

United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Sills Building

Other name/site number: Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana Hall; SMOM Hall

Name of related multiple-property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 5804 Canal Street

City or town: Houston

State: Texas

County: Harris

Not for publication: ☐ NAVicinity: ☐

NA

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

Signature of certifying official / Title

State Historic Preservation Officer

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

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

5. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private

Category of Property: Building

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/business
SOCIAL/meeting hall

Current Functions: SOCIAL/meeting hall, office space

7. Description

Architectural Classification: Modern Movement/Postwar Moderne

Principal Exterior Materials: Concrete, Stucco

Narrative Description (see continuation sheets 6 through 8)

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria: C

Criteria Considerations: NA

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period of Significance: c.1946

Significant Dates: c.1946

Significant Person: NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: James O. Sills/builder, Robert Brashear/architect

Narrative Statement of Significance (see continuation sheets 9 through 19)

9. Major Bibliographic References

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. Part 1 approved on (date)
- ☐ 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: Harris County Archives, Houston

Historic Resources Survey Number: NA

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property: Less than 1 acre (approximately 0.184 acres)

Coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

1. Latitude: 29.744409° N Longitude: -95.315825° W

Verbal Boundary Description: The nominated boundary comprises Lots 6A and 7A, Block 3, in the Fullerton Place Addition at the southeasterly corner of Norwood and Canal Streets, in Houston, Texas.

Boundary Justification: The boundary includes the only building historically associated with the parcel since its c.1946 construction.

11. Form Prepared By

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Date: August 2023

Additional Documentation

Maps (see continuation sheets 23-24)

Additional items (see continuation sheets 25-28)

Photographs (see continuation sheets 29-40)

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo Log

Sills Building
Houston, Harris County, Texas
Photographed by Emily Ardoin (Preservation Houston), January 2024..

Photo 1

Northeast façade and main entrance, oblique angle, camera facing southeast.

Photo 2

Detail view of canopy and glass block on northeast façade, camera facing southeast

Photo 3

Northeast façade, camera facing southwest.

Photo 4

Northwest façade, camera facing southeast..

Photo 5

Northwest façade, oblique angle, camera facing northeast.

Photo 6

Northeast façade, oblique angle, camera facing southwest.

Photo 7

Southwest façade with utility room and elevator shaft additions, camera facing northwest..

Photo 8

Interior from main entrance, camera facing south.

Photo 9

Interior first floor office spaces, camera facing southeast.

Photo 10

Second floor from stairway, camera facing northwest.

Photo 11

Second floor, camera facing southwest.

Photo 12

Ground floor, looking towards entrance on chamfered corner (northeast)

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, D.C.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

This project was funded through an Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund grant from the National Park Service that addresses damage inflicted by Hurricane Harvey. In October 2021, National Park Service staff concurred that this property is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C in the area of Architecture.

Description

The Sills Building, also known as the Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana (SMOM) Hall, is a two-story, Late Art Moderne commercial building at 5804 Canal Street, part of the historic Second Ward in Houston's East End. The stucco-clad building was constructed in 1946 by owner James O. Sills and architect Robert Brashear. On the exterior, the primary entrance faces the Norwood/Canal Street intersection from the chamfered northwest corner. Storefront windows are sheltered by an upcurved awning. The second floor has a glass-block window in the chamfered corner. The building originally had three first-floor commercial stores and a second-floor union hall.¹ The SMOM has owned the building since 1978 and uses the first floor as office and meeting space, and the second floor is a community venue. In 2017, the City of Houston designated the building as a Protected Landmark. The SMOM Hall is good local example of Late Art Moderne architectural design, common in the East End in the mid-century when builders often mirrored popular stylistic movements. The building retains sufficient integrity to convey its significance to the historic period, the year of construction (1946).

At the southeast corner of Canal and Norwood Streets, the building occupies two lots, 6A and 7A of Block 3 in the Fullerton Place Addition, just east of downtown (**Maps 1 and 2**). The building is in the Second Ward, roughly bounded by Buffalo Bayou to the north, Lockwood Avenue to the east, and to the south, the railroad tracks parallel to Rusk Street that extend north to Buffalo Bayou. One of the city's four original nineteenth-century wards, this area was an important location of the city's twentieth-century industrial history.

The Second Ward, initially settled by German immigrants, was increasingly populated by native Mexican and Mexican American immigrants in the twentieth century. Their numbers increased so profoundly after 1910 that they became the main demographic in the neighborhood. World War II-related industrial rejuvenation sparked in the East End, offering myriad employment opportunities for even more newcomers. When construction began on the building, Canal Street was lined with a mixture of commercial, residential, and industrial buildings. Some neighboring commercial buildings are extant—the former c.1930 Bloomfield Grocery at 5914 Canal Street, a ca. 1940 gasoline filling and service station at 5714 Canal Street, and an Art Moderne-style commercial building that housed Pappas Brothers Cleaners during the 1940s at 5602 Canal Street. The industrial area north of Canal Street toward the bayou is mostly in use. Primary improvements are the 1938 J. A. Folger & Company Building at 235 Norwood Street and the 1942 Continental Can Company at 5900 Canal Street. The can company, now offices for Harris County, Precinct 6, Headquarters, to the north, features a 1973 mural, *The Rebirth of Our Nationality*, painted by Leo Tanguma.² The residential area south of Canal Street, built in the 1910s and later, was home to East End industrial and commercial workers.

Exterior

The 7,500-square-foot building is a two-story, freestanding, commercial-block building with a flat roof. It has a poured-concrete foundation and is constructed of stucco-clad concrete block. The building has a rectangular plan, and its most prominent feature is a chamfered corner at the juncture of the building's primary (northeast and northwest) façades. An upcurved, stucco-clad canopy with standing-seam metal roof wraps around from the north façade to the chamfered

¹ Morrison & Fourmy Directory Company, *Houston, Texas, City Directory* (Ancestry, 1942); *Daily Court Review*, "Materialmen's Liens," September 14, 1946, 2 (Newspaper Archive).

² The mural was an important representation of the Chicano movement in East Houston and influenced SMOM's decision to purchase the building in 1978.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

northwest corner and terminates at the northwest façade's northernmost bay. The building's smooth stucco exterior, parapet with metal coping, and asymmetrically placed fenestration are indicative of its Art Moderne architectural style.

The street-facing façades have the most detail. The chamfered corner has an aluminum-frame double glass door with transom and sidelights at street level under the canopy (**Photo 1**). Above is a glass-block window in Vitrolite frame—structural glass with a black pigment (**Photo 2**). The street level of the northeast façade, facing Canal Street, has three wide bays of asymmetrically placed aluminum storefront windows (**Photo 3**). Two single door entrances with transoms are on this façade. Above the canopy, four slender, metal casement windows with painted brick sills punctuate the upper level. Casement windows on this and other façades have 10 lights, the top 2 fixed in place. Near the chamfered corner, a fifth broad window has two outer metal casement windows on either side of three single-pane replacement lights. Between this row of windows and the parapet are four equidistantly placed, diamond-shaped tiles. The street level of the northwest façade, facing Norwood Street, has one aluminum-frame storefront window that the canopy wraps around to cover and a paired metal casement window above (**Photo 4**). At the street level's southern end, a single aluminum door has a flat-roof awning that metal rods support. The upper level has three metal casement windows. Like the northeast façade, the northwest façade has four equidistantly placed, diamond-shaped tiles between the upper-level windows and the parapet.

The southeast and southwest façades are utilitarian. At street level, the southwest (rear) façade has a single-door entrance near the east end and two small awning windows with painted brick sills (**Photo 5**). The upper level has five metal casement windows with painted brick sills. Above are six small, equidistantly placed vents with painted brick sills. The east façade is plain and has three appendages: an exterior metal staircase to an upper-level single steel door near Canal Street, a one-story unit with a double door that faces southwest, and an elevator shaft (**Photos 6 and 7**).

Interior

Hurricane Harvey damaged the building's interior, which is undergoing renovation. Originally divided into three distinct stores, the first floor was repurposed for offices (**Figures 1 and 2**). The floor is poured concrete. Interior wood-frame walls are covered with drywall. The main entrance opens to a reception area (**Photo 8**). A bathroom in the southwest corner is underneath an interior stairwell that leads to the second floor. Pilasters along the walls support horizontal concrete beams around the ceiling's perimeter, indicating a reinforced-concrete structural frame. An addition to the southeast portion of the building has an elevator to the second floor and a one-story mechanical room. Another one-story addition is used for storage.

The second-floor union hall has an open plan (**Figure 3**). Because the ceiling has been stripped, its wood beams and joists are visible (**Photo 10**). Square, concrete columns and pilasters support the ceiling beams. The floor has been removed, and a plywood subfloor has been installed.

Alterations

The building has been minimally modified. The building was originally constructed with three storefronts on the street level, each with an entry door and display windows, and a union hall on the second (**Figure 1**). The building had plaster- and tile-covered interior walls.³ The Seafarers National Union, which owned the building beginning around 1960, enclosed both the original plate-glass display windows and secondary entry doors and repurposed the first floor as office space, rearranging the three stores into five offices with two additional bathrooms and a kitchen. By 1970, the one-story utility room had been added. At some point, the second-level dance floor, wet bar in the southeast corner, and stage in the

³ Harris County Archives, "Building Assessment" (1946).

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

northwest corner were removed. In 1990, the street-level window openings were infilled with aluminum-frame units. Sometime before 2005, the elevator shaft was added, and the first-floor public bathrooms were updated for accessibility.

In 2017, the building suffered damage from Hurricane Harvey, and repairs continue. The organization received funding from the Hurricane Harvey Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund Grant Program in 2019 to restore street-level windows, interior walls, ceilings, and flooring. On the second floor, an open floor plan will be retained, even though the central dance floor, the wet bar in the southeast corner, and the stage in the northwest corner have been removed. The exterior metal stairs were replaced with a larger footprint as part of the project. In 2023, the plate-glass storefront windows were repaired, and the secondary entry doors restored (**Figure 4**).

Integrity

The Sills Building/SMOM Hall possesses sufficient integrity to convey its Late Art Moderne architectural style. It is in its original location. The setting has changed only minimally, with the area to the south filled with residential development and that to the north improved with schools, businesses, and county offices. Many buildings extant within the viewshed were extant during the period of significance, like the 1942 Continental Can Company Building and its 1973 mural. This continuity of setting bolsters the building's integrity of feeling, evoking a sense of the past. The building's integrity of design, materials, and workmanship have been compromised with the loss of original materials, particularly street-level windows, and additions. However, the building retains essential character-defining attributes—its chamfered corner; upcurved canopy; stucco cladding; fenestration patterns, sizes, and shapes; and glass-block and metal casement windows—that neutralize the deficits. When the interior was modified during the historic period, the second-floor open plan was retained along with a continued primary function as a community meeting or event space. The retention of that open meeting space on the second floor results in the preservation of some integrity of design, feeling, and association. Finally, archival and architectural history sources document the building's associative qualities with the style.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Statement of Significance

The Sills Building (1946) in Houston's East End is nominated under Criterion C in the area of Architecture at the local level of significance as a good example of Art Moderne architectural style, employing characteristics of the Late Moderne subtype, within the East End and Houston's Second Ward. The building is a rare extant example of a Late Moderne design applied to a commercial building in this locale. The period of significance is 1946, its date of construction. The building retains sufficient physical and historical integrity to convey its significance as an example of the style. James O. Sills had the commercial-block building constructed in 1946. The Seafarers International Union of North America and Marine Engineers Beneficial Association owned the building from 1960 to 1978. The building has been known as the Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana (SMOM) Hall since the late 1970s. Even though the SMOM did not own the building until 1978, its historical association with the mutual aid organization since that time has superseded any name recognition with Sills or the seafarers union. Since the 1970s, the building has had signage indicating it to be SMOM Hall.

Brief History of Houston's East End

Within the boundaries of the East End are the 1826 original townsite of Harrisburg, the 1837 site of the city's first platted residential blocks often known as Frost Town, and the Second Ward political subdivision. Houston was divided into six wards in 1840 when the state congress revised the town charter, doubled its physical boundary, and split the city into four political sections, or wards. The dividing lines for wards were Main Street, Congress Avenue, and bayous. The Fifth and Sixth Wards were developed after the Civil War.

In mid-nineteenth-century Houston, industrial areas developed along railroad tracks and waterways, and working-class neighborhoods were built around them. The Second Ward, mainly residential with some small farms, was east of Main Street between Buffalo Bayou and Congress Avenue.⁴ In 1860, the Second Ward had many immigrants, of which about 30 percent were German, and the area became a social and cultural center for German Americans. Elite commercial and residential areas developed more distant from the rail lines.⁵ The wealthy residents of the Second Ward were concentrated in the exclusive Quality Hill neighborhood near the Harris County Courthouse, overlapping both the Second and Third Wards. The working-class and poor were concentrated near the railroads in areas like Frost Town.⁶

The character of the Second Ward began to change in the 1890s. The major rail lines that intersected north of the bayou near downtown and Frost Town gave way to working-class neighborhoods and commercial improvements along the bayou's banks through the East End.⁷ The Frost Town area by this time was a predominantly Black neighborhood, with few owner-occupied homes. Subdivision of some still-extant larger farms for redevelopment as residential subdivisions, like the 1890s Magnolia Park neighborhood east of Second Ward, created much-needed housing. Coinciding industrial growth occurred here also. The Houston Packing Company built one of the first large industrial plants in the East End in the late 1890s. Areas closer to downtown displaced housing for commercial and civic buildings. The area northeast of the Harris County Courthouse was redeveloped as warehouses (now the Warehouse District). Working- and middle-class families moved to Magnolia Park. Many wealthier residents relocated, and their large houses were mostly demolished by the early twentieth century.⁸ Plans to widen Buffalo Bayou for safe ship passage to Houston were underway by this time.

⁴ Barrie Scardino Bradley, *Improbable Metropolis: Houston's Architectural and Urban History* (University of Texas Press, 2020), 74–75.

⁵ Bradley, *Improbable Metropolis*, 50.

⁶ Thomas McWhorter, "From Das Zweiter to El Segundo, A Brief History of Houston's Second Ward," *Houston History* 2010.

⁷ Bradley, *Improbable Metropolis*, 50.

⁸ McWhorter, "From Das Zweiter to El Segundo, A Brief History of Houston's Second Ward."

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

The area continued to transform in the early twentieth century with industrial expansion and cultural shifts. After the 1900 hurricane destroyed Galveston, the City of Houston began dredging the bayou to improve navigation. In 1914, the Houston Ship Channel opened, and the Port of Houston became the leading port in Texas, attracting petrochemical companies to develop refineries in the area. Nineteenth-century-initiated German social and cultural organizations lost influence in the early twentieth century with anti-German sentiment derived from the First World War. German Street, for example, the neighborhood's main thoroughfare, was renamed Canal Street in 1918. Nevertheless, links to German heritage are evident with other streets named Bering, Engelke, Fox, Freund, Rottman, Lemke, Schroeder, Hagerman, and Merkel.⁹ By the early twentieth century, most Second Ward residents were native-born, with approximately 10 percent composed of immigrants.¹⁰ Two more-populous Second Ward groups in the 1910s were Russian Jews and Mexican Americans.

The East End experienced a surge of construction as Houston's population increased after World War I. The lack of zoning resulted in intermixed commercial, industrial, and residential improvements. Busy business districts with restaurants, theaters, and shopping centers lined the neighborhood's main thoroughfares, Canal Street, Harrisburg Street, and Navigation Boulevard. As the population increased and residential areas developed, Harrisburg Boulevard became the *de jure* division that segregated the East End. Working-class families lived in neighborhoods north of Harrisburg Boulevard closer to Buffalo Bayou and the industrial center. The middle- to upper-class neighborhoods of Forest Hill and Simms Wood were south of Harrisburg Boulevard, bordering the 1903 Houston Country Club along Wayside Drive.¹¹

Houston's Mexican population grew, and the Second Ward became its social and cultural center. The Mexican Revolution and continued industrial development led many Mexican-born immigrants to the Second Ward. These immigrants were segregated into Hispanic neighborhoods or barrios separate from the established white neighborhoods. One of the barrios to emerge in the Second Ward was *El Alacrán*, which overtook Frost Town's Black population. By 1930, Magnolia Park was Houston's largest barrio. The Mexican American community became self-sustaining with organizations, schools, and churches to support families. In 1908, the El Campo Laurel chapter of Woodmen of the World was founded and in 1917 hosted a *Diez y Seis* parade to commemorate Mexican independence from Spain, one of the first public representations of Mexican culture in Houston. This organization led to the formation of many other Mexican American social and benevolent aid groups.¹² *Sociedades Mutualistas*, organizations that offered community support by and for Mexican Americans, took on this role. They offered Mexican American workers assistance during labor strikes and provided families with education and healthcare resources.

Founded in 1932 to offer assistance for families in the East End, SMOM was the second Mexican American mutual aid organization in Houston. Founding member Refugio Gomez moved from Mexico to New Mexico in 1913 with his father, a coal miner. After miners went on strike in New Mexico, they moved to Texas for work. During World War II, Gomez was a welder in the Houston shipyards but like many, suffered employment discrimination.¹³ SMOM members raised funds to financially support members by selling tamales, organizing dances, and hosting other events.¹⁴

When Depression-era unemployment reached 25 percent in 1933, union membership grew rapidly.¹⁵ Employment discrimination and layoffs affected the East End's Mexican workers. They were denied many benefits that federal

⁹ McWhorter, "From Das Zweiter to El Segundo, A Brief History of Houston's Second Ward."

¹⁰ McWhorter, "From Das Zweiter to El Segundo, A Brief History of Houston's Second Ward." 41.

¹¹ Ben Koush, "By the Wayside, A Model of Urban Development in the East End," *Cite*, Volume Winter, No. 69 (2006): 25.

¹² Leigh Cutler, "Salon Juarez," *Houston History* 2012.

¹³ Maria-Christina Garcia, "Refugio Gomez," in *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, 2017.

¹⁴ City of Houston, "Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana Building" City of Houston, Planning and Development (2017) Protected Landmark Designation.

¹⁵ Ruth A. Allen et al., "Strikes," in *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, 2022.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

programs and organized labor unions designed to aid families. Mutual aid societies and cooperatives were the first version of Mexican American labor unions, organizing informal actions and labor strikes. In 1939, the League of United Latin American Citizens Council of Houston formed in Magnolia Park. Among other quests, the group worked to secure wartime industrial jobs for Mexican Americans.¹⁶

Houston experienced an exponential increase in industrial production during and after World War II fermented labor agitation. The war ignited domestic production of all kinds to support military efforts; in the aftermath, steel, shipbuilding, and other industries multiplied. Workers flocked to the city for employment opportunities. Conflicts among labor unions, underrepresented groups, and big industrial firms resulted in work stoppages in the oil, railroad, aircraft, chemical, construction, and steel industries. In 1945, worker strikes occurred at several oil refineries. National steel and regional longshoremen strikes in the 1950s affected many Houston workers and companies.¹⁷ By 1946, when the SMOM Hall was completed with its second-story union hall, at least 70 labor organizations operated in Houston.¹⁸

The East End was the center of Houston's Chicano movement in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1960s, the petroleum industry continued to grow, and tens of thousands of immigrants came to Houston for work.¹⁹ When the East End became home to a more-diverse Hispanic population from other Central American countries, the area became known as *Segundo Barrio* or *El Segundo*.²⁰ Their shared discrimination experiences led to the Chicano movement, a national effort to confront segregation and resulting inequalities in labor and education. Groups like the Mexican American Youth Organization battled police brutality and workers' rights. In 1970, the activist *Papel Chicano* newspaper was founded with headquarters in Magnolia Park. Leo Tanguma, a founder of the newspaper, created the mural *The Rebirth of Our Nationality* in 1973, painted on the Continental Can Company building at 5900 Canal Street. The SMOM purchased the c.1946 commercial building across the street from the mural in 1978 and made it its headquarters. Although *sociedades mutualistas* declined and few survived to the late twentieth century, the SMOM was active in the East End during the Chicano movement.

The late twentieth century was a time of economic decline for the East End. In the late 1970s, the downturn caused many industrial companies to relocate elsewhere in the city. The 1980s oil bust resulted in the closure of 50 factories in the area, causing thousands of Hispanic workers to lose their jobs.

Ownership and Occupancy

James Oliver Sills (1906–1965) was the original owner of the building. Born in Dallas, Sills' family had moved to Harris County by 1920.²¹ By 1930, Sills was married to Lassie O'Neil Bailey (1906–1993) and lived in the Magnolia Park neighborhood.²² Sills purchased property on Canal Street in 1937, where the family lived, and he opened a barbershop and beauty salon at 5902–5904 Canal Street.²³ Next door, Russian Jewish immigrants William and Minnie Bloomfield operated their Bloomfield Grocery.²⁴ The Bloomfields owned several properties along the street, including an empty lot at

¹⁶ Julie Leininger Pycior, "Mexican-American Organizations," in *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, 2020.

¹⁷ Ruth Alice Allen, *Chapters in the History of Organized Labor in Texas* (University of Texas, 1941).

¹⁸ Morrison & Fourmy Directory Company, *Houston, Texas, City Directory* (Ancestry, 1946).

¹⁹ Nestor Rodriguez, "Hispanic and Asian Immigration Waves in Houston," in *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations*, Janet Salzman Chafetz and Helen Rose Ebaugh, eds. (AltaMira Press, 2000).

²⁰ Bradley, *Improbable Metropolis*, 74–75.

²¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population: Precinct 2, Jim Wells County, Texas, Ancestry, National Archives and Records Administration, 1920; U.S. Department of Commerce, Population: Precinct 2, Jim Wells County, Texas.

²² Morrison & Fourmy Directory Company, *Houston, Texas, City Directory* (Ancestry, 1930).

²³ Morrison & Fourmy Directory Company, *Houston, Texas, City Directory* (Ancestry, 1937).

²⁴ Morrison & Fourmy Directory Company, *Houston, Texas, City Directory*.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

5804 Canal Street, which they sold to Sills in 1944.²⁵ In the 1950s, Sills purchased other property in the community and opened a real estate office on Norwood Street behind the SMOM Hall.

In 1946, Sills hired the Robert Brashear Company, a Houston father-son architectural company, to construct a two-story commercial building at 5804 Canal Street with a drugstore and beauty parlor on the street level and a medical clinic on the upper level.²⁶ There is no indication that a medical clinic was ever in the building. The upper level appears to have been a union hall since at least 1947. The building had three businesses on the street level, and three businesses are known to have operated in the building. One of the earliest tenants was Model Pharmacy, owned and operated by Harold Miller, son-in-law to Houston's then-mayor Oscar Holcombe, through most of the 1950s.²⁷ Simmons & Company, an oil well supply firm owned by Dudley Simmons, and Randolph Supply Company, owned by Ted Albers, were other early first-floor occupants.²⁸

Since the 1960s the building has been associated with three labor unions, each with their own histories. Organized labor in Texas had nineteenth-century roots with skilled workers' unions forming for different trades, particularly in large cities, which matured in the mid-twentieth century. This began with the formation of national and state umbrella labor organizations so that affiliated trade organizations could support each other in collective bargaining with company owners and industry leaders. One of the earliest of these was the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which was founded in 1886 as a federation of skilled labor unions. The 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act and the 1935 Wagner Act supported the right of workers to organize and engage in collective bargaining. In 1936, the national organization Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO, later the Congress of Industrial Organizations) formed and worked to organize industrial labor unions that would include existing workforces previously excluded from the AFL's organization efforts: unskilled, immigrant, Black, and female workers. The CIO advocated plantwide, interracial unions with skilled and unskilled workers on an equal footing. The CIO began organizing in Houston in 1937.²⁹ Unions, particularly those affiliated with the CIO, were active in civil rights demonstrations in post-World War II Houston. The AFL and the CIO merged in 1957. By 1960, there were more than 400,000 union members, the majority associated with AFL-CIO affiliates. Organized labor became an important political force both nationally and in Texas. In the 1960s, the support of labor unions was often crucial for local and state political candidates. In the late twentieth century, however, unions became stilted. The growth of nonunion workforce, an increasing conservative political leaning in Texas, and a decrease in support from the National Labor Relations Board resulted in a decline in organized labor in Texas. By the early 1970s, 47 percent of the Texas labor force was union members, but by the end of the twentieth century, the proportion had declined to 21 percent.³⁰

The United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Local No. 1742 was likely the first union to use the building's second level, with its Steelworkers Hall noted in 1947 at Canal and Norwood Streets. The CIO chartered this union as the Steel Workers Organizing Committee in 1937 at the Hughes Tool Company and changed its name to United Steelworkers of America in 1942.³¹ In the 1940s, the USWA was active in labor disputes with Hughes Tool Company, the National War Labor Board, and the Independent Metal Workers Union, the other major labor union at Hughes Tool Company. In 1947,

²⁵ Harris County Clerk, Deed Record 1314:438, Houston, April 6, 1944.

²⁶ Morrison & Fourmy Directory Company, *Houston, Texas, City Directory*; *Houston Chronicle*, "Contract Is Let To Build Store Building," April 14, 1946, 51 (Newsbank.com).

²⁷ *Houston Chronicle*, "Harold B. Miller Druggist Here for Many Years, Dies," August 22, 1948, 57 (Newsbank.com).

²⁸ *Houston Chronicle*, "Simmons and Company," November 24, 1947, 18, Advertisement (Newsbank.com); *Houston Chronicle*, "Shotgun Blast Victim To Be Buried in Taylor," August 12, 1949, 15 (Newsbank.com).

²⁹ Michael R. Botson Jr., *Labor, Civil Rights, and the Hughes Tool Company* (Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 10.

³⁰ Ruth A. Allen, "Labor Organizations," in *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, 2021.

³¹ Botson Jr., *Labor, Civil Rights, and the Hughes Tool Company*, 88.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

the USWA helped organize a 10,000-man strike in Houston.³² A connection between the building's owner, Sills, and the USWA is not documented, but he was likely associated with or sympathetic to labor unions. A realtor in 1950, he had been an oil tool machinist for Hughes Tool Company earlier in his career.³³

Two other unions used the hall. The Pipefitters International Union Local No. 211, a member organization of the AFL, used it from around 1955 to 1960. The pipefitters union was also associated with Hughes Tool Company, representing approximately 3,000 workers at the company in 1950.³⁴ Local No. 211 was involved in some internal or rival union turmoil during the 1950s. A bomb planted at the hall exploded on August 12, 1955, damaging the building.³⁵ The Seafarers International Union of North America and Marine Engineers Beneficial Association used the hall from 1960 to 1978. The seafarers and marine engineers union had opened its Houston branch in the Second War by 1955. In 1960, the union purchased the building at 5804 Canal Street.³⁶ The union assembled at the hall to organize longshoremen strikes and picketing events against Houston's port.³⁷ The seafarers and marine engineers union aided taxi drivers and models and hosted campaigning politicians. On March 16, 1962, a rival union planted another bomb that was disarmed before it damaged the building. After this event, the union hired police to guard the building.³⁸ The union altered the building's interior, converting the street level to offices, and its exterior, removing secondary entrances and enclosing storefront windows, likely in response to threats of violence (**Figure 5**).

The SMOM acquired the building in 1978, directly across the street from Tanguma's symbolic 1973 *The Rebirth of Our Nationality* mural. Here it established a permanent venue for the East End's Mexican American community. The SMOM, though not a labor organization, participated in the labor movement. When the SMOM purchased the building and moved its headquarters to this location, it had been assisting Mexican families in the area for decades. By the late 1970s, when the East End's factories were closing or moving, many residents were left unemployed, and grassroots community organizations such as the SMOM provided aid. The group hosted commemorative events, like centennial celebrations, festivals, and pageants, to generate financial assistance for medical care and aid. These services eventually included cultural programs in folklore, music, food, and continuing education classes for adults. Initiatives to celebrate Hispanic heritage observed holidays like Thanksgiving in the *Barrio*, *Navidad en el Barrio*, *Cinco de Mayo*, and *Día de Los Muertos*. The building was renovated in the 1990s with storefront windows restored, and the second-floor union hall was converted to a rental venue (**Figure 6**).

Modernistic Architecture: Moderne

Art Deco and Moderne were popular modernistic architectural styles, particularly for commercial and civic buildings, from the 1920s through the early 1950s. Art Deco gained popularity first in the late 1920s during the period's commercial boom and prosperity.³⁹ The style was characterized by exterior walls with a smooth surface, often applied stucco; flat roofs, often with a parapet; decorative geometric ornamentation, particularly zigzags and chevrons; and stepped building façades with towers or other vertical projections giving buildings a vertical emphasis.⁴⁰

³² *Houston Chronicle*, "Steelworkers to Street Political Action at Session," December 6, 1947, 14 (Newsbank.com).

³³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population Schedule, Enumeration District 263-421, Harris County, Texas, Ancestry, National Archives and Records Administration, 1950.

³⁴ *Houston Chronicle*, "Four Unions to Bid for Hughes Tool Representation," March 14, 1950, 8 (Newsbank.com).

³⁵ *Houston Chronicle*, "Police Step Up Bomber Search: Union Hall under Guard after Anonymous Caller's Warning," August 30, 1955, 1 (Newsbank.com).

³⁶ Harris County Clerk, Deed Record 4451:487, Houston, August 7, 1961.

³⁷ *Houston Chronicle*, "Port and Unions To Have Picket Showdown," August 12, 1964, 5 (Newsbank.com).

³⁸ *Houston Chronicle*, "Bomb Fuse Snuffed in Union Hall," March 16, 1962, 1 (Newsbank.com).

³⁹ Yolita Schmidt, *The Modern Style in Architecture: A Houston Guide* (1978).

⁴⁰ Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture (Revised)* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

The Art Moderne style, often further divided into Streamline Moderne, Classical (or Public Works Administration) Moderne, and Late Moderne, was popular from the 1930s through the early 1950s. Streamline Moderne, the earliest subtype, combined avant-garde International Style aesthetics with the streamlined designs of the era's mass-produced airplanes, trains, boats, and cars. Like Art Deco, Streamline Moderne design has smooth exterior walls and flat roofs and a horizontal, rather than a vertical, emphasis, with horizontal bands, ribbon windows, rounded walls, and other curved forms. The horizontal emphasis and curved forms of these buildings projected a sense of movement and speed. The Classical Moderne style evolved partially from the Art Deco style as the onset of the Great Depression granted the high ornamentation of Art Deco an air of ostentation. Classical Moderne retained the more Classicist design features of Art Deco but stripped the ornamentation and added Streamline Moderne horizontal and curved design elements. Late Moderne, a style subtype most often found in post-World War II Art Moderne buildings, blended Postwar Modern aesthetics, derived from the International Style, with Classicist forms and geometric ornamentation typical of earlier Moderne designs. Late Moderne buildings often exhibit: flat roofs; applied stucco or masonry cladding; horizontal bands of windows, sometimes set within projecting frames (i.e., bezel windows), sometimes wrapped around corners, and usually framed with metal; and very little ornamentation. Some examples have rounded corners, but others substitute them with more angular forms. Commercial examples typically have prominent primary entrances and display windows and sometimes a curvilinear canopy or soffit. Streamline and Late Moderne designs were most commonly applied to commercial, industrial, and small professional buildings and are uncommon for residential, religious, or civic architecture.⁴¹

Three unlikely groups influenced the popularity of the modernistic styles for commercial architecture: the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), manufacturers, and marketing firms. In 1935, the FHA began a public relations campaign for the modernization of commercial buildings, the Modernize Main Street initiative. The campaign promoted new storefronts to encourage consumers to shop, injecting money into the economy. It provided local construction jobs to the building industry, thereby stimulating those economies. Through the Modernization Credit Plan, the agency insured banks against low-interest loans for the modernization of nonresidential buildings.⁴² Manufacturers and their advertisers repurposed the "Modernize Main Street" motto to promote new, machine-made building materials like structural glass, glass block, and neon tubing for signs.⁴³ This appealed to both large and small companies that sought to modernize their image with new building designs.

Modernistic Architecture in Houston

At the turn of the twentieth century, Houston's architecture consisted of regional variations of Victorian, Classical Revival, and Period Revival styles that were soon abandoned for modern styles. Houston quickly embraced the new Modernistic styles as it became a global energy capital.⁴⁴ The booming petroleum industry led to major changes, and downtown's flourishing business district had more than 36 skyscrapers by 1920.⁴⁵ Construction for the Texas Medical Center and the upper-class neighborhoods of River Oaks and Riverside Terrace broke ground. The city's civic and cultural organizations constructed monumental public spaces and parks.

⁴¹ Jay C. Henry, *Architecture in Texas: 1895–1945* (University of Texas Press, 1993), 239. City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning, Office of Historic Resources. *SurveyLA: Los Angeles Citywide Historic Context Statement; Architecture and Engineering; L.A. Modernism, 1919–1980* (2021), 91–103.

⁴² Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁴³ Henry, *Architecture in Texas: 1895–1945*, 234.

⁴⁴ Bradley, *Improbable Metropolis*, 114; Jim Parsons and David Bush, *Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast* (Bright Sky Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ Bradley, *Improbable Metropolis*, 82.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

The earliest modernistic buildings in Houston date to the late 1920s. The 1927 Petroleum Building at 1314 Texas Avenue by architect Alfred C. Bossom and the 1929 Gulf Building at 712 Main Street by architect Alfred C. Finn represent some of the city's earliest Modernistic skyscrapers. The Petroleum Building's stepped roof and abstract reliefs based on pre-Columbian Mayan art are characteristics of a Southwestern regional interpretation of Art Deco design. Other early Modernistic buildings in Houston featured Art Deco zig-zag lines and geometric ornament. Few areas of the city were untouched by these styles, which were applied to both modest and high-style buildings.

Construction slowed during the Depression era and elaborate high-style architecture was pushed aside for more functional designs. Modernistic buildings from the 1930s included commercial buildings designed in the Streamline Moderne style, usually with flat roofs, smooth stucco walls with one or more rounded corners, and often with continuous windows and glass block and chrome or stainless-steel decorative elements.⁴⁶ Houston's economic recovery and industrial prosperity leading up to, during, and after World War II created an automobile culture that impacted the development of transportation and commercial improvements.⁴⁷ Commercial buildings and shopping centers with off-street parking became focal points. The Moderne style features of rounded corners, use of glass block, and second-floor band of windows were popular in Houston's commercial design. The 1937 River Oaks Community Center by architects Nunn & McGinty with Oliver C. Winston was one of the nation's first automobile-oriented suburban retail centers.⁴⁸ This was a revolutionary transformation for commercial architecture and supplied a model for other developers, especially after World War II. A distinctive feature of the shopping centers was an upcurved canopy, like that on the SMOM Hall, with coved lighting. The most prominent Houston architects from the 1920s through the 1940s, Alfred C. Finn and Joseph Finger, designed extensively in the Art Deco and Art Moderne styles. Others who incorporated the design were Kenneth Franzheim, Wyatt C. Hedrick, Moore & Lloyd, and Lamar Q. Cato.⁴⁹ Their designs influenced smaller developers and builders who integrated high Moderne style into vernacular construction.

Like elsewhere in Houston, modernistic buildings were designed and constructed in the East End from the 1920s through the 1950s. In fact, Houston's East End contains the largest concentration of Modernistic industrial buildings in the city.⁵⁰ The 1929 Coca-Cola Bottling Plant at 707 Live Oak Street (demolished in 2007) by Pringle & Smith with Alfred C. Finn and the 1935 Cameron Iron Works building at 711 Milby Street are examples of the Classical Moderne style applied to industrial buildings. Commercial buildings in the East End were commonly designed in modernistic styles, particularly Art Deco and Streamline Moderne. Architect Kenneth Franzheim designed Houston's first postwar Moderne department store in 1947 for Sears, Roebuck, and Company in the East End at 6800 Harrisburg Boulevard (demolished 1985). The building was a blend of Postwar Modern and Late Moderne architectural styles, with large blank-brick surfaces above rounded canopies and vertical elements on the exterior walls with vertical signs extending above the roofline.

Many of Houston's Modernistic commercial buildings are no longer extant, and most of those remaining have experienced substantial alterations. Most of Hedrick's major buildings in Houston have been altered or demolished. Likewise, some of Finn's and Finger's more impressive designs, like the Metropolitan Theater, the Houston Turn-Verein Clubhouse, and the Coca-Cola Bottling Plant, were demolished. Very few postwar or Late Moderne commercial buildings exist in Houston today.

⁴⁶ Henry, *Architecture in Texas: 1895–1945*, 216, 234.

⁴⁷ Bradley, *Improbable Metropolis*, 15.

⁴⁸ Parsons and Bush, *Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast*, 40.

⁴⁹ Preservation Houston, "Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast," 2014.

⁵⁰ Parsons and Bush, *Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast*, 19.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Architectural Significance

The SMOM Hall is a good example of the Late Moderne style in Houston's East End. Its design incorporates character-defining attributes of the style: smooth stucco exterior wall surfaces, flat roof, asymmetrical fenestration configuration, ribbon windows, and aluminum-frame storefront windows and doors. The design uses a material commonly implemented in Moderne buildings, Vitrolite structural glass. Subsequent alterations generally retained or restored these important features. The building's upcurved canopy copied that of the distinctive 1937 River Oaks Community Center by Nunn, McGinty, and Winston, which was altered and partially demolished by 2007. The upcurved canopy on the SMOM Hall appears to be a rare surviving feature of Late Moderne style in the East End and the greater Houston area.

A variety of East End property types display Moderne characteristics, from industrial warehouses and factories to ornate theaters. Most extant examples are Classical Moderne industrial buildings, but few are either commercial buildings, examples of the Late Moderne style, or both. Examples comparable to SMOM Hall with limited alterations are rare. **Table 1** illustrates examples of extant Moderne-style commercial buildings in the East End. Most extant Moderne buildings in the East End are examples of Streamline Moderne. Of the five extant Late Moderne commercial buildings noted in the East End, the SMOM Hall is the most intact example (see **Table 1**). These buildings all feature characteristics of Late Moderne: flat roofs, stucco or masonry cladding, angular forms, and minimal ornamentation. The Parker Brothers & Company Building and the commercial building at 6725 Harrisburg Boulevard retain symmetrical façades common to Classical Moderne design. The Central Park Post Office and the Rite-Way Department Store are most similar to the SMOM Hall, with chamfered primary entrances and prominent stylized upper-story windows. These three buildings both share the characteristically Moderne smooth exterior walls, flat roofs, and horizontal emphasis, and replace the most recognizable feature of Streamline Moderne, its rounded walls, with angular corners. Each is a modest example of Late Moderne design, but with distinct features of the style. The Central Park Post Office has a brick exterior and wraparound canopies on the first and second floors, the upper-story windows are set within a frame, and the chamfered storefront has a stylized upper-story window. When the Rite-Way Department Store was remodeled in 1948, its new appearance featured the Late Moderne style with a painted stucco exterior and a glass-block window. The upper-story window in the chamfered corner is set in a rounded bay that projects from the facade and has scalloped walls. Both have had modifications to their canopies, doors, and windows. With its stucco finish, intact upcurved canopy, and extant upper-story glass block window within its Vitrolite surround, the SMOM Hall is a good and rare local example of a Late Moderne commercial building in the East End. As such, it is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C, in the area of Architecture, at the local level of significance.

Potential Significance under Criterion A

This property has potential for significance under Criterion A that is not fully documented in this nomination, but related history is included to provide context for these topics. Limited research to identify whether the building was significantly associated with social and ethnic history proved inconclusive for the period through 1974, the 50-year cutoff date. No significant events or persons associated with local labor history were linked to the building during that period. James Sills, a machinist for Hughes Tool Co. in 1940, may have belonged to one of the unions associated with the company, but the connection could not be documented, and no others were obvious. Similarly, no significant events or individuals associated with local social history were linked to the building during the period 1946 to 1974, although a bombing occurred at the building in 1955, and another was attempted in 1962. Both events were linked to interunion rivalries. The Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana, which offered union-like assistance and protection, has been important to the local Hispanic community since the 1930s but was not associated with the building until 1978. Since that date, no significant events or people appear to be associated with the building's potential local history. As a result, it does not meet Criterion Consideration G for having achieved significance in the past 50 years. More intensive research, however, may document the building as eligible under Criterion A, including for a period of significance that post-dates 1973, in the area of Social History for associations with labor history and/or in the area of Ethnic History/Hispanic for its cultural associations.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Table 1: Extant Art Moderne Examples of Commerical Buildings in Houston's East End (1930–1950)⁵¹

Classical Moderne	
 <p>Google Image; Captured 2022</p> <p>1935 Houston Casket Company at 1717 Live Oak Street</p>	 <p>Google Image; Captured 2018</p> <p>1940 Dahlgren's Furniture Studio at 3518–3522 Polk Street</p>
Streamline Moderne	
 <p>Houston Deco</p> <p>1945 Albritton Eat's Restaurant at 4120 McKinney Street</p>	 <p>Google Image; Captured 2022</p> <p>1947 Rettig's Heap-O-Cream at 210 Wayside Drive</p>

⁵¹ Stephen Fox and Gerald Moorehead, *Houston Architectural Guide*, ed. Nancy Hadley (Houston: American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990); Anna Mod, *Building Modern Houston* (Texas: Arcadia Publishing, 2012); Parsons and Bush, *Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast*.

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas



Google Image; Captured 2023

1940 Houston Power Equipment Company at 4614
Navigation Boulevard



Google Image; Captured 2022

C.1940 Pappas Brothers Cleaners at 5602 Canal Street



Google Image; Captured 2022

C.1940 building at 3401 Harrisburg Boulevard
Late Moderne



Google Image; Captured 2022

C.1940 building at 6705 Navigation Boulevard



Google Image; Captured 2022

1939 Parker Brothers & Company at 5303 Navigation
Boulevard



Google Image; Captured 2022

C.1945 commercial building at 6725 Harrisburg
Boulevard

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas



Google Image; Captured 2022

1940 Central Park Post Office Substation at 6646 (now 6700) Harrisburg Boulevard



Google Image; Captured 2022

1929-1948 Rite-Way Department Store at 7504 Harrisburg Boulevard

Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

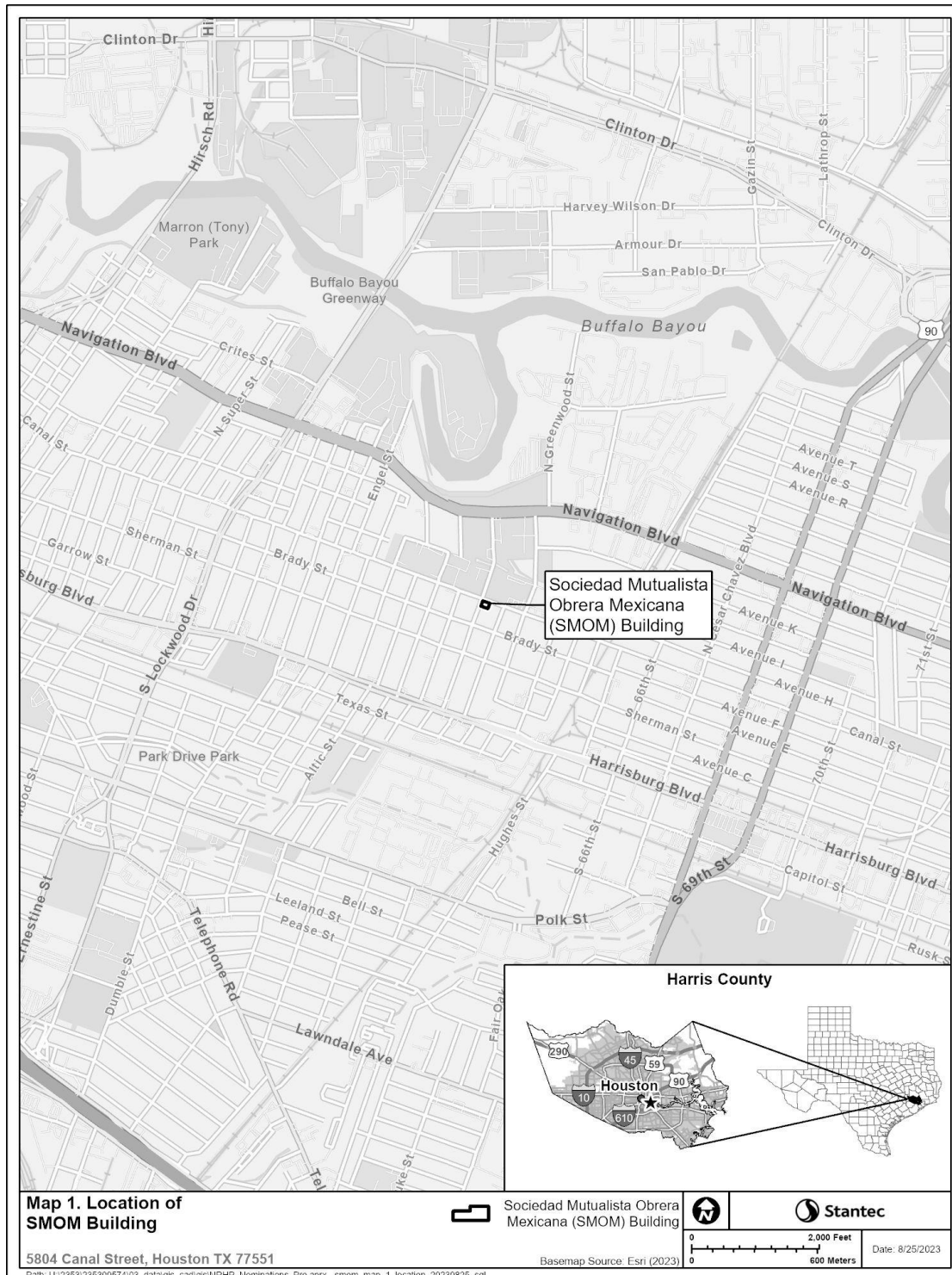
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Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

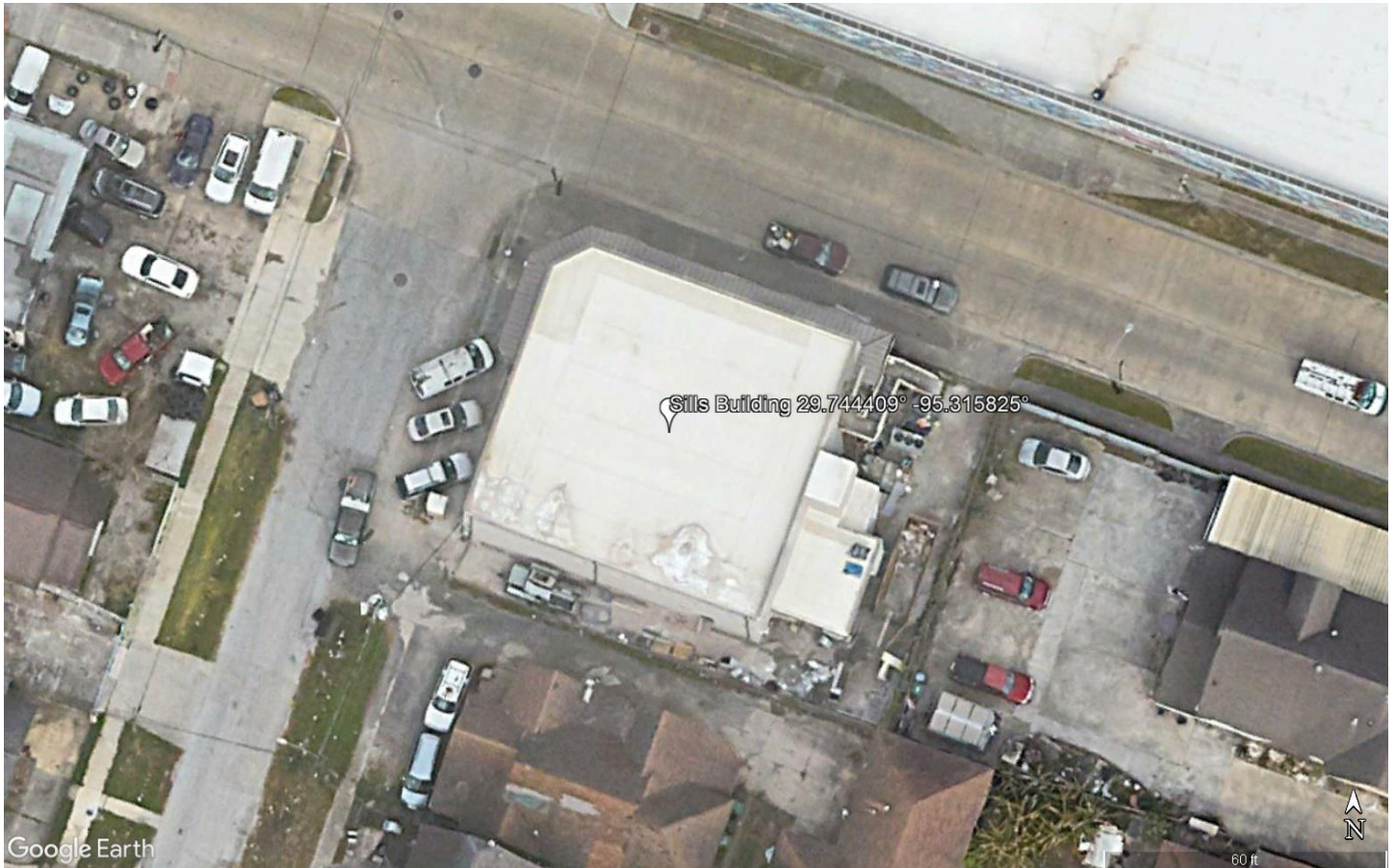
Map 1: Property location in Houston, Harris County.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Map 2

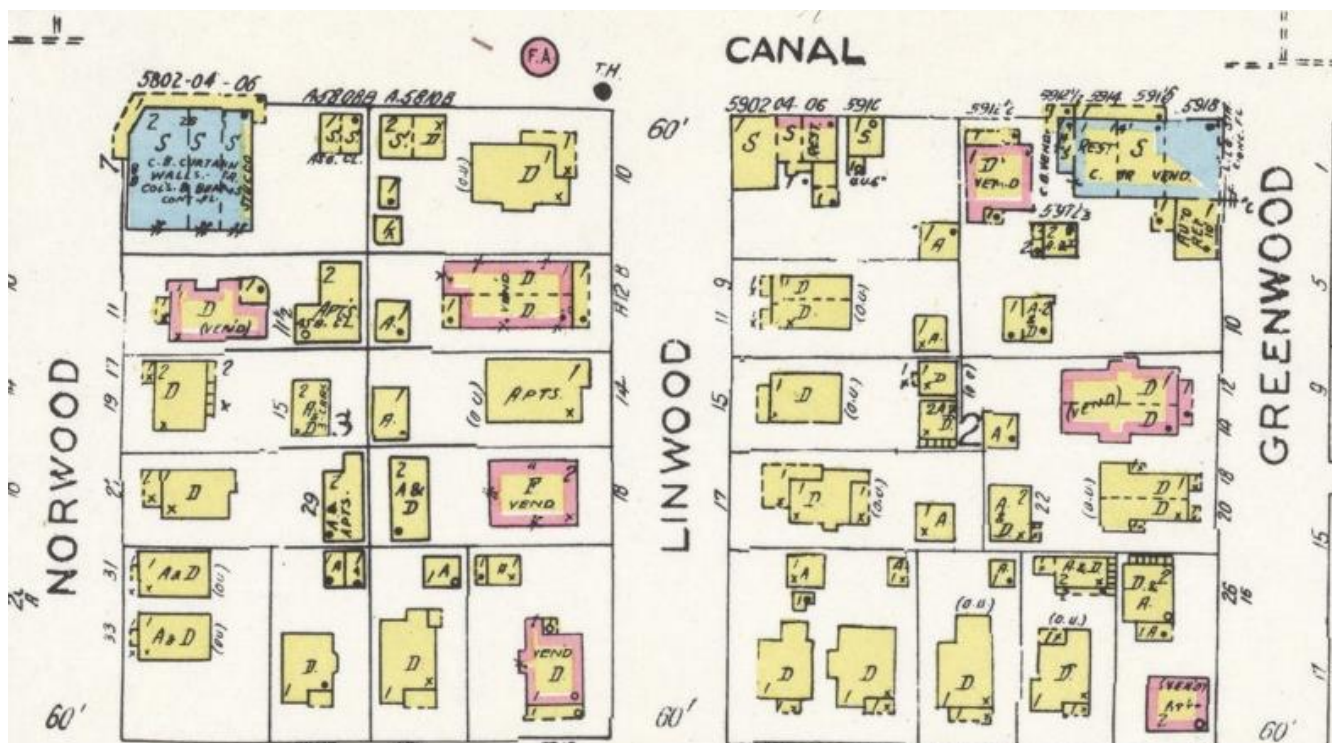
Source: Google Earth, accessed January 18, 2024.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

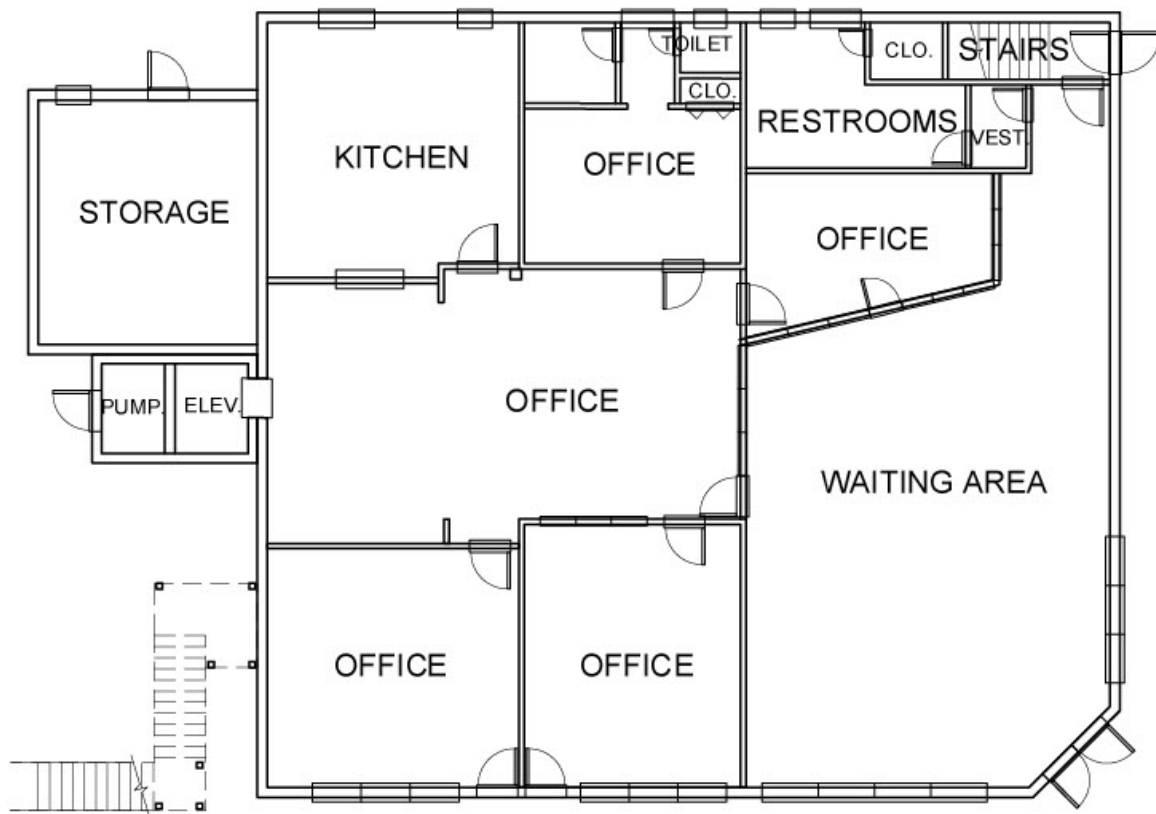
FIGURES

Figure 1: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1948, Vol. 6, Sheet 633, shows the building with three storefronts and wraparound canopy.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Figure 2: First floor layout of the building as of March 2023, showing current usage of interior space.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Figure 3: Second floor as of March 2023.

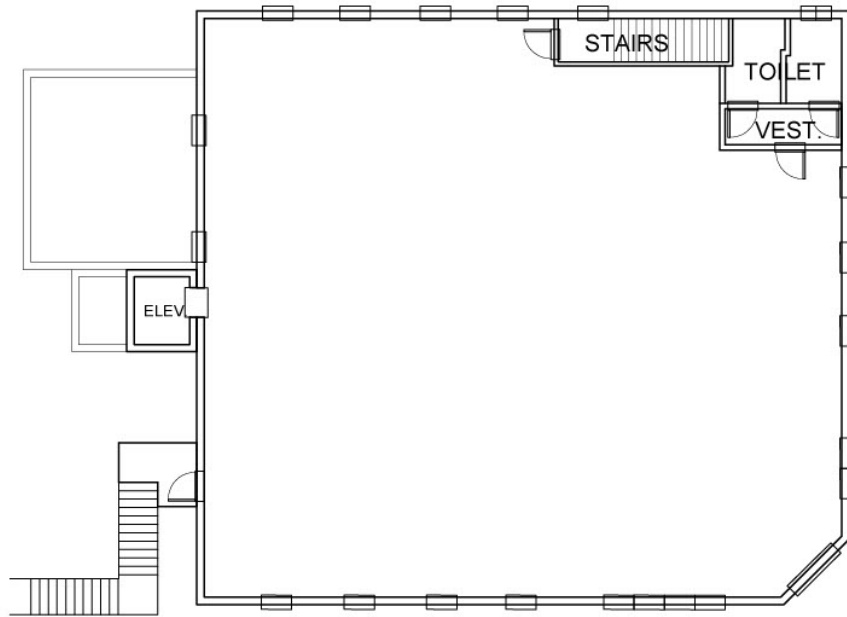
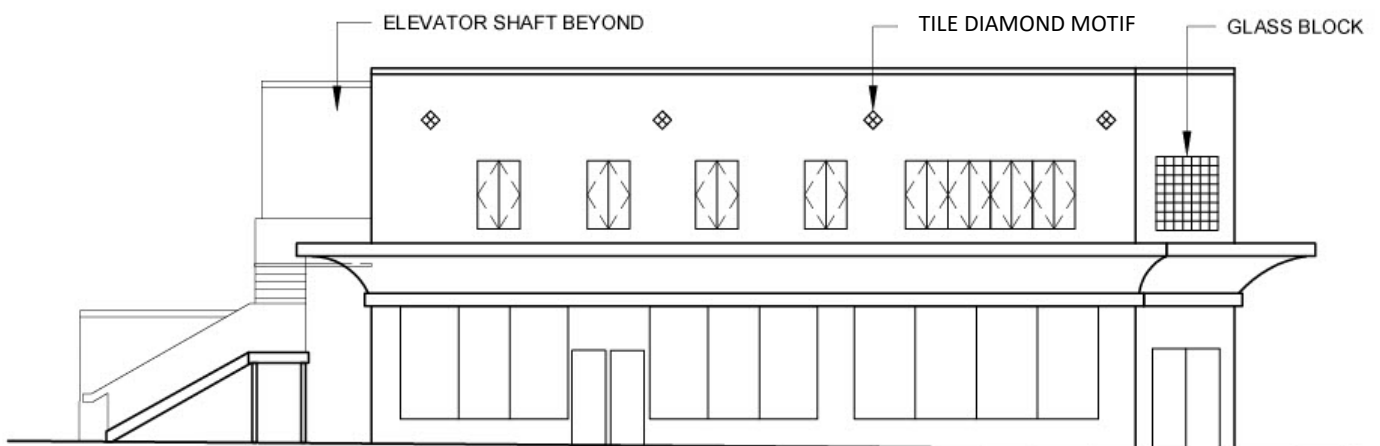


Figure 4: Front façade as of March 2023, showing the elevator shaft addition, restoration of display windows and entrance doors to the front façade, and Art Moderne details.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Figure 5: SMOM Hall in the 1980s, showing the enclosed windows and entrances, view facing southeast. Smomhouson.org.



Figure 6: SMOM Hall, c.2017, view facing southeast. Smomhouson.org



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 1: Northeast façade and main entrance, oblique angle, camera facing southeast.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 2: Detail view of canopy and glass block on northeast façade, camera facing southeast.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 3: Northeast façade, camera facing southwest.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 4: Northwest façade, camera facing southeast..



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 5: Northwest façade, oblique angle, camera facing northeast.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 6: Northeast façade, oblique angle, camera facing southwest.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 7: Southwest façade with utility room and elevator shaft additions, camera facing northwest.
(A fence on property prevented ground-level photographic documentation of the building's full height from this direction.)



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 8: Interior from main entrance, camera facing south.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 9: Interior first floor office spaces, camera facing southeast.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 10: Second floor from southeast corner of the room, camera facing northwest.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 11: Second floor, camera facing southwest.



Sills Building, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Photo 12: Ground floor, looking towards entrance on chamfered corner (northeast)



- end -