sup> On December 29th the contractor for deconstruction of the Federal

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<sup>40</sup> *El Paso Herald*, "Construction Notes," November 27, 1907.

<sup>41</sup> *El Paso Times*, "About the New Kress Store," January 31, 1917.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas, 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "Federal Building Purchase Loom: Report S.H. Kress Co. Ready to Buy Old Structure for \$225,000," September 21, 1936.

<sup>44</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "Bid Accepted on Federal Building," November 30, 1936.



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Courthouse was awarded to El Paso salvage dealer, W. Silver — a company still in existence to this day. The work was to be completed within two months and the company hoped to build a new building by November 1937.<sup>45</sup>

*Sibbert's Unique Design Response to El Paso's Chamber of Commerce, Women's Division*

Sibbert's design for the El Paso store represents a unique design response to a public dialogue with the Women's Division of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce. While most of Sibbert's designs included some contextual references, his work in El Paso grew directly out of local input.

Organized in 1924 as a sub-division of the exclusively male Chamber of Commerce, the Women's Division was an active and outspoken organization that beautified and promoted the West Texas City through the 1940s.<sup>46</sup> Mabel R. Welch, the state's second licensed woman architect, was among its members and a one-time chair of the Women's Division Architecture Committee. In 1937, the chamber adopted an architectural campaign to encourage citizens, architects, and contractors to adopt a Southwestern style for existing and new commercial and residential construction. Part beautification, part marketing endeavor, the group persistently stoked "hacienda consciousness" to give El Paso's built landscape a cohesive character. Welch produced a pamphlet, "Typical Southwestern Architecture," as a resource for local builders. Her own residential designs and remodeling reflected the "hacienda-type," distinguished for its rambling plan, red tile roofs, pink or buff exteriors, and arcades.<sup>47</sup> The nominated building was another successful example of their campaign.

When Kress announced its plan to remodel and enlarge the downtown store, the Women's Division arranged meetings to persuade the company leadership and Sibbert to design a structure in the city's unofficial hacienda style. While the *El Paso Times* reported that much of the program for the building was worked out, the Kress Company would consider the Women's Department request, saying "The building we will erect here, will be a credit to this city, as well as to our organization. We believe in El Paso and are willing to back that belief with our money invested in property and buildings."<sup>48</sup>

In late April 1937 Edward Sibbert himself came to El Paso in his role as chief architect as part of a cross country trip on behalf of Kress.<sup>49</sup> Sibbert spent time during his visit taking in the architectural context immediately surrounding the San Jacinto site. It was still very much Henry Trost's city even though Trost has passed away four years prior. The new Kress site was in the shadow of Trost's streamlined Art Deco skyscraper which held the honor of being the city's tallest structure. Completed in 1930, the Hilton Hotel (now Plaza Pioneer Park) was the last major downtown commission designed by Henry Trost. Author Carla Breeze would later classify both the Hilton Hotel and Sibbert's Kress building as Pueblo Deco - a term she gave to the process of regionalization that Art Deco underwent in the American southwest.<sup>50</sup> Kress had years prior sold the corner piece of property which fills the inside of the "L" upon which the Trost designed Roberts Banner Building was built. Additionally, from the northwest corner of the intersection they shared sat the twelve story Mills Building — a Sullivan-esque modern office building rendered in insitu concrete that Trost claimed was the largest monolithically cast concrete structure in the world when it was completed in 1911.

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<sup>45</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "Start Wrecking Federal Building," December 29, 1936.

<sup>46</sup> Mrs. A.F. Quisenberry, "Women's Division Renders Valuable Aid to El Paso, Making this a Better City," *El Paso Times*, April 15, 1931.

<sup>47</sup> Welch's only commercial building, the A.B. Poe Motor Co. building at 601 Texas was completed in 1936 just a few blocks from the Kress Building. Welch's design for the A.B. Poe Motor Co. "Women to Aid in Remodeling El Paso Homes," *El Paso Times*, December 12, 1937; "Urges Spanish Building Type," *El Paso Herald-Post*, February 15, 1937.

<sup>48</sup> *El Paso Times*, "Hacienda Type Building Studied Here" Kress architects Plan Structure Which Will Be Credit to City," February 16, 1937.

<sup>49</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, "Women Ask Chiming Bells in Tower, Soft Pink Walls for Store Building," April 20, 1937.

<sup>50</sup> Whiffen and Breeze, 18

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Most importantly, during his El Paso visit Sibbert met with a committee of women from the Chamber of Commerce Woman's Department to listen to their ideas for his new building that included Spanish lines, chiming bells in a tower, soft pink walls, a mission look with Spanish tile and an element that was visible from trains passing through downtown along Main Street. Sibbert was quoted as saying during the meeting; "The Spanish or Mexican influence will undoubtedly be the thing for the building's general outline," then he added "the store cannot look like a mission. It must be basically a modern store built for modern business. But a combination of stone and stucco or stone and terra cotta can undoubtedly dress it up to suite this country. Also, the bells are good for the Spanish note."<sup>51</sup>

Upon his return to his design studio in New York, Sibbert delivered a significant win for the harbingers of El Paso's architectural style at the Women's Department of the Chamber of Commerce. Spanish architecture and the physical site's context indeed influenced Sibbert's skilled design solution for El Paso.

*First Phase of Construction, 1937*

In July 1937 the site was prepared for the construction of the new Kress Building with the construction of a new underground vault being built by El Paso Electric to install two new 300-kilowatt transformers to serve it.<sup>52</sup> The building required this major upgrade in electrical service to provide power for a sales floor lit entirely by electric incandescent lighting and cooled by refrigerated air conditioning. The project went out to bid on August 10th<sup>53</sup> and on October 4th the project was awarded for construction to legendary El Paso contractor Robert E. McKee for a sum of \$450,000.<sup>54</sup> By October 19th, McKee had a building permit in hand and had soil testing so that excavations for foundations could begin.<sup>55</sup> After the foundations were placed, McKee's crews moved quickly and by February, 1938 construction had advanced to the point of installing the air conditioning equipment with work costing \$35,000 under a separate building permit.<sup>56</sup>

*Opening Day*

In May 1938, the old Mesa Street Kress store closed, and the first unit of the new store opened its show windows on Mills and Oregon for the first time. The Kress company celebrated its grand opening of its new Sibbert designed "Superstore" with the opening of the first unit on May 21st. The El Paso Times reported; "The new Kress Building represents one of the most novel architectural and engineering feats ever accomplished in El Paso."<sup>57</sup> The building offered new features unknown to other department stores and a new lighting system that impressed local engineers.<sup>58</sup> A leaflet distributed at the opening described the complete building:

Modified Spanish architecture to comply with a special request of the Women's Division of the Chamber of Commerce that we design a building in keeping with the colorful history of this locality. We are proud to cooperate with them in their splendid program of city planning to make El Paso more beautiful than ever...a city which truly reflects its romantic past.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, "Women Ask Chiming Bells in Tower, Soft Pink Walls for Store Building." April 20, 1937.

<sup>52</sup> *El Paso Times*, "Kress Building Vault Is Built," July 10, 1937.

<sup>53</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "Kress Building Bids are Asked; New Store Structure Will Be Spanish Design," August 10, 1937.

<sup>54</sup> *El Paso Times*, "Deal Closed For Building Kress Store; R.E. McKee Awarded Job of Erecting \$450,000 El Paso Project," October 4, 1937.

<sup>55</sup> *El Paso Times* "Kress Building Work Started" October 19, 1937.

<sup>56</sup> *El Paso Times*, "\$35,000 Permit Taken by Kress Company" February 5, 1938.

<sup>57</sup> *El Paso Times*, "Beautiful New Kress Building Will Open In El Paso Today; Many Department Store Innovations Made in Structure," May 21, 1938.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Thomas, 151.

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During design, it was reported that the tower which is open to the elements would function as a carillon with chimes and lighting — a design response from Sibbert to the input received from the Woman's Division of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce. When the design was first reported, the lighting and chimes were planned to occur in the original construction. At opening day however, it was reported that the tower was merely "wired for chimes or lighting in the future."<sup>60</sup> The Kress Company determined during construction to leave the chimes and backlighting of the tower for another day - presumably as a value engineering measure. Regardless the planning of an elaborate tower that would electronically provide music for people on the street or sitting in the park was a unique phenomenon in Kress's building history.<sup>61</sup>

*Second Phase of Construction, 1938*

Wasting no time, McKee already had permission from El Paso City Council to block off a portion of Mesa Street for the razing of the old Kress Building prior to the opening of unit one at Mills and Oregon. In the first week of June McKee was granted the building permit for unit two as the work to tear down the old building had already commenced.<sup>62</sup> McKee's crews moved right into the work constructing unit two after completing unit one. In just a few short months on November 6, 1938, the *El Paso Times* published photos by Aultman Photo Co, featuring the new Kress Store with the second Mesa Street unit completed and open for business.

*Kress Company Period of Sit-Ins and Segregation in the 1960s*

Considering the S.H. Kress company's focus on providing lunch counter service as evidenced by the upgrades to the lunch counter at the El Paso Kress store in the 1955 renovations, it is important to consider the societal context of lunch counter sit-in protests that occurred at the 1960's across the south. In 1960, the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, was the stage of the sit-in protest by four African American students that moved forward the civil rights movement across the nation. Two days later the protests spread to the Kress store in Greensboro.<sup>63</sup> The sit-ins at lunch counters were quickly spreading amongst other department stores in cities across the South – protests that demanded changes in segregation laws, even though many ended in arrests for trespassing or disorderly conduct. The protests caused store chains including S.H. Kress to shut down their lunch counters, to protect their stores and their clientele. At the store located in Orangeburg, South Carolina, Kress resorted to removing the seats of the lunch counter to avoid sit-ins. (Reference Figure #16) By the summer of 1960, lunch counters began to be quietly integrated by the direction of the national headquarters for several chain stores including S.H. Kress.<sup>64</sup>

The Kress store in downtown Dallas was among the first to voluntarily desegregate its lunch counter when it served Rev. Thompson – the 56-year-old pastor of the New Jerusalem Institutional Missionary Baptist Church. The merchants of Dallas, including the Kress manager George Cole, had heard rumors of sit-in demonstrations across the south, and decided to serve any protesters that appeared at their establishments.<sup>65</sup> As several stores in the S.H. Kress dime store chain across the South were the target of demonstrations, the chain suffered economic setbacks resulting in a vote by the board of directors "to omit payment of its regular quarterly dividend" in response to "the basic problems which the company faced in the fields of merchandising, personnel and procedures." following its move to progressively integrate the lunch counters at its' Kress stores in southern states.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "125 Salesgirls at Mahogany Counters to Open Kress Store" May 20, 1938.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas, 154-155.

<sup>62</sup> *El Paso Times*, "Kress Gets Permit For New Building," June 5, 1938.

<sup>63</sup> "Negro Protest Keeps Lunch Counters Shut," *El Paso Herald-Post*. February 10, 1960.

<sup>64</sup> "Across The City Desk," *Durham Morning Herald*, August 8, 1960.

<sup>65</sup> "Negro Preacher Gets Waited on in Dallas," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 26, 1960.

<sup>66</sup> "Across The City Desk." *Durham Morning Herald*, August 8, 1960.

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Amid the backdrop of protests at variety and department store chains across the south - there did not appear to be any protests or disruptions at the lunch counters in the El Paso stores. The stories published in El Paso's newspapers on the subject were all reporting on the happenings elsewhere across Texas and the south. This could be due, in part, to the demographics of El Paso which consisted of a majority-minority population of Mexican Americans and a very limited percentage of African Americans citizens. El Paso also notably had the very first branch of the NAACP in the State of Texas, established in 1914.<sup>67</sup> Historically and to this day the retail economy in downtown El Paso depends largely on sales to Mexican Nationals who cross the downtown International Bridge to shop in El Paso stores. In this era, El Paso's streetcar system crossed the bridge to provide expedited passage for Mexican shoppers to El Paso stores. The El Paso-Juarez international trolley line was the only one of its kind crossing an international border.<sup>68</sup>

*Kress Building Through Postwar Suburbanization*

In 1967, S.H. Kress & Company opened a second store in El Paso at Stanton and Seventh in the new format of self-serve variety stores located outside of the central business district.<sup>69</sup> The opening was the local implementation of the company's shift in business model that began nationally in 1944 as it turned its focus away from Main Street America. It is possible that the downtown location's success lay behind the company's decision against a suburban location until the mid-1960s when suburban retail patterns were well-established. Instead, Kress undertook interior renovations in 1955 to update the nominated building with modern escalators, lunch counter, and a new retail space in the basement.

From 1944 to its bankruptcy in 1980, Kress & Company focused on new models of retail and suburban locations that reflected American's postwar evolving living and shopping patterns. El Paso's second Kress Store was a 17,925 square foot "Variety Fair" model in business for eight years. It operated under a new self-serve retail model that no longer relied on salespeople at counters to assist shoppers and organized the merchandise into departments with rows of shelves. This move away from large retail labor forces was a market-wide move to self-serve stores in direct response to changes in the nation's minimum wage laws implemented in 1967.<sup>70</sup> In 1966, Congress has enacted amendments that expanded the type and scope of businesses that were covered by the prior minimum wage laws and additionally reset the minimum wage to \$1.00 an hour effective February 1967.<sup>71</sup> The downtown Kress Building operated until the company's bankruptcy in 1980 at which point Genesco Inc. and later McCrory's Stores ran it under the name of Kress until 1997 when it was finally shuttered. The building has been vacant since then.

**Samuel Kress**

Samuel Kress started professional life at the age for seventeen by teaching school. By 1887 he had saved enough from teaching to purchase a stationery and novelty store in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania — his entry into the retail business. In 1890 he purchased a wholesale business of stationery and toys in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania and turned it into the Kress Stationery Company.<sup>72</sup> Kress chose a location in the South for starting a variety-store chain because the South was vastly "understored" at the time and had no five-and-tens. Kress was quoted regarding this decision as follows, "Memphis was picked because it was a thriving cotton port and it appeared, after careful appraisal, to offer the maximum potential and minimum risk for the introduction of the Kress idea."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> "About," NAACP El Paso Branch #6175, <https://www.naacpepasobranch6175.org/about>.

<sup>68</sup> "El Paso: Visitor's Gateway to Fun in The Sun" *El Paso Times*, June 8, 1966.

<sup>69</sup> *El Paso Times*, "Kress Sets Thursday Opening," March 9, 1967.

<sup>70</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, "Law's Higher Wages Hikes Cost of Living," January 31, 1967.

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history>.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas, 4-5.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

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Samuel Kress's business instinct to serve the South and start his variety-store chain in Memphis paid off. By 1900 his success had grown to twelve variety stores across four southern states and Texas. He then took the ambitious step of moving the company headquarters to New York City.<sup>74</sup> His general retail strategy was not unique — it was a selling strategy devised by Frank W. Woolworth in 1879. His chain offered a wide choice of quality merchandise at extremely low prices, with nothing costing more than a nickel or a dime. Kress was able to keep this commitment until 1901, when he began also selling items for a quarter.<sup>75</sup>

His original stores were started in leased spaces but eventually Kress began to build his own stores - making exceptional retail establishments part of the Kress brand. He embarked on a massive building spree through the Great Depression, growth that financed by the sale of everyday items Americans needed even in tough times. When Samuel Kress died in 1955, S.H. Kress & Co. owned 262 stores with an annual gross income of \$167.9 Million.<sup>76</sup>

*Philanthropy*

By the 1920's, Kress had become a collector of European painting, sculpture, and decorative art financed by the success of his retail business. As one of the greatest American collectors of old master paintings, Samuel Kress again found a means of enhancing American lives. In 1929 he set up the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, established to care for his collection and provide a vehicle for philanthropy. The very next year he began gifting his art collection to public museums.<sup>77</sup>

Through his own generosity and the work of his foundation — more than three thousand works of European art were donated to the people of the United States between 1930 and 1961. This work was not placed in a single Kress Museum but distributed throughout the land for all to access. Masterpieces from the Kress Collection fill the halls of the National Gallery of Art in Washington and form the core old master collections in eighteen regional galleries from Miami to Honolulu including El Paso in between.<sup>78</sup> Study collections of European paintings and sculpture beckon to students in

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas, 5.

<sup>77</sup> Wilkerson, x.

<sup>78</sup> Through his generous Art patrimony, Samuel Kress made a significant contribution to the cultural milieu of the United States as a whole and a profound impact on the cultural institutions of El Paso specifically. On June 13, 1956 — less than a year after the newly renovated Kress Building had reopened and Samuel Kress had passed away — it was announced in the El Paso Times that El Paso was being considered on a tentative list of four cities to receive a portion of the Kress Collection. Seventeen other cities had already received a portion of the collection with an estimated value at the time of \$70 M. A representative from the Kress estate was to visit El Paso within weeks to investigate facilities including those at Texas Western College and the International Museum. If selected, El Paso would receive a collection with a value of \$8 M.

It took several years to accomplish but El Paso was initially approved to be the 18th city to receive a portion of the Kress Collection if the city could make improvements to prepare gallery space to receive the collection and keep it on permanent display. This significant gift from the Kress Collection would be responsible for the creation of what is now known as the El Paso Museum of Art. In a 1958 Bond Election, El Paso voters approved funds to add two new wings to the International Museum Building in central El Paso to create the gallery space required.<sup>78</sup> In May of 1959, El Paso Architect Louis Daeuble revealed approved plans for the addition to the existing museum building. Plans included full heating and air conditioning of the space and special display lighting — all specifically designed for the best care of the paintings. The Kress Foundation had the right of final approval to ensure the facilities would be adequate to provide proper care of the paintings.

In a column that appeared on the front page of the El Paso Times next to the announcement of Alan Shepard's first American flight into space the previous day — it was reported on May 6, 1961, that the new El Paso Museum of Art had officially opened with the Kress Collection. At the top of his flight path, astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr. exclaimed "What a beautiful sight." A sentiment shared by the public in El Paso as the ribbon was cut by Mrs. Rush Kress opening the new wing housing the Kress Collection.<sup>78</sup> With the gift that was formalized through a deed later that same year, the El Paso Museum of Art received a total of 51 works of art,

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twenty-three American colleges and universities. Samuel Kress turned the profits from the nickels and dimes of public and endowed the American people with a priceless artistic patrimony that among others, includes Masterpieces by Giotto, Raphael, Durer, Giorgione, Titian, El Greco, Rubens, Van Dyck, Watteau, and David.<sup>79</sup>

### **Architectural Significance: Work of a Master Architect**

In 1977, when asked if he favored any particular S.H. Kress & Co. Department Store that he had designed, retired architect Edward F. Sibbert replied, “Yes—the Kress Store on 5th Ave., N. Y. C. and [the one] in El Paso, Texas.”<sup>80</sup> The El Paso Kress Building is an excellent example of the work of a master commercial retail architect, Edward Sibbert, who was responsible for the design of at least 50 Kress stores during his tenure at the company from 1929-1954 when he retired. More than any other Kress store in the state, the nominated building embodies distinctive characteristics representing the high point of the architect’s career. The arc of Sibbert’s creative career culminated with the design of the chain’s Fifth Avenue store in New York City (1935) and El Paso in (1938). The building represents the perfection of Sibbert’s retail architectural branding—rendered in a regionally influenced Art Deco design language. The architect identified the El Paso store as one of his two favorite works of design from his career as head architect for S.H. Kress & Company alongside the now demolished Fifth Avenue New York City store.<sup>81</sup>

The building’s distinction compared with counterpart S.H. Kress & Co. stores in Texas include it is three heavily ornamented street facing facades — articulated in polychrome terra-cotta block. The El Paso store was the only Kress to feature an iconic five story tall tower — a design feature that was a contextual design response to the commercial architecture of its site and a direct result of Sibbert consulting with the Women’s Division of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce during design. This feature was designed to create a distinctive architectural element that would be highly visible across San Jacinto Plaza from the main east west rail line that ran along Main Street, one block to the north of the store.<sup>82</sup>

#### *Edward F. Sibbert (1899-1982)*

Edward Frederick Sibbert was born July 1, 1899, in Brooklyn, New York to parents Edward Sr. and May. Following his graduation from Brooklyn’s Manual Training Highschool, Frederick enrolled at Pratt Institute where he studied structural engineering. Enlistment in World War I briefly interrupted his undergraduate education, but Edward graduated in 1920. Two years later, he earned a degree in Architecture from Cornell University.<sup>83</sup>

In 1929, after a brief stint practicing in Miami, Edward responded to a S.H. Kress & Co. advertisement for an open position in the company’s architectural department and was offered the job. He remained with the company until 1954. Kress began building its own stores in the 1910s and almost immediately created an in-house Architectural Department. Although two head architects predated him, the Kress Foundation considers Sibbert’s buildings as “the most distinctive and best remembered.”<sup>84</sup> Many extant Sibbert-designed stores are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

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primarily from the Italian Renaissance period.<sup>78</sup> With the Art patrimony that benefits all El Pasoan’s through the El Paso Museum of Art, the local legacy of Kress continues in El Paso to this day.

<sup>79</sup> Wilkerson, v-vi.

<sup>80</sup> “Sibbert, Edward F. (1899-1982),” North Carolina Architects & Builders: A Biographical Dictionary webpage. North Carolina State University Libraries, <https://ncarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000652> (accessed January 15, 2022).

<sup>81</sup> Thomas, 150.

<sup>82</sup> *El Paso Herald Post*, “Women Ask Chiming Bells in Tower, Soft Pink Walls for Store Building” April 20, 1937.

<sup>83</sup> Palmer Hasty, “Brooklyn Architect for S.H. Kress, Edward Sibbert, Left a Legacy,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 7, 2015, Bernice L. Thomas. *Americas 5 & 10 Cent Store, The Kress Legacy*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York. 1997. P.69

<sup>84</sup> “S.H. Kress & Company Stores,” Kress Foundation, <https://www.kressfoundation.org/About/Our-Founder> (accessed February 1, 2022.)

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Within his first two years with the company, Sibbert's design talent won him the job of head architect. Between 1929 and 1954, he designed more than 50 Kress stores across the nation and oversaw remodeling older Kress buildings.

The first half of Sibbert's tenure with Kress (1929-1944) is considered the height of his architectural career.<sup>85</sup> After World War II, the company shifted to a more functional design for its stores in new, emerging suburbs. The new direction dissatisfied Sibbert, who had accepted a promotion with managerial responsibilities rather than design. As a result, he resigned from the Kress Company in 1954.<sup>86</sup> Sibbert and his wife Bertha (married in 1921) relocated to Florida from Brooklyn where, although retired, he formed a consulting firm with Frederick C. Wood. Sibbert passed away in 1982 in Pompano Beach, Florida. He was a member of both the American Society of Civil Engineers and the American Institute of Architects.

*Master of Commercial Architectural Form*

Sibbert's designs reveal that he never stopped exploring the Kress store as an architectural problem, one that he continued to approach with imagination and creativity to the end of his tenure. No Kress building that he led the design of was without some artistic or intellectual interest, regardless of size. Because of this continued development of the typology, Sibbert's corpus of Kress stores account in large measure for the value of the S.H. Kress & Co.'s architectural legacy in America. Sibbert was quoted on the use of style in his evolution of an architecture for Main Street:

We did lean toward simplified modern. Tried to have our building stand out in the community but not too much. Avoided classical styles... We tried to use good composition, simple ornamentation and coloring which [we] thought significant of a Kress store, in average American towns.<sup>87</sup>

Sibbert would head the department when the company made the transition from quality stores in downtowns of Main Street America, to stores in outlying shopping centers. In 1944 he became company vice president in charge of the buildings division (formerly the architectural division) where his focus was primarily on property development rather than design. He resigned from the company ten years later in 1954, shortly before the death of the company founder Samuel Kress.<sup>88</sup> Clearly there was a strong bond and level of trust between the two men. With the passing of the founder's leadership of the company and retail's migration to suburbia, Sibbert determined his time with the company should also ended.

*Kress Modernism in Context*

With the introduction of Edward Sibbert into the Kress Architecture Department there is a notable shift in style of Kress buildings shift towards the modern style now known as Art Deco. The Art Deco movement in the decorative arts and architecture originated in the 1920s and developed into a major architectural style in western Europe and the United States during the 1930s. Its name is derived from the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925, where the style was first exhibited.<sup>89</sup>

In the United States one of the early communities adopting the Art Deco style predominately in its architecture was Miami Beach whose Art Deco Historic District is made up of 800+ buildings and structures which date back to 1923.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Thomas, 70.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 164,

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/Art-Deco>.

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.miamiandbeaches.com/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/art-deco-historic-district>.

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Interestingly, this timeline crosses paths with Sibbert who moved to Miami in 1924 to join a Cornell architecture classmate and fraternity brother Russel T. Pancoast in the practice of architecture where Pancoast's grandfather John S. Collins was developing Miami Beach. It was an exciting time and place for an aspiring young architect to get experience: the great Florida land boom of the 1920s was in full swing.<sup>91</sup>

However, a real estate bubble was brewing in Miami when a serious hurricane in 1926 and virtually put a stop to the Miami building boom. Shortly thereafter, at the request of his wife who did not appreciate seawater flooding her home, Sibbert moved the two of them back to New York. As he began to practice architecture again in New York, Sibbert was surely influenced by the modern architectural language he had experienced and participated in with his friend Pancoast back Miami Beach. In his absence, the Art Deco had become popular in New York as well with developers racing to the sky to build the tallest skyscraper in the world with the style.

After bouncing around for a couple of years after returning to New York, Sibbert found a permanent home for his design skills at the S.H. Kress Company in 1929. Not coincidentally, that year marked a notable transition in Kress Company architecture, as the buildings moved away from designs based on classical or historical European models toward the new, modern style the company adopted. In a 1979 written questionnaire, Sibbert would make it clear that he was primarily responsible for the company's fresh style. When asked if any Art Deco buildings were designed or built before he started working for Kress, his simple reply was "no." To the more specific question "Was the general design type of the 1929-1903's Kress stores established by a previous architect, by you, or by Mr. Kress?" He underlined "by you" and stressed the choice with a check mark.<sup>92</sup>

*Peak of Sibbert's Design Career*

The period of design in which the El Paso store is situated within is the latter part of Sibbert's design career – a period characterized by a number of significant Kress stores designed by the architect where he had perfected his Art Deco design language for retail. During this period Sibbert exhibited a profound ability to be playful and expressive in his form creation while pulling in contextual references to the architecture of the cities and building sites to which he was responding.

The Kress store that Edward Sibbert has received the most acclaim for was his design for the Fifth Avenue store in New York City. Certainly, its prominent location as the flagship store makes it rise to the top of Sibbert's accomplishments, but also of importance are the significant contributions in Art Deco design which incorporated Mayan themes in addition to modern stylized classical elements.

The Kress company opened the flagship New York location at 444 Fifth Avenue, at the corner of 39th Street on October 28, 1935 — one year before Sibbert would begin the design for the El Paso store. Described in an advertisement as the "Showplace of the nationwide Chain," Kress's flagship store was, appropriately enough, on America's premier Main Street. Edward Sibbert designed the store with its function as the company showplace in mind. The building was seven stories high and sheathed entirely in white marble. It was larger, more lavish, and more technologically advanced than any Store in the company's history.<sup>93</sup>

Situated on Fifth avenue virtually equal-distant between the Chrysler Building (1930) and the Empire State Building (1931) — the sleek, flat, white marble edifice with strong vertical accents fit into its environment as a New York Art Deco

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<sup>91</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\\_Sibbert](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Sibbert).

<sup>92</sup> Thomas, 60-61.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 117.



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building.<sup>94</sup> The Art Deco stylings of the Fifth Avenue store were rendered by Sibbert in a Mayan theme — a recurring theme among his Kress Stores. Historian Bernice Thomas presents an articulate account of a sampling of the Mayan details of the Fifth Avenue store in her Kress treatise:

Parts of the ornamentation inside and out made the Mayan reference clear: bas-reliefs of a Mayan god and goddess on the walls inside the front entrance and Mayan hieroglyphs. Bracketing the mezzanine windows on the facade...Most explicitly Mayan, however, were the hieroglyphs on the exterior and images of Mayan deities on the interior of the store.<sup>95</sup>

Mayan motifs may also reflect Samuel Kress's interests, which he shared with others. Archaeological expeditions and their new discoveries had captured the imagination of many Americans during this period. Books such as George Oakley Totten's *Maya Architecture* (1926) helped disseminate designs of Mayan buildings and ornament and stimulated interest in the ancient Mesoamerican civilizations.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, in the 1920's and 1930's Mayan civilization related to Freemasonry. Mason and explorer, Augustus Le Plongeon published a book in 1896 titled, *Queen Moo and the Egyptian Sphinx*, where he introduced the notion that the Maya were the fountainhead of Masonry. As a Mason himself, Samuel Kress might well have been exposed to these ideas linking Masonry to the Maya.<sup>97</sup> Certainly Mayan ornament offered a departure from classicism as it was incorporated and stylized into Art Deco designs.

One can assume that the president of the company gave the modern design of his flagship store his endorsement, which must say something about Samuel Kress's personal taste and preference for an architecture.<sup>98</sup> There are published accounts of Kress' disagreements with and firing of Sibbert's predecessor George Mackay whose primary architectural language was one of classicism. Perhaps this was a result of a refusal or inability to modernize Kress architecture for the times. An architectural ability and skill set that Samuel Kress would have immediately recognized in Sibbert.

The Fifth Avenue store certainly represents the high point in the design career of Edward Sibbert as an architect. The completed structure earned Sibbert the Pan American Congress of Architecture's gold medal in 1940 and praise from the his peers in the Architectural League of New York.<sup>99</sup> Unfortunately, the Fifth Avenue store has not survived as it was demolished in 1980, having failed to become a New York City landmark.<sup>100</sup> However in September 1936, less than one year after the opening of the Fifth Avenue flagship location, the Kress Company began eyeing a property acquisition opportunity in El Paso where Kress and Sibbert were planning the construction of a new "superstore" to be designed by Sibbert.<sup>101</sup>

#### *Comparative Analysis with Texas Kress Stores*

The nominated building is a high point in the development of Kress Stores in the State of Texas. This high point in El Paso is bookended by two Kress stores within the same trajectory of design — including the Fort Worth Kress Store completed in 1936 (National Register #7000266) and the San Antonio Kress Store completed in 1939 (Contributing, National Register #100002128). Like El Paso, each of these two Texas Kress stores offer significant architectural

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas, 126.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> <http://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2018/12/the-lost-1935-s-h-kress-co-bldg-444.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas, 118.

<sup>101</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, "Federal Building Purchase Loom" Report S.H. Kress Co. Ready to Buy Old Structure for \$225,000," September 21, 1936.

Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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detailing in polychrome terra-cotta like El Paso's that build on the success of the Fifth Avenue store. The Fort Worth Kress store embodies much of the same Art Deco design language that Sibbert perfected in New York to present the street with a vertically emphasized streamlined façade. Logically these similarities between Fifth Avenue and the Fort Worth Kress store make sense as they would have been on the drawing boards around the same time.

The San Antonio Kress store also uses the sculpted terra-cotta block material to place a strong emphasis on verticality but like the El Paso store Sibbert mixes things up with local contextual references. In San Antonio, Sibbert adds Mission Revival details at the crown of the building that are a direct reference to the local San Antonio Missions.

Historians Carla Breeze and Marcus Wiffen would describe the El Paso Kress store as; "a tour de force in the use of terra-cotta, which is employed, in two different shades, for the facing of the walls and also, in red, blue, green, and gold, for all the ornament..."<sup>102</sup> They added that; "in the final analysis the Kress Store is inconvertibly Art Deco...where the two shades of terra-cotta are used to speed the eye's ascent to the broken skyline."<sup>103</sup>

## Conclusion

The Kress Building in El Paso, El Paso County is an outstanding late example of Art Deco commercial design by S.H. Kress & Company Chief Architect Edward F. Sibbert and, as one of the chain's most successful five-and-dime stores nationwide, it significantly contributed to the commercial development of downtown El Paso. While known for selling affordable merchandise since 1896, in the 1920s company founder Samuel Kress envisioned building department stores that were works of public art in the average cityscape. Hired in 1929, Sibbert successfully modernized the company's image with an architectural building program that prioritized good composition, sleek facades, and abstracted ornament highlighted in Kress-branded colors. More than 50 Kress stores built nationwide through 1944 exhibit Sibbert's distinctive Art Deco style. Kress opened its first El Paso branch in 1907 at 211 N. Mesa. After three decades of successful sales, Sibbert designed a larger store for El Paso, which replaced the original building and expanded the footprint to include a prominent corner site. Lauded upon its completion for its modernity and beauty, the nominated building embodied Sibbert's "simplified modern" Kress branding with Spanish Moorish-influenced details reflective of its regional setting. Built at the height of his career, Sibbert later stated it was one of his favorite designs. Opened in 1938, the Kress Building offered customers a modern shopping experience with two, well-lit and air-conditioned floors consistently stocked with inexpensive goods, resting lounge, and a soda fountain. When suburban shopping centers replaced downtown retail in the postwar era, Kress remodeled its El Paso store in 1955 with self-service options, an escalator, and larger lunch counter. In 1980, S.H. Kress & Company filed bankruptcy, but the El Paso Kress store continued operating under new ownership through 1997. It is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the area of Commerce at the local level of significance and Criterion C in the area of Architecture at the state level of significance. The period of significance begins with its construction date in 1937 through 1967 when Kress built its first suburban branch in El Paso, which signified the decreasing importance of the downtown store.

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<sup>102</sup> Whiffen and Breeze, 61.

<sup>103</sup> Whiffen and Breeze, 66.

Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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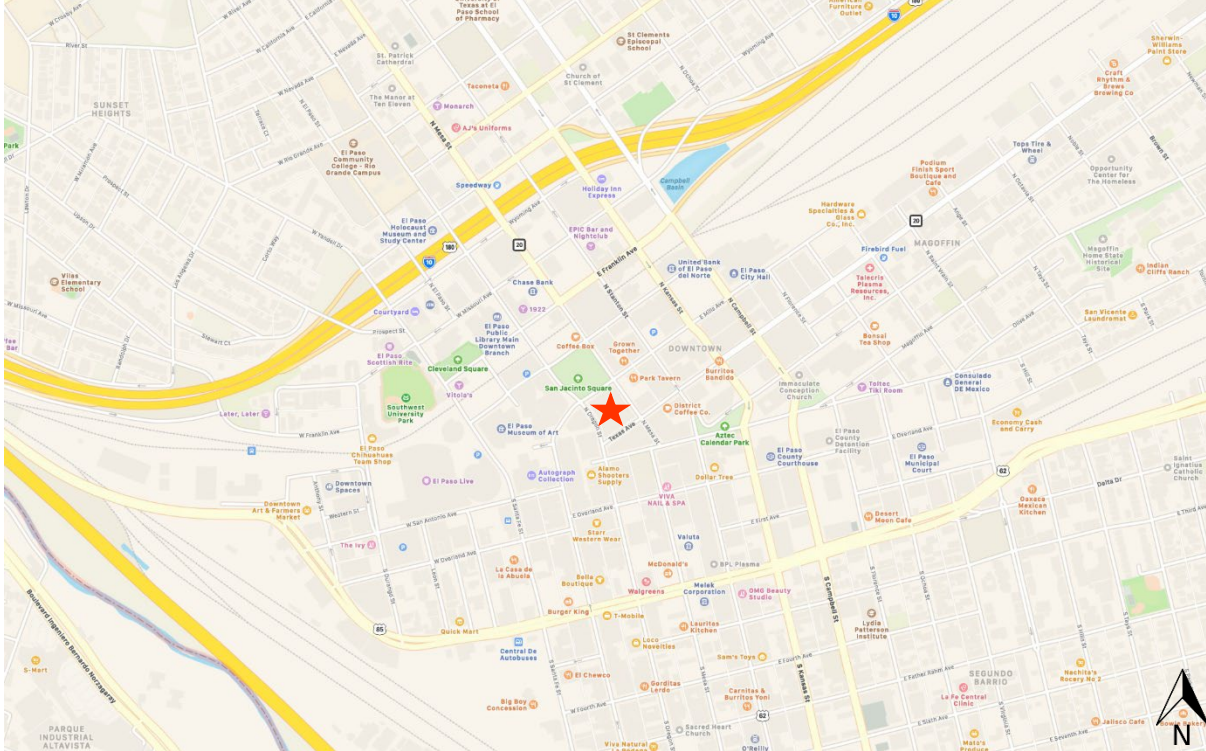
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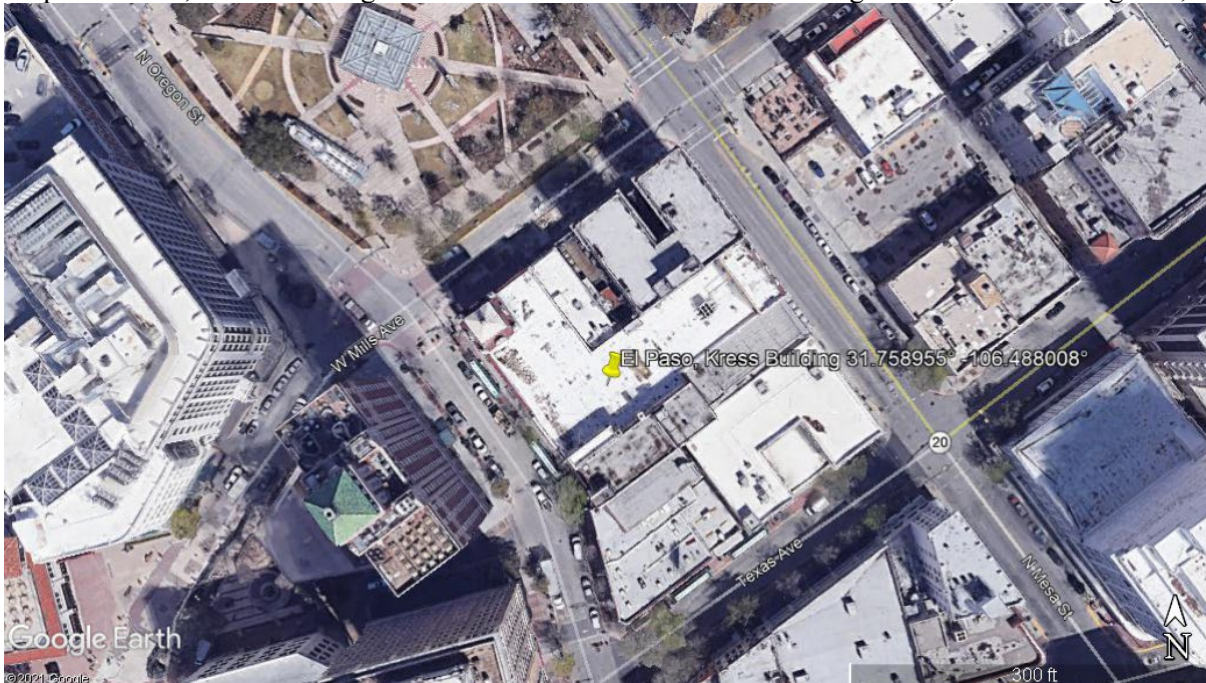
Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

Maps

Map 1: Kress Building (indicated by red star) in El Paso, Texas. Source: Google Maps, accessed August 5, 2021.



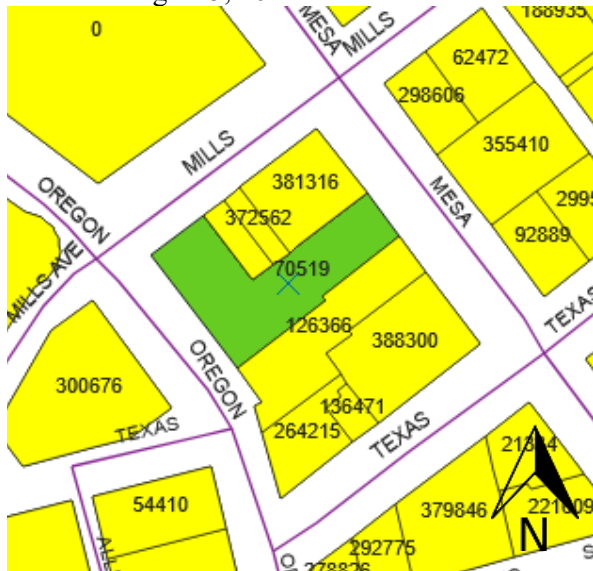
Map 2: El Paso, Kress Building 31.758955° -106.488008°. Source: GoogleEarth, accessed August 5, 2021.





Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

Map 3: The nominated boundary is the current and historic legal property boundary (ID#70519). Source: El Paso CAD, accessed August 5, 2021.



Map 4: Site Plan. Source: In\*Situ Architecture

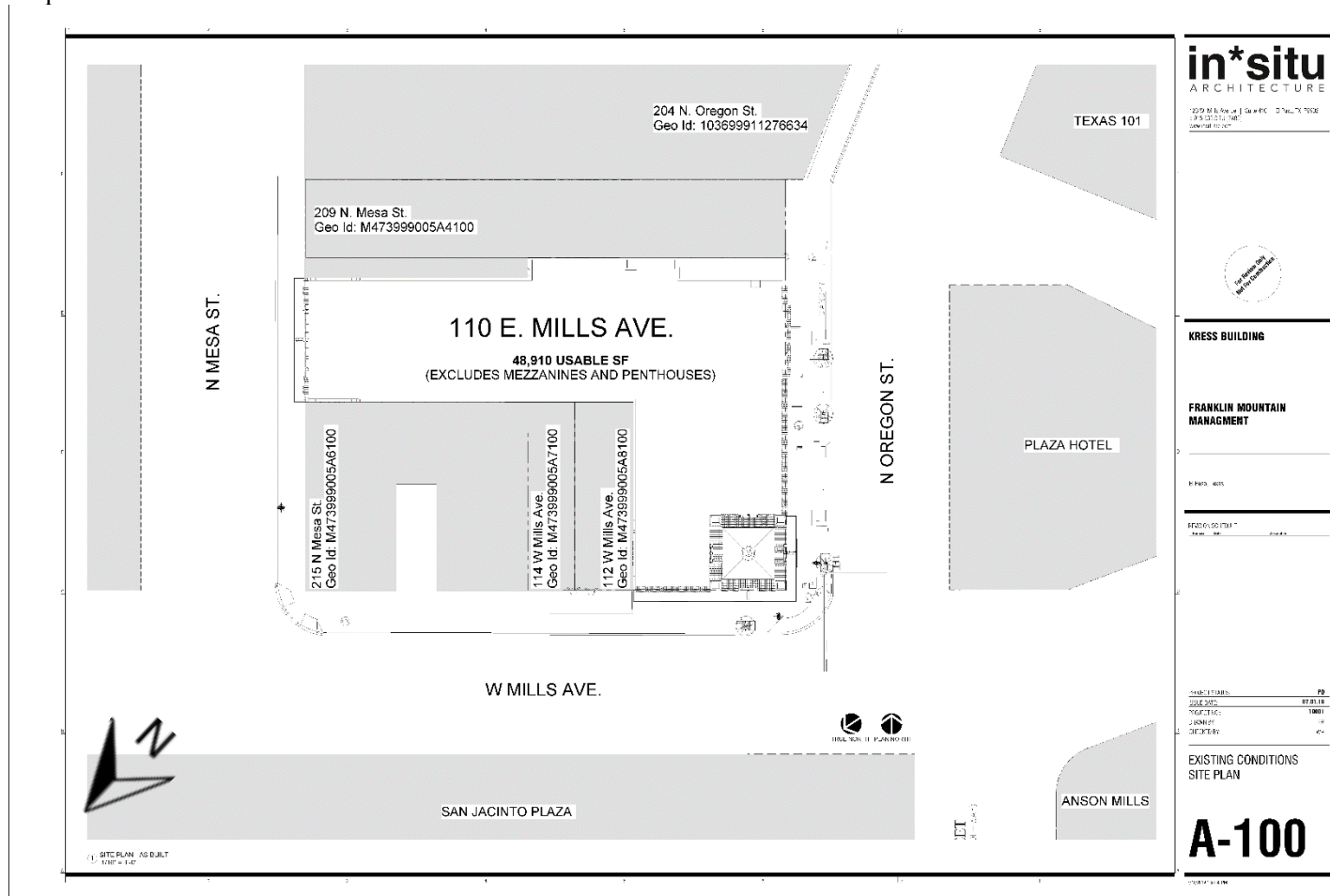
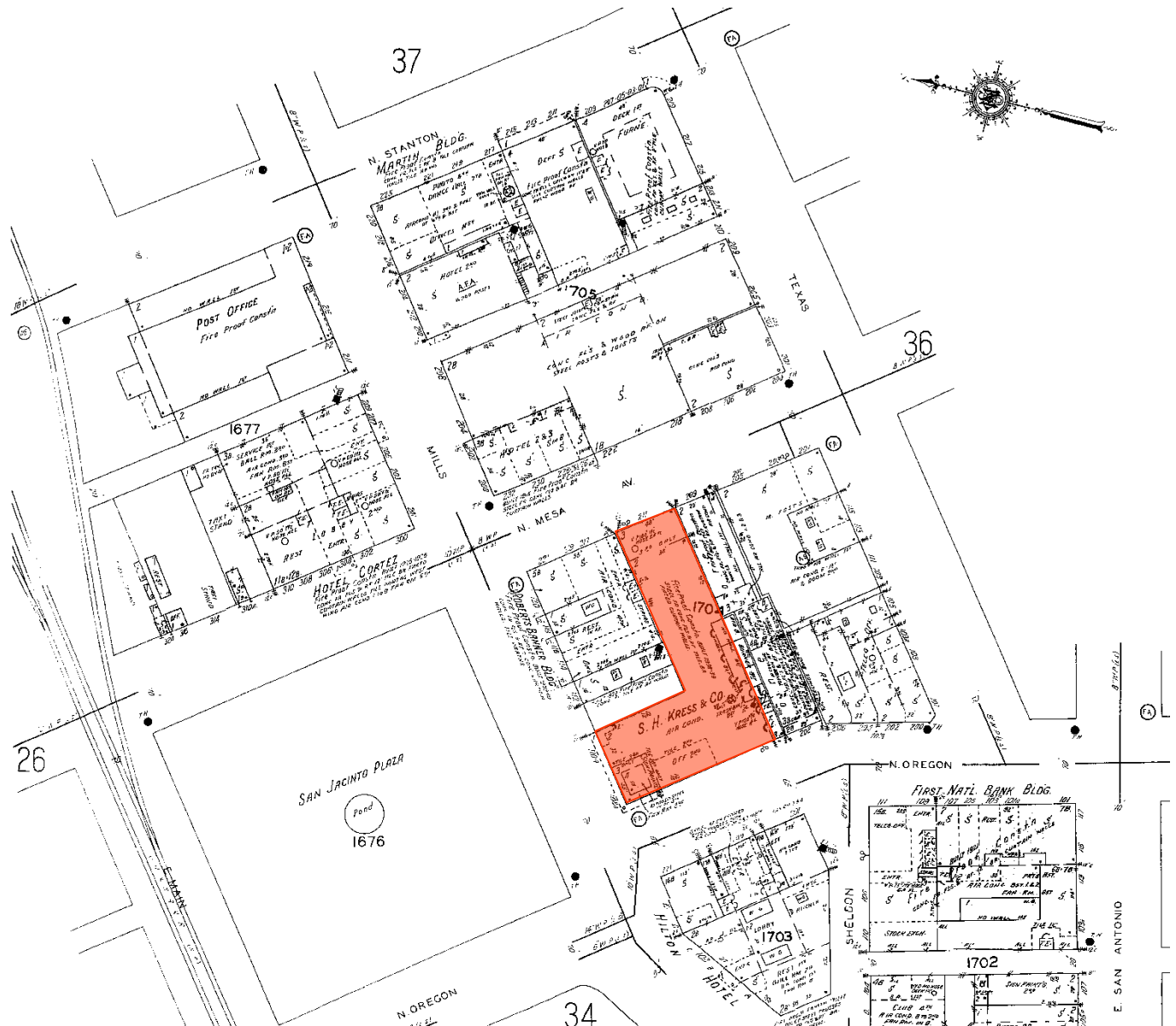
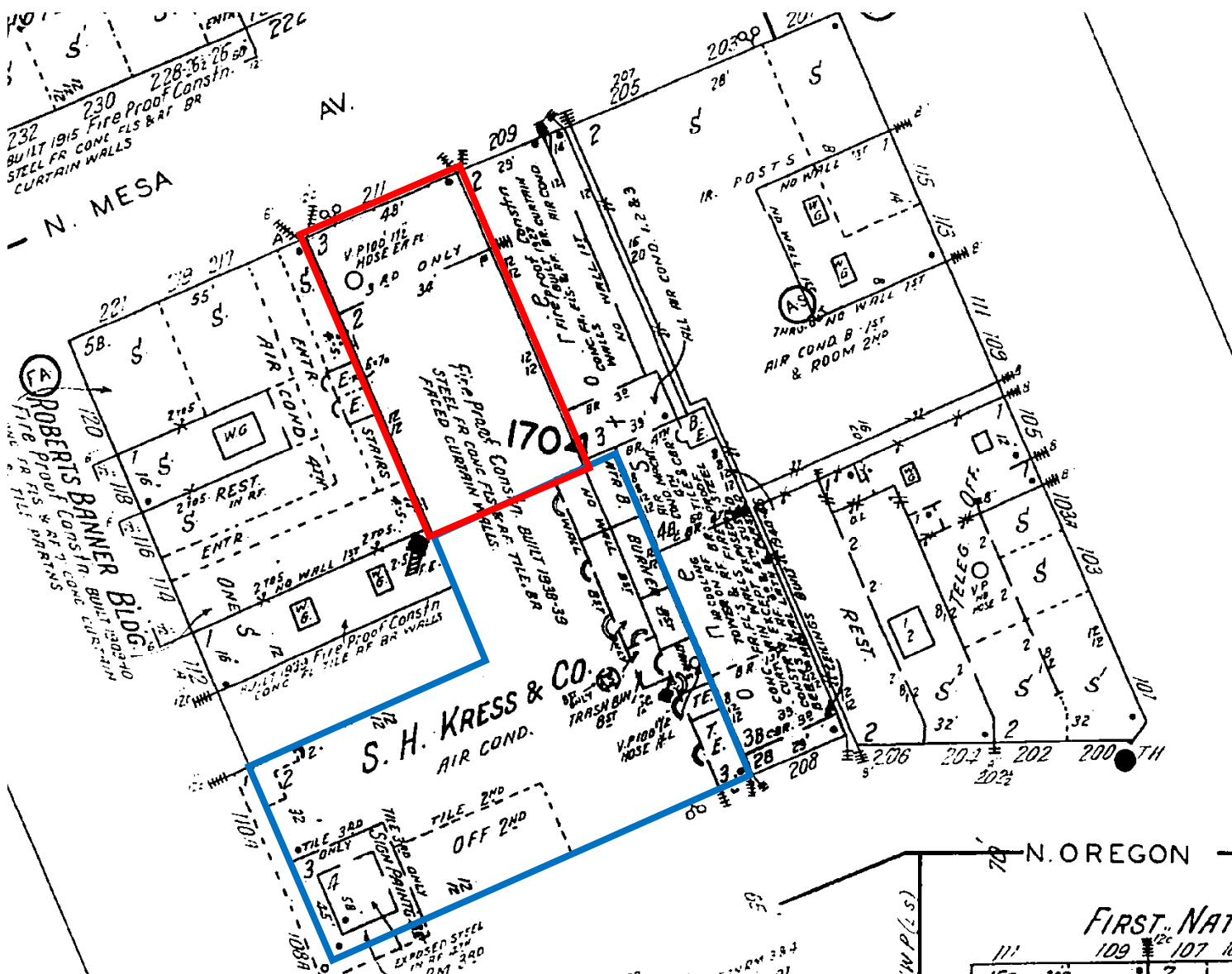


Figure 1: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of El Paso 1908-1948 vol. 1, 1908 Republished 1948, Sheet 35.



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

Figure 2: Detail, Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of El Paso 1908-1948 vol. 1, 1908 Republished 1948, Sheet 35. The Kress Building was constructed in two phases over a two-year period: 1937 (blue) and 1938 (red).



[illegible]



**in\*situ**  
ARCHITECTURE

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**KRESS BUILDING**

**FRANKLIN MOUNTAIN  
MANAGEMENT**

81 Park Tower  
Chicago, IL 60606

**EXISTING CONDITIONS  
GROUND FLOOR**

**A-102**

The floor plan shows the ground floor of the Kress Building. It features a large central hall (18' x 112') and several rooms, including a reception area, a lounge, and a staircase. The plan is oriented with North at the top. Dimensions are provided for various areas and rooms. The plan is oriented with North at the top.

Key areas and dimensions include:

- RECEPTION (18' x 112')
- LOUNGE (18' x 112')
- STAIRCASE (18' x 112')
- RESTROOM (18' x 112')
- OFFICE (18' x 112')
- MEETING ROOM (18' x 112')
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**in\*situ**  
ARCHITECTURE

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**KRESS BUILDING**

**FRANKLIN MOUNTAIN  
MANAGEMENT**

1000 W. MESA STREET  
SUITE 100  
MESA, AZ 85201

**EXISTING CONDITIONS  
SECOND FLOOR**

**A-103**

**MEZZANINE - AT MESA STREET**  
100' x 100'

**MEZZANINE - AT OREGON ST. CORNER BALCONY**  
100' x 100'

**REAR DOOR - AS BUILT**  
100' x 100'

**EXISTING CONDITIONS  
SECOND FLOOR**

**FRANKLIN MOUNTAIN  
MANAGEMENT**

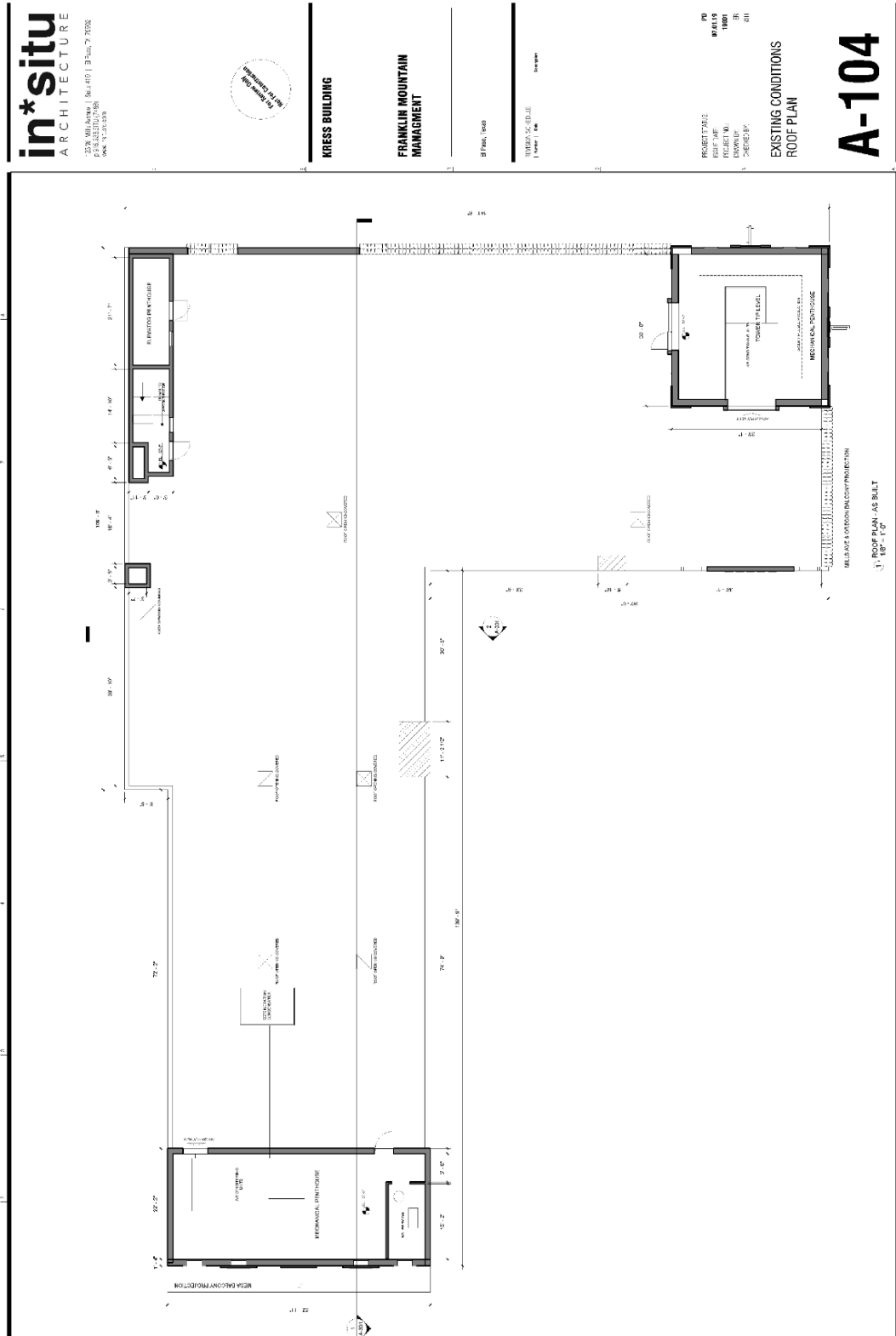
**KRESS BUILDING**

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ARCHITECTURE

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MESA, AZ 85201  
PH: 480.944.1111  
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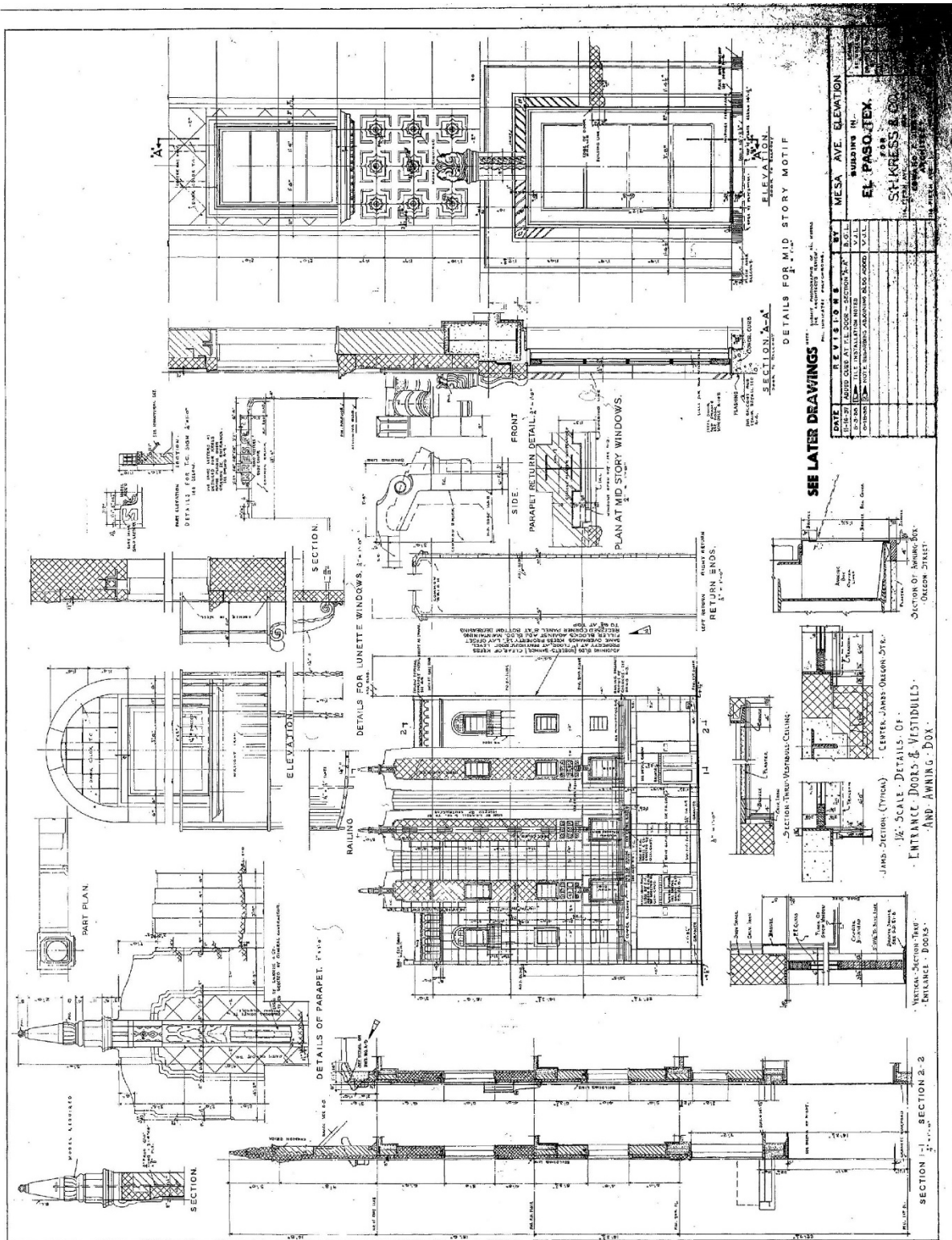
Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

Figure 6: Current Roof Plan Source: In\*Situ Architecture



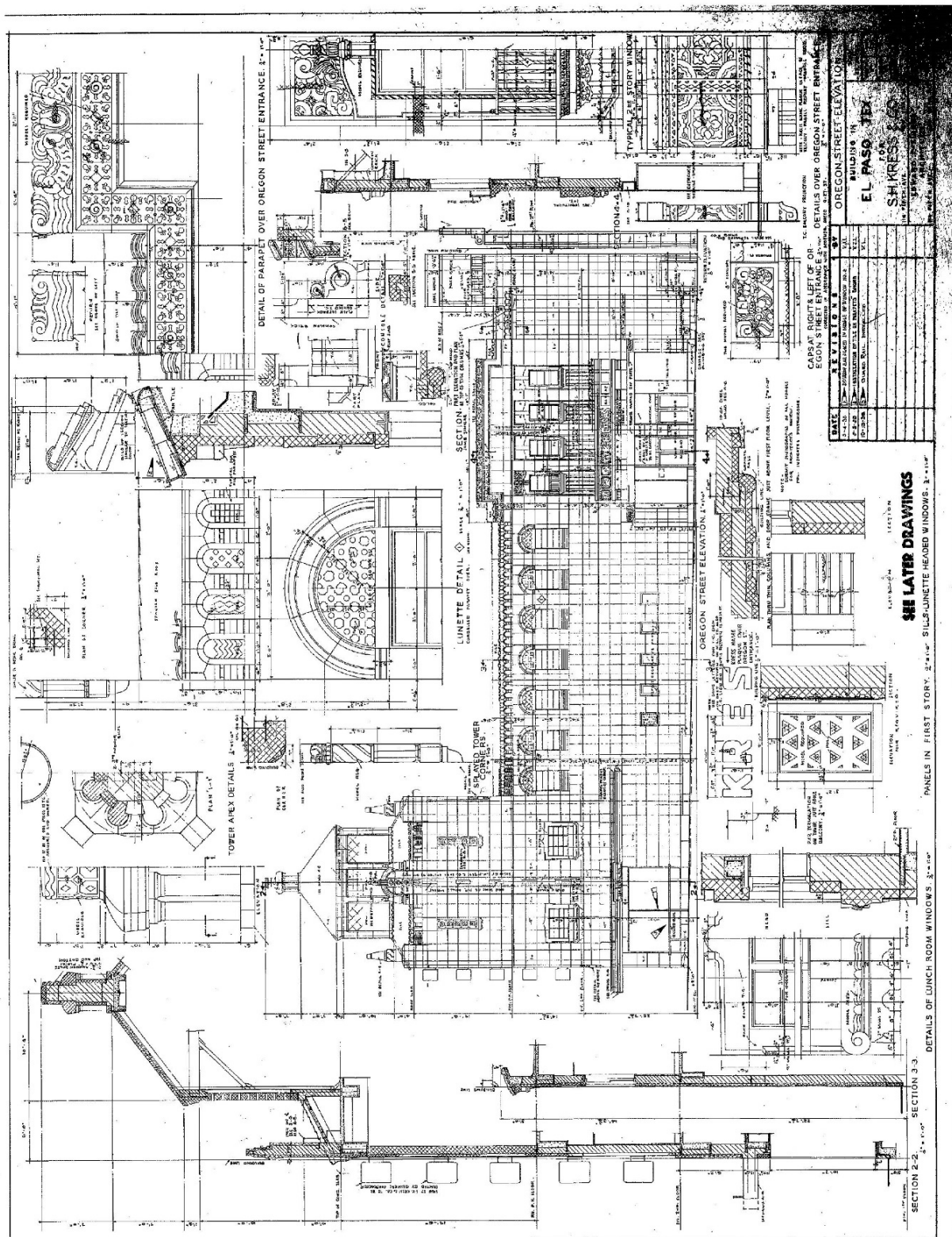
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Figure 7: Historic, Northeast (Mesa Ave.) Elevation Source: Whiffen, Marcus and Carla Breeze. *Pueblo Deco: The Art Deco Architecture of the Southwest*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1984.



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

Figure 8: Historic, Southwest (Oregon St.) Elevation Source: Whiffen, Marcus and Carla Breeze. *Pueblo Deco: The Art Deco Architecture of the Southwest*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1984.



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

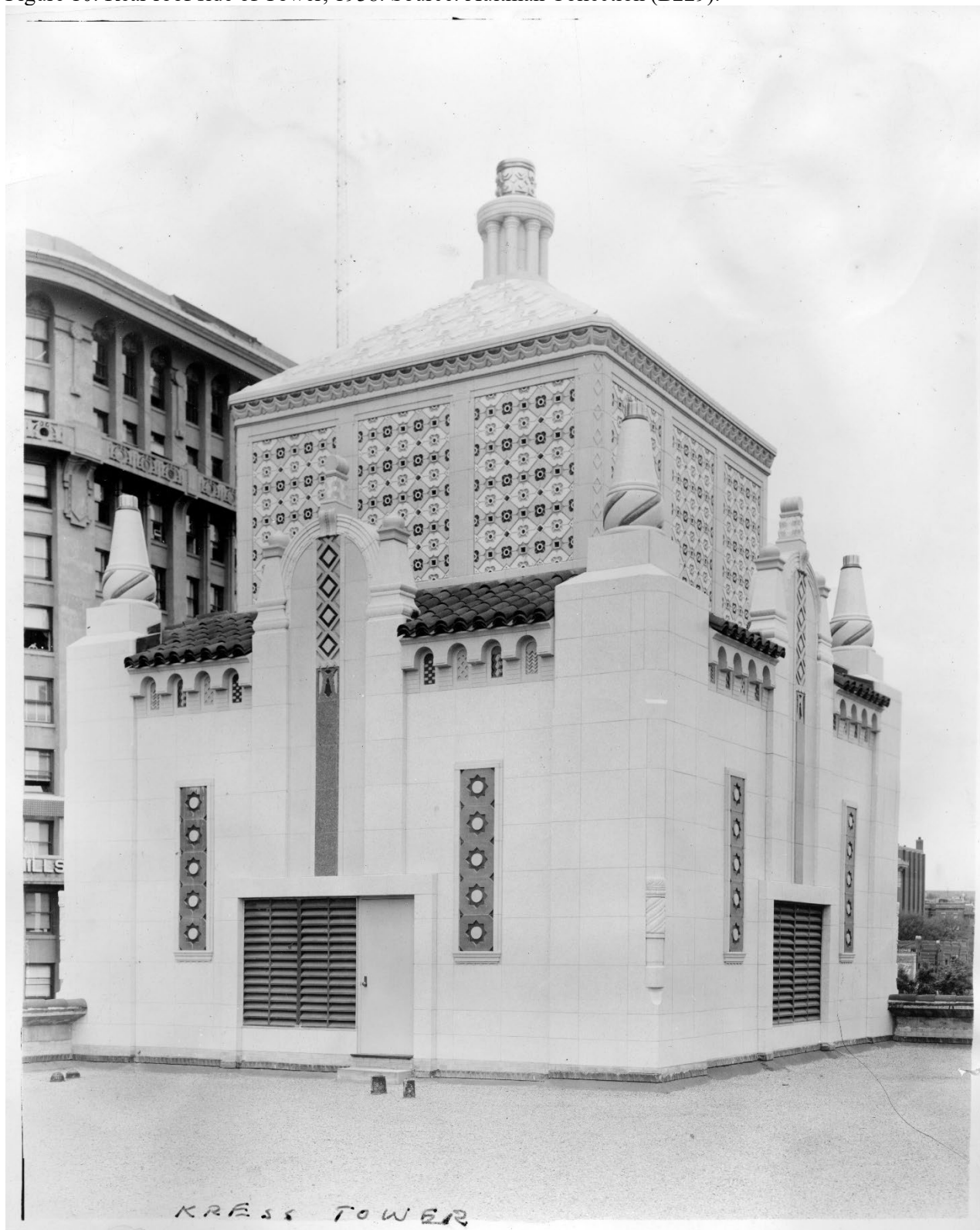
Figure 9: Mills Avenue Elevation, 1938. Source: Aultman Collection.





Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

Figure 10: Rear roof side of Tower, 1938. Source: Aultman Collection (B229).



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

Figure 11: Mesa Street Elevation, 11/25/1938. Source: McKee Foundation Archive.





Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Figure 12: Interior, 11/1/1938. Mirrored columns gave an illusion of unobstructed views across the department store. Original ceiling and wall moldings and elevator surrounds remain intact today. Source: McKee Foundation Archive.



Figure 13: 1935 S.H. Kress & Company, New York City.



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Figure 14: 1936 Kress Building (center), 604 Main St., Fort Worth. (NR#7000266). Source: University of Texas at Arlington.



Figure 15: 1938 Kress Building, 315 E. Houston, San Antonio. (Contributing NR#100002128). Source: THC.



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Figure 16: Photo of Kress store lunch counter in Orangeburg, South Carolina with seats of lunch counter removed.



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

Figure 17: Kress Building, 1970, showing 1955 exterior alterations to storefronts and Oregon Ave. infill.





Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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**Photographs**

Kress Building

211 N. Mesa St.

El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

All photos by William C. Helm II, AIA, 2021 unless otherwise noted

Photo 1: Contextual view of Mesa St. elevation. Camera facing north.



Photo 2: Contextual view of Kress Building's Mills and Oregon Street elevations. Camera facing southeast.



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Photo 3: Northwest oblique at Mills/Oregon. Camera facing southeast.





Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Photo 4: Southwest oblique at Oregon Street. Camera facing northeast.





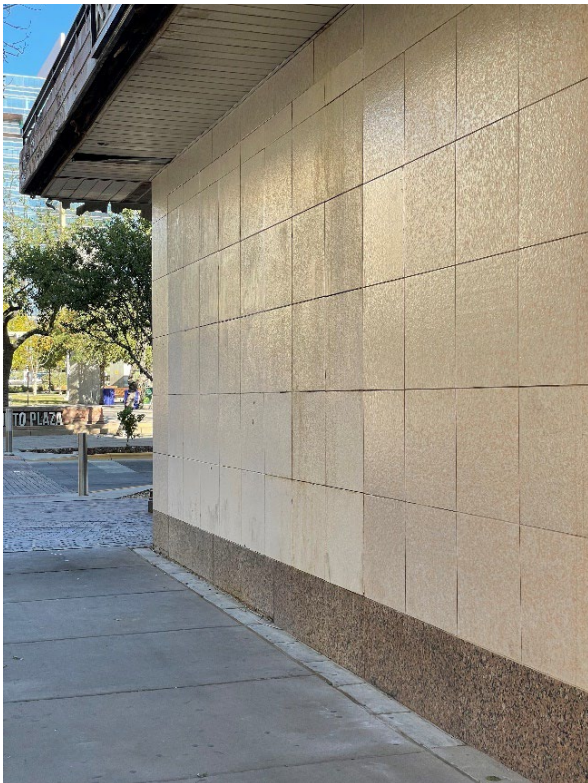
Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Photo 5: Detail over entrance at south end of Oregon Street. Camera facing east.



Photo 6: Detail at window infill at north end of Oregon Street. Camera facing northeast.





Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Photo 7: Northeast elevation at Mesa Street. Camera facing southwest





Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Photo 8: Ground Floor – oblique view of retail sales floor. Camera facing north.



Photo 9: Ground Floor at Mills Avenue entrances. Camera facing north



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

---

Photo 10: Ground Floor at Mills Avenue right entrance detail. Camera facing north



Photo 11: Ground Floor at detail at north end of lunch counter. Camera facing south.





Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Photo 12: Basement perspective view of north leg of building. Camera facing north.



Photo 13: Basement east stair to ground floor. Camera facing east



Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Photo 14: Second floor perspective view of east leg of building. Camera facing west.



Photo 15: Second floor detail of entrance to stair. Camera facing west.





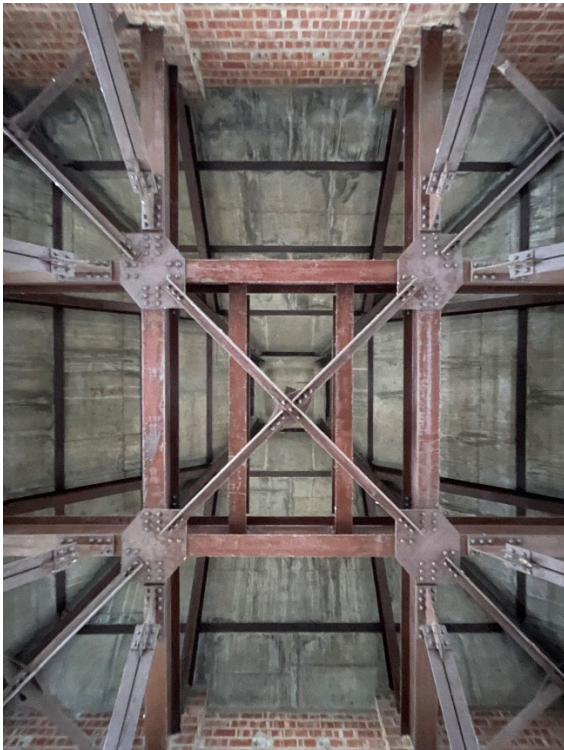
Kress Building, El Paso, El Paso County, Texas

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Photo 16: Interior of concealed open air top story of tower. Camera facing east.



Photo 17: Detail of tower roof structure at concealed top story. Camera facing up.



~end~