

Finger, Joseph  
Texas Chapter.

Application for Membership

~~Member of~~  
Ex-Recd.  
Jan. 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921

To the Secretary of the American Institute of Architects,  
The Octagon House, Washington, D. C.

SIR:

I hereby apply for Membership in the American Institute of Architects.

I hereby certify that the following statements are correct:

Name Joseph Finger

Address 601. Kress Bldg. Houston Texas  
[Number and Street.] [City.] [State.]

Place and date of birth Austria - 7<sup>th</sup> March 1887

Graduate in architecture \_\_\_\_\_  
[If required in your case, give name of institutions and year.—Attach evidence of Diploma or Certificate of graduation]

Holder of Scholarship in architecture \_\_\_\_\_  
[If required in your case, attach evidence.]

Passed the qualifying examinations of the Royal Institute of British Architects, or the examinations for the  
first class of the Ecole des Beaux Arts \_\_\_\_\_  
[If required in your case, state which, and attach evidence of Certificate.]

If an Associate of a Chapter of the Institute, give name of chapter \_\_\_\_\_

If practicing architect, firm name Finger & Pato

Have been in practice Thirteen years \_\_\_\_\_

If draughtsman, employed by \_\_\_\_\_  
[State number of years.]

Collegiate and office training McKenzie-Goldstein-Biggs New Orleans,  
L. S. Green Houston Tex. P. O. Hill & Co. Dallas Tex.

I have carefully examined the Constitution and By-Laws of the Institute and the "Circular of Advice Relative to Principles of Professional Practice and Canons of Ethics," and I agree, if elected, honorably to maintain them.

I further agree, if elected to membership in the American Institute of Architects, that if at any time my membership shall cease, either by my own resignation or by any action taken by the Institute, I will then, by that fact, relinquish all rights of any character that I may have acquired by reason of such membership in the property, real or personal, of the American Institute of Architects, and of the Chapter of the Institute of which I am then a member.

Jo. Finger  
[Signature of Applicant.]

I hereby certify that the signer of this application was duly elected an Associate of the \_\_\_\_\_  
[For use when the applicant is an Associate.]

Chapter, A. I. A., on the following date \_\_\_\_\_  
[Insert date of election to chapter.]

\_\_\_\_\_  
Secretary.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Chapter, A. I. A.

We, the undersigned members of the American Institute of Architects, have carefully examined the foregoing statement and believe it to be correct. We know the applicant personally, and consider that his work and practice warrant his admission to Membership.

- (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- (2) P. O. Steele
- (3) A. C. Fann

[The signatures of three Institute members are here required unless the applicant has the unanimous endorsement of his Chapter, in which case certification to that effect should be made above by the Secretary. Unanimous endorsement is that endorsement in which each Institute member of the Chapter had an opportunity to express himself by letter ballot either for or against the member proposed. No other form of unanimous endorsement will be accepted.]

Ad. \$5.00 1/8/21  
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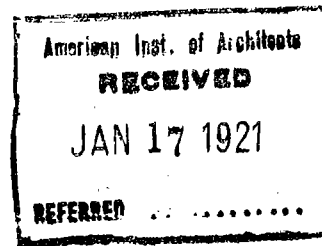
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**FINGER & CATO**

ARCHITECTS

HOUSTON, TEXAS

January 12, 1921.



Mr. E. C. Kemper,  
Executive Secretary,  
American Institute of Architects,  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

We are enclosing herewith two applications for membership in the American Institute of Architects and are sending by express, prepaid plans and photographs of some of the work that has been executed by our firm, as Architects. We being in partnership, have sent only one set of plans and one photograph of each building as exhibits, rather than separate exhibits to accompany each application and we trust that this will be sufficient. However, we shall be glad to send separate exhibits if so desired.

In securing signatures of members of Texas Chapter, Mr. A. C. Finn, Mr. O. Lorehn and Mr. R. D. Steel have signed the applications, all of them being in practice at the present time in Houston.

We are particularly anxious to become members in this organization and if we have not carefully complied with all the necessary requirements, we will consider it a personal favor if you could advise us before the application is taken into consideration by the membership committee.

As we understand the initiation fee until March, 1921 is \$5.00 and the annual dues \$20.00 and we are therefore enclosing the initiation fees with application and shall be glad to forward dues upon notification of our having become members.

Very truly yours,

FINGER & CATO,

By Lamar Q. Cato

LQC:S

THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS  
THE OCTAGON, WASHINGTON, D. C.

COPY

March 10, 1921.

My dear Sir:-

Acting for the Secretary, I am pleased to advise you of your election to membership in the American Institute of Architects, effective March 10, 1921.

You have been assigned to the Texas Chapter as an Institute member in good standing therein, and the Secretary of the Chapter so notified.

The enclosed statement for dues should receive early attention, as the engrossed Certificate of Membership is not sent until the dues for the first year have been paid. No charge has been made for first quarter of the current year.

May I take this opportunity to say that the office of the Secretary at the Octagon is for the service of every Institute member. Should the occasion arise, we shall be glad to give you our best cooperation.

Very truly yours,

Executive Secretary.

Mr. Joseph Finger,  
601 Kress Building,  
Houston, Texas.

K-P.  
Enclosure.

*P.S.: Your Tx. are being returned  
under separate cover.*

March 27, 1924.

My dear Mr. Finger:-

This will advise you of the formation of the South Texas Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, effective March 4, 1924.

As you are residing within the territory of the South Texas Chapter we have transferred you, as an Institute member in good standing, from the Texas Chapter to the South Texas Chapter, effective March 4, 1924.

We have advised Mr. Birdsall P. Briscoe, Chairman of the Organizing Group of the South Texas Chapter, to whom we are sending all Institute communications for the time being.

By direction of the Secretary.

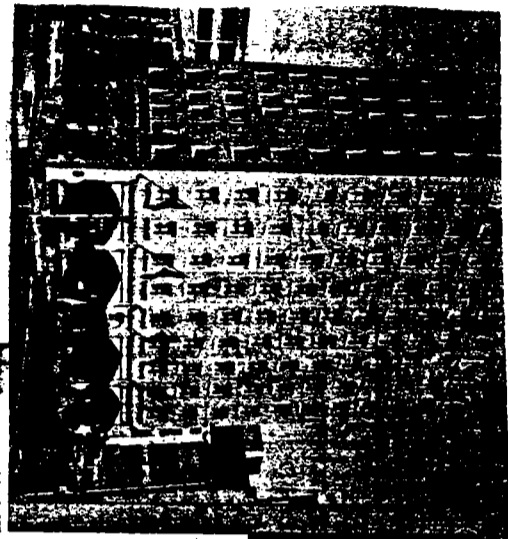
Very truly yours,

Executive Secretary.

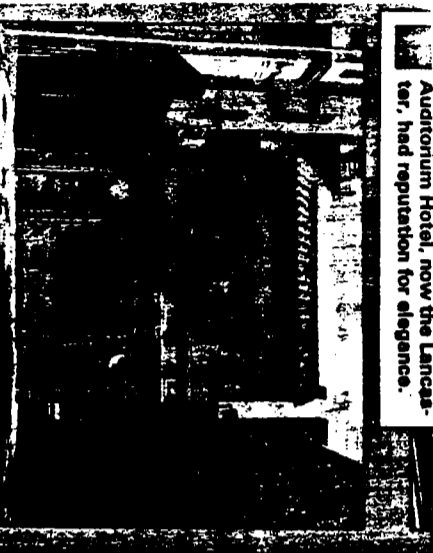
Mr. Joseph Finger,  
601 Kress Building,  
Houston, Texas.

K:VB

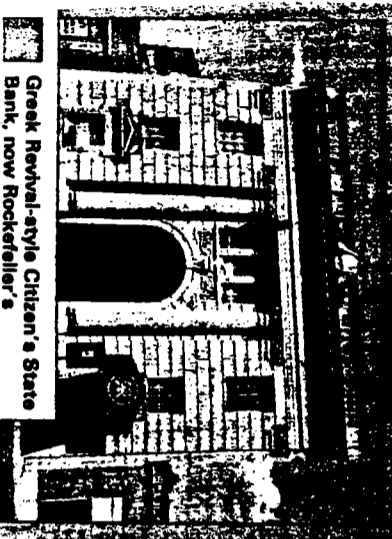
Finger, Joseph



Auditorium Hotel, now the Lamar Center, had reputation for elegance.



1929 National Cash Register Co. Italian Renaissance villa



Greek Revival-style Citizen's State Bank, now Rockefeller's

Solidity and permanence were expressed by City Hall's Moderne look.

# Finger on the pulse of the times

Immigrant guided Houston's architectural course for more than 2 decades

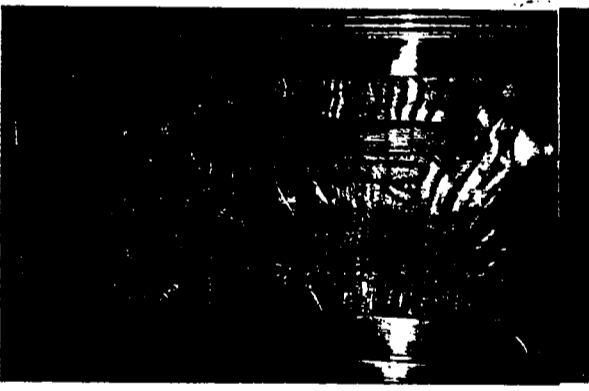
**EDITOR'S NOTE:** On this Independence Day, *Design Today* celebrates the contribution made to the look of our city by architect Joseph Finger, who came to Houston via New Orleans from Austria-Hungary in the early years of the 20th century.

By JEFFREY S. KELLY  
Special to The Post

“A ll political power is a trust, civil government is an association of men and not men themselves.” These words grace the lobby of Houston's stately City Hall and reflect the belief of its architect, Joseph Finger, that he was building for Houston's future.

This one man had a lasting impact on the course Houston's architecture would take from 1920 to 1946. In addition to City Hall, many private residences, apartment houses, hotels, stores and factories were stamped with his twin hallmarks — balanced elegance and structural integrity.

The Finger family had arrived in New Orleans from Austria-Hungary in 1905. Joseph's father wanted his son to take over his dry goods business, a prospect that thoroughly horrified the young man. In fact, said Finger's son Joseph S. Finger, according to family legend, he deliberately spoiled a valuable bolt of cloth by cutting it incorrectly to convince his father that he was not suited to the business. He chose to risk his father's disapproval by moving to fast-growing Houston in 1908.



City Hall's wonderfully detailed lobby artwork reflects the Western heritage of Texas.

Working at first with C. D. Hill & Company, he built upon his sound European technical training at the Royal Institute in Vienna to become totally familiar with all aspects of the architectural profession. His life's work would conform to exacting standards of strength, durability and permanence.

Anxious to express his own creative energies, he set up his own architectural practice in 1913 and immediately started to change the shape and appearance of Houston.

He went a long way toward that end in the decade of the 1920s, when Houston tripled its population. Science and technology as expressed by machines became the dominant

force in American life in the '20s. As if to balance this, social revolution in native artwork, especially the Mayan and Aztec of nearby Mexico. Joseph Finger drew upon these themes to embellish his works and create for Houston architectural reminders of the romance of ancient cultures.

America's love affair with the automobile was turning this Southern cotton port into a bustling oil boomtown. Economics was turning a city around, refitting its internal workings for a new age. Joseph Finger's son said his father instinctively understood what the new era would demand of Houston: a sense of sophisticated style. He realized Houston was fast becoming a regional capital, a city looking outward to the world.

One of his first works in the 1920s was the Beth Israel Temple, now the Heinen Theater of Houston Community College on Austin Street. While not overly large, it gives the impression of much greater mass, a sort of *troupe-foeil* that he would employ throughout his career. Inspired by the astonishing archaeological discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb, it has an Egyptian quality to it. Standing outside in the hot sun, you can imagine yourself in Karnak or Thebes.

This sense of size in a compact structure was repeated in the Citizen's State Bank, now Rockefeller's, on Washington Avenue. In 1926, when the bank was built, the avenue was a lively route of wealth, style and commerce. Despite its internal transformation into a nightclub, a sense of those days lingers in its classical facade.

Take a splash of New York's Park Avenue, add a dash of London style, and flavor with the *foie de vivre* of Paris and you have the Plaza Apartment Hotel on Montrose in the 1920s.

Finger designed this hotel as a stage for luxurious living. There was a large public dining room, a commissary, "from which the busy housewife can order by telephone," a barber shop, and a garage. Within each apartment, frescoed ceilings framed spacious, airy rooms. With running ice water in every room, "mechanical refrigeration," (a primitive form of air

See Finger/page 2E

# Finger . . . .

Continued from page 1E

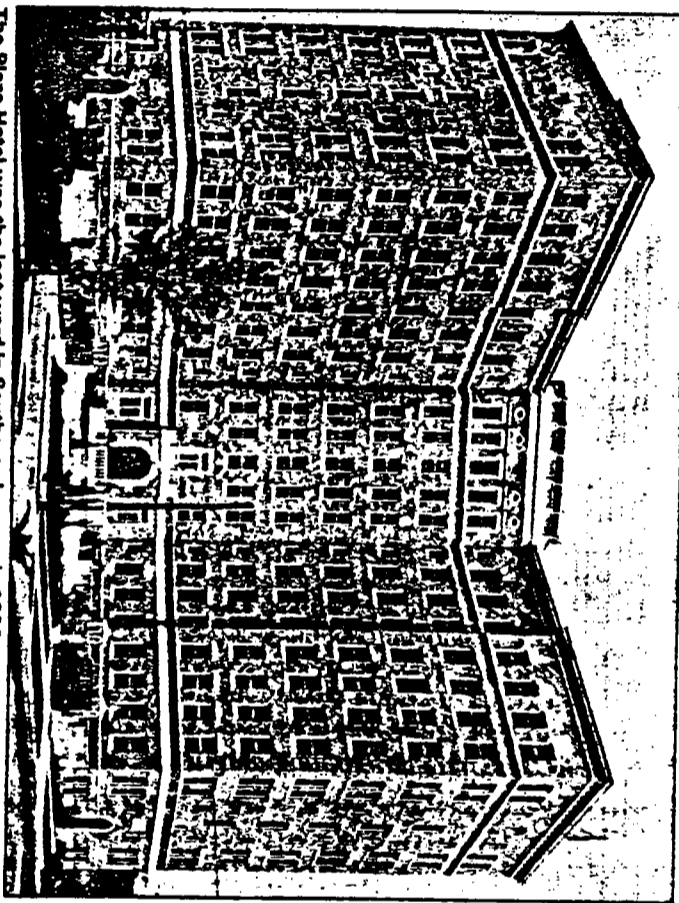
conditioning), and refrigerators in all suites that — imagine — made the Plaza was considered the last word in Southern elegance when it was completed in 1926.

Immediately, it became a favorite gathering place of wealthy Houstonians and their out-of-town visitors. Later, it was the home of millionaire "oil widows," whose tastes were in accord with the architectural distinction of the hotel and whose preferences for maid service were said to be imperial. Certainly, this was one of Houston's more colorful spots.

The boom years of the late '20s were prosperous ones for Joseph Finger. Though he was creating his works in a decade noted for its commercial haste and rampant speculation, the buildings were all carefully crafted and embellished with painstaking detail.

In the A. C. Burton Company building — now demolished — on Milam Street, Finger designed a partial showroom for the full range of Chrysler automobiles. Zig-zag modern in style, its ornate exterior drew inspiration from ancient Mayan designs. It was pure whimsy in the service of commerce, and in 1928 this approach made good business sense.

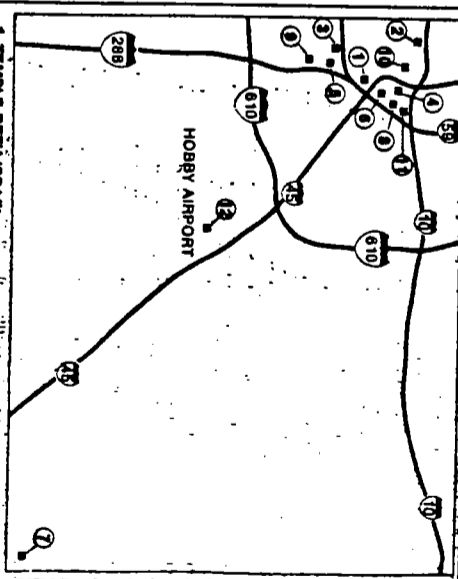
With the design of the Houston Turn-Verein building, Joseph Finger expressed his most important beliefs as an architect. The Turn-Verein had been organized in 1854 by German immigrants as a sports and cultural organization with civic-minded goals. They had even organized a volunteer fire company and militia.



The Plaza Hotel was the last word in Southern elegance in 1926.



## PARTIAL LISTING OF THE MAJOR WORKS OF JOSEPH FINGER

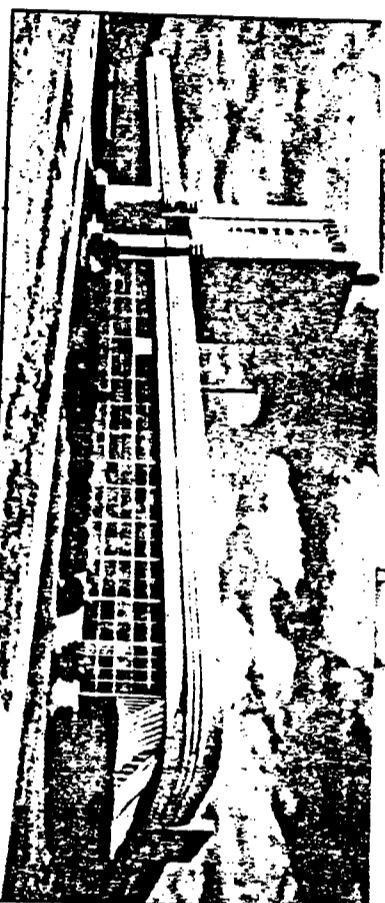


- 1 TEMPLE BETH ISRAEL
- 2 CITIZEN'S STATE BANK
- 3 PLAZA APARTMENT HOTEL
- 4 AUDITORIUM HOTEL (now THE LANCASTER)
- 5 HOUSTON TURN-VEREIN
- 6 CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BUILDING
- 7 RESIDENCE OF MR. AND MRS. JAMES MARION WEST
- 8 CLARKE AND COURTS BUILDING
- 9 SAN JACINTO HIGH SCHOOL ADDITION
- 10 JEFFERSON DAVIS HOSPITAL
- 11 THE HOUSTON CITY HALL
- 12 HOUSTON MUNICIPAL AIRPORT TERMINAL BUILDING AND HANGAR

His new home on Alameda Road was a masterpiece of structural integrity and design discipline. With its sense of linear flow and balance, the building has an almost athletic appearance, accentuated by the sporting bas-reliefs which run across its front and sides.

For this work, Finger borrowed design principles from Europe and added artistic elements from his- torical themes. The Turn-Verrein's core remained classical: form, shape and arrangement were the supreme concern, detail clearly secondary. It succeeded so well in this that it has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is Houston's unique monument to the age of Art Deco. Today, it's a valuable little gem of European architectural design, neglected and abandoned in the heart of Houston.

A very different building, in a very different location, is the home which Joseph Finger built in 1929 for James M. West, on Clear Lake. Father of the unconventional "Silver Dollar Jim West" — a legend in his own right — James West had made his fortune in lumber and oil. This beautiful northern Italian Renaissance mansion marked an important transition in the architect's career. It was his last work to exemplify the spirit of the Roaring '20s when the villas of wealthy Italian merchants and the palaces of Mediterranean royalty were taken as examples of the frivolity, whimsy and adoration of wealth which set the tone for the decade. Facing east along Clear Lake, this expansive, 17,000-square-foot



The architecture of Clark & Courts is pure design, symbolic of forward motion.

home was designed to be a lasting showplace of artisans' craftsmanship, costly and select materials, and detailed workmanship. Even the tile grout in the lavish bathroom had to be imported from the South Pacific to achieve the desired coral-toned effect, while the tiles themselves came from Tunisia.

From the glistening marble entryway and stairwell to the rich walnut paneling of the elaborate vaulted gothic hallways, it is clear that the reported 1929 cost of \$250,000 was justified.

In this magnificent seaside palazzo, Houston possesses one of the finest examples of 1920s Italian Renaissance architecture in the country, a monument to an era of bold and colorful entrepreneurs. The Great Depression had a sobering effect on all aspects of American life. Simplicity and streamlining replaced ornament and excess. While cost was often a factor in this change, more important was the need for a progressive, forward-looking message of hope in the future.

By the mid-'30s, government buildings extolled the virtues and

rewards of labor. This accorded with Joseph Finger's roots in an old-fashioned Europe that valued work and cooperation. His work in this period seems to have been given a certain visible energy by this happy coincidence.

What is striking in the comparison of Finger's works of the '30s to his buildings of the '20s is the fluid change, adapt and draw inspiration from new trends.

The elegant simplicity of the Streamline Moderne style is readily apparent in the Clark and Courts Building, finished in 1936. Even the stylized lettering over the entrance reflects Streamline Moderne's unity of effect. Here was architecture as pure design.

machine-like, taking form from the airplane and the ocean liner, and the symbolic of forward motion.

It was considered a noteworthy model of Streamline Moderne by the American Institute of Architects. Plans and photographs of the building were exhibited in both the United States and Europe for over two years. This striking style, and especially this building, marked the real turning point in Houston's ar-



Joseph Finger was able to convey to Houston an expression of solidity and permanence in a very impermanent age... of ever-changing borders, radical social change and economic despair.

chitectural development. It was to be a renaissance made up of molded concrete, curved glass, shiny stainless steel and sleek ship-like lines. It begged Houston to look to tomorrow and not to dwell on the economic disappointment of the Depression. It was the epitome of architectural optimism and belief in the power of technology.

An expression of architecture's new look was the Jefferson Davis Hospital, designed along with Alfred C. Finn and completed in 1937 with partial funding from the Public Works Administration. Shortages of a result, the reinforced concrete exterior was much simplified. Even with its stripped-down facade, the building is unmistakably Moderne in appearance, with the substantial look common to all of Finger's work.

In this structure, Finger's penchant for placing utility foremost is clearly seen. His eye for practicality resulted in a facility that was, in its day, the largest general hospital in Texas, well-planned and adaptable to changing patient needs. Joseph Finger considered Houston City Hall his supreme accom-

plishment. Today, half a century later, it still does the Bayou City proud. Narrowing in mass as it ascends in height, this Moderne miniscraper is conservative yet progressive, radical yet restrained.

That it can encompass these seeming contradictions without compromising its grace is a credit to Finger, the man. He was a product of the vigorous, traditional schooling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the free and open attitudes of Texas.

His City Hall design represents the moment when Finger's architecture moved away from historical precedent to create its own style, clear, bold and free of clutter. Siting opposite the original Spanish Renaissance Public Library, it turned its back — and Houston's — on the Mediterranean romanticism of the 1920s.

Excess was not part of the Moderne style's game plan. Each work of art had to have some educational or inspirational purpose. The moral heedless and often selfish excesses

of the 1920s. Intricate exterior detail was restricted to the imposing aluminum grille facing each entryway and the transoms above them. Aluminum was, in the mid-1930s, just coming into its own — it was considered the harbinger of the future, this metal of the skies. Its use on the exterior of City Hall spoke volumes about Houston's belief in its own future.

Joseph Finger was able to convey to Houston, with buildings such as the City Hall, an expression of solidity and permanence in a very impermanent age; a decade of ever-changing borders, radical social change and economic despair. Working within a social milieu that often tolerated mediocre architecture, Joseph Finger succeeded in creating solid works of tasteful elegance with vital and unique identities, which were strong enough to set the pace of architectural development in Houston.

Jeffry S. Kelly is a Houston-based freelance writer.