

**PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT****LANDMARK NAME:** Mecom Fountain**OWNER:** City of Houston**APPLICANT:** Same as Owner**LOCATION:** 5800 Main Street at Montrose Boulevard - Hermann Park**AGENDA ITEM:** E**HPO FILE NO.:** 16PL128**DATE ACCEPTED:** Dec-29-2015**HAHC HEARING:** Mar-24-2016**SITE INFORMATION**

Located in the median at the intersection of Main Street and Montrose Boulevard, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic concrete fountain designed by Eugene Werlin, built in 1964.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Protected Landmark Designation**HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY**

Since 1964, Mecom Fountain has been one of Hermann Park's most beloved sites. In September 1963, John W. Mecom Sr. and his wife, Mary Elizabeth, gifted a \$100,000 fountain designed by Eugene Werlin, AIA, to the City of Houston. Mecom was a Houston oil tycoon with operations around the world. In 1962, Mecom diversified his oil empire when he purchased the Warwick Hotel on Main Street.

In 1964, the park installed Mecom Fountain at the site of George Kessler's old sunken garden across the street from the Warwick Hotel, maintaining the elliptical shape of the existing landscaped median. The fountain includes three elevated, concrete, circular bowls set inside a low oval retaining wall. The fountain's refined design makes it a statement of modernist artwork. At the time, Mecom Fountain was the largest fountain in the city.

Mecom Fountain is significant as the work of architect Eugene Werlin, as well as for its modern design, as a reminder of the city's development, and for its association with Hermann Park and the Mecom family. The Mecom Fountain meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8 for Protected Landmark designation.

**HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE***Hermann Park*

Hermann Park is a product of the City Beautiful Movement inspired by the "White City" at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. The movement emphasized the importance of green space to offset overcrowded tenement settings, understandably appealing for a rapidly growing Houston. Mayor H. Baldwin Rice appointed the first Board of Park Commissioners in 1910. The Board promptly retained Arthur Coleman Comey as their landscape architect and placed him in charge of creating a comprehensive park plan and system. Comey recommended a city-wide park system with a large central park at the center. Park Commissioner George Hermann, for whom the park is named, donated 285 acres of his own land for the main park. In 1915, parkland increased to 407 acres and the Board hired George Kessler (friend of Frederick Law Olmstead), as the new landscape architect. Kessler designed the elliptical sunken garden at the main entrance, the future site of Mecom Fountain. While World War I stalled widespread park improvement, the 1920s saw a boom in development. Construction of the zoo, golf course, and excavation of the Grand Basin all began in the 1920s. After Kessler's death, the Board hired the firm

Hare and Hare out of Kansas City to oversee park improvements. The Great Depression inhibited progress on park improvements and lack of action continued well into the 1950s.

In September 1963, John W. Mecom Sr. and his wife, Mary Elizabeth, gifted a \$100,000 fountain designed by Eugene Werlin, AIA, to the City of Houston. In 1964, the park installed Mecom Fountain at the site of the old sunken garden, a recommendation made by Hare and Hare in the 1940s. At the time, Mecom Fountain was the largest fountain in the city. The 1960s and 1970s were characterized by a new building campaign that led not only to the construction of Mecom Fountain, but also the Miller Outdoor Theater, Natural Science Museum, and Planetarium, all in Hermann Park. A 1990s design competition for the “Heart of the Park” led to a new master plan for Hermann Park developed by Hanna/Olin, Ltd. in 1991. Hermann Park celebrated its Centennial in 2014, and recent additions to the park include the eight-acre McGovern Centennial Gardens. In 2016, Hermann Park is working to implement the \$4 million Grand Gateway project (designed by Kevin Shanley), aimed at streetscape improvements.

#### *John W. Mecom, Sr.*

John W. Mecom, Sr. (1911-1981), son of oilman Harvey Mecom, was born in Liberty, Texas. He began his career in oil at 25 when he and two friends raised \$700 to drill in a Liberty County field determined to be dry. Mecom and his friends not only found commercial oil in the field, they made a significant profit. Mecom was able to sell his interest for \$100,000 two years later. Mecom gained tycoon status during World War II and by 1948 was able to sell his oil holdings for \$11.6 million. He expanded his empire into Louisiana, and also reached across the world to the Middle East with crews operating in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Yemen by 1957. In 1962, Mecom diversified his empire when he purchased the Warwick Hotel (the present-day Hotel Zaza) next to Hermann Park. The oilman’s financial status was widely discussed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The decades proved to be financially turbulent times for the Mecoms after Mecom, Sr. failed to acquire the *Houston Chronicle* in 1966, borrowed against future income, and filed for bankruptcy in 1970.

#### *Eugene Werlin, AIA*

Eugene Werlin, AIA (1905-1989) was a graduate of Rice Institute (now University) in Houston. In addition to the Mecom Fountain, Werlin also designed homes for wealthy Houstonians on Underwood Boulevard early in his career, including:

- 2330 Underwood (1930), a French Provincial style Fondren House
- 2328 Underwood (1936), a traditional home for retailer Harry Battlestein
- 2329 Underwood (1937), a Tudor revival style home for oilman Glenn McCarthy’s son-in-law

Werlin also designed the Miller Outdoor Theater (1968), another beloved space in Hermann Park. Werlin was active in Houston throughout his career. He was president of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1933, and a three-term president of the Texas Society of Architects.

### **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY**

Mecom Fountain replaced George Kessler’s sunken garden in 1964, maintaining the elliptical shape of the existing landscaped median. The fountain includes three elevated, concrete, circular bowls set inside a low oval retaining wall. The fountain’s refined design makes it a statement of modernist artwork.

*Alterations*

Alterations to the Mecom Fountain in 2016, a product of Hermann Park's \$4 million Grand Gateway project, included altering the base of the fountain by cladding the low oval retaining wall with limestone and adding a bull-nosed cap on top of the wall. Mayor Sylvester Turner ultimately ordered alterations to the fountain stopped after objections to the change from preservationists throughout Houston. Preservationists and Friends of the Fountain (a group organized to raise money to reverse the alterations made to the fountain) maintained that the limestone finish was overly decorative and changed the sight lines for the water pools. The limestone cladding will now be removed and the fountain will be restored to its original appearance.

*The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by the Historic Preservation Department, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.*

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Braeswood: An Architectural History.* The Anchorage Foundation. Houston: Old Braeswood Civic Club, 1988.

*Cite Looks at Houston.* "Big Park, Little Plans: A History of Hermann Park." Stephen Fox. Houston: Rice Design Alliance, 2003.

"Eugene Werlin (1905-1989)." The American Institute of Architects.  
<http://public.aia.org/sites/hdoaa/wiki/Wiki%20Pages/ahd1047877.aspx>.

*Friends of Hermann Park: Action Plan 2000.* "Appendix B: Hermann Park, A Brief History." Bernie Scardino. Houston: Friends of Hermann Park, 2000.

*Houston Architectural Guide, Third Edition.* Stephen Fox. Houston: AIA Houston and Minor Design, 2012.

*Houston Chronicle*

*Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast.* Jim Parsons and David Bush. Albany: Bright Sky Press, 2008.

*New York Times*

**APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION**

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

**S      NA****S - satisfies      NA - not applicable**

Meets at least three of the following:

- ☒    ☐ (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;
- ☐    ☒ (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;
- ☒    ☐ (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;
- ☒    ☐ (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;
- ☒    ☐ (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
- ☐    ☒ (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
- ☐    ☒ (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
- ☒    ☐ (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.
- ☐    ☒ (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

**OR**

- ☐    ☒ The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2));

**OR**

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

☐ ☒ The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3);

**OR**

☐ ☒ The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4).

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Protected Landmark Designation of the Mecom Fountain at 5800 Main Street at Montrose Boulevard.

## **HAHC RECOMMENDATION**

The Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends to City Council the Protected Landmark Designation of the Mecom Fountain at 5800 Main Street at Montrose Boulevard.

**EXHIBIT A**  
**CURRENT PHOTOS**  
**MECOM FOUNTAIN**  
**5800 MAIN STREET AT MONTROSE BOULEVARD**



COH Photos, [hermannpark.org](http://hermannpark.org)



View from above (*Houston Chronicle*)



*Museum Park Neighborhood Association*



**EXHIBIT B**  
**HISTORIC PHOTO**  
**SUNKEN GARDEN**  
5800 MAIN STREET AT MONTROSE BOULEVARD



*sloanegallery.com*



**EXHIBIT C**  
**HISTORIC PHOTO**

MR AND MRS JOHN MECOM, SR. WITH EUGENE WERLIN



Richard Pipes, *Houston Chronicle*

**EXHIBIT D**  
**SITE MAP**  
**MECOM FOUNTAIN**  
**5800 MAIN STREET AT MONTROSE BOULEVARD**

