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**Interviewee: Fox, Stephen**

**Interview Date: November 28, 2012**

**University of Houston**  
**Oral History of Houston Project**  
*Houston History*

Interviewee: Stephen Fox

Interview Date: November 28, 2012

Place: Rice University

Interviewer: Josh Levine

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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**Abstract:**

Stephen Fox is an architectural historian at Rice University; he discusses prominent Jewish architect Joseph Finger and his legacy to Houston architecture in the early twentieth century. Stephen Fox says Joseph Finger was an Austro-Hungarian Empire émigré. Fox suspects Finger came to Houston due to the city's commercial prosperity, where Fox says Finger established himself as a trustworthy architect. Finger brought with him European architectural influences: Sezession, Art Deco, and Modernist. Finger incorporated these styles into buildings he designed in Houston such as: the Turn-Verein, Houston Temple of Congregation of Israel, and A.C. Burton Chrysler Company Sales and Service Building.

Fox speaks of Alfred C. Finn, a contemporary architect of Finger, who was both a competitor and collaborator to Finger. The two architects worked on the Jefferson Davis Hospital. The architects were among a few city architects that pushed for modern architectural styles at the time that led away from the dominant styles of the 1920s such as the Georgian, Tudor, and Spanish. Fox talks about Finger designing the many buildings for the Houston Independent School District, one of the largest houses in Houston for James M. West, a wealthy Houston businessman; and the Houston City Hall building, his most prominent public building. Finger ran into controversy for his design of City Hall after a change in mayors. The new mayor publicly questioned Finger's qualifications; however, Finger maintained support from city council and outlasted the term of the critical mayor. Fox says that the city hall building is conservative in design, yet its internal design use of modernistic techniques is a representation of Houston embracing the new. Fox also cites Finger's work on the Houston Municipal airport as another public building exemplifying Finger's modernistic design.

Fox says Finger's firm was closed in 1970 following his death by his business partner George Rustay. However, the firm Rustay, Martin, and Vale continued for some time the architectural style that Finger's firm had pioneered before gradually shifting to the modern architectural styles of the time. Many of Finger's surviving buildings are now endangered, such as his home on Portland Place, or have been demolished, such as the Houston Turn-Verein. Fox believes that friendlier attitudes towards preservation in Houston that started in 1990s have helped protect Finger's buildings and encouraged their repurposing, such as Texas State Hotel in downtown Houston or the Levy Store on Main Street, which became the Commerce Building.

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**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**  
**ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Stephen Fox**

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**Transcribed by:** Michelle Kokes  
**Location:** Rice University

JL: Alright so it's about 9:30 right now November 2, 2012. I'm here at Rice University with Stephen Fox. We are going to be talking about Joseph Finger. First of all, can you start by just talking about your own professional background -- I guess your study of Houston architectural history?

SF: Sure, Stephen Fox I'm an architectural historian. I examined especially the architecture of Houston and Texas sort of American architecture in the nineteenth and twentieth century. That is how I became familiar with the work of Joseph Finger.

JL: Okay so we really, as a summary I guess -- who was Joseph Finger?

SF: Joseph Finger was an important commercial architect in Houston from the 1910s, when he began his practice in Houston, until his death in the early 1950s. He was especially known for his design of hotel buildings, retail buildings. He was Jewish and had many prominent Jewish clients in Houston. He designed Jewish houses of worship and other Jewish institutions.

JL: So his primary styles I guess the Art Deco, the Moderne style can you just talk about kind of the definitions in there: the Art Deco, the zigzagModernes the streamline Modernes and how they kind of pertain to Joseph Finger's work.

SF: Joseph Finger described himself in biographical materials as Austrian. He was born in the part of the Austro-Hungarian empire that is today is Poland. His professional education

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before coming to the United States is not entirely clear but, in the United States to which he immigrated as a young man, he worked first in New Orleans before coming to Houston in the 1908. He worked for various architects before starting his independent practice I think around 1914 and tended to work in what were the kind of prevailing architectural trends of the time. When he designed a social club that had been founded in the nineteenth century by Houston Germans, called the Turn-Verein, he described the architecture as growing from the Sezession, which had been the Viennese modern style at the beginning of the twentieth century. So it seemed clear from that reference that he was aware of these sort of progressive architectural trends in Europe even though much of his work in the United States in the 1910s and 1920s was fairly conservative architecturally and again in performance with prevailing trends. But the Turn-Verein, the building that he did as the Temple of Congregation of Israel in 1924, and such buildings as the A.C. Burton Chrysler Company [Sales and Service] building of 1929 in Houston all displayed sort of unconventional architectural tendencies that reflected his awareness of these sort of modernizing trends that architectural aesthetics of the 1920s. This grew into his sort of florescence as one of the early Houston interpreters of modernistic architecture, which is also sometimes called Art Deco and it has various other names which historians have tended to divide into two trends: The kind of Art Deco zig zag Moderne was the modernistic tendency of the late 1920s and early 1930s that often involved stylizations of geometric patterns and sometimes very effusive ornament that might have reflect its origins in classical architectural or in gothic architecture but were very abstracted. By the middle 1930's, the trend was to kind of simplification of zig zag Moderne Art Deco for a streamlined modernistic architecture which tended to involve sleek planes, an emphasis on horizontality and especially kind of horizontal speed lines a kind of modern replacement for classical molding that sought to emphasize the

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linearity of the buildings. JL: So I guess; how would you describe -- the kind of the he was part of the modern kind of the predominant style at the time -- but you also said he was a trend setter in that he was one of the first in Houston to be building in that style?

SF: Yes, the architects, such as Joseph Finger or Alfred C. Finn who was a contemporary of Finger's and I guess sort of a competitor he was one of Houston's other leading commercial architects, adapted to the sort of modernistic trend in the late 1920s and their retail building designs because this was a very fashionable new architectural style for people who were jaded by the various interpretations of historical styles, which had been very popular in the 1920s. This seemed like a kind of the latest version of that trend, which was to have kind of a modern historical style. They were particularly applied, I think, to retail shops as types of businesses that dealt in the latest modes, the latest fashions.

JL: So these historical styles are like the direct predecessor that is what came right before?

SF: Yes, that sort of the sort of familiar styles, Georgian, Tudor, Spanish they were all the styles that one particularly saw in residential architecture in the 1920s.

JL: Okay so what brought Joseph Finger to Houston? And when he got here, did he develop sort of a vision for the city and kind of how he saw it?

SF: I'm uncertain based on what I've read about his biography what precisely drew him to Houston. I suspect it was Houston's commercial prosperity. In New Orleans it was a city that had a well-established architectural community, and a city that tended to look to people with New Orleans' connections whereas Houston was sort of a city of opportunity. It was not quite so important where you came from or who you knew as your ability to demonstrate your skills professionally. Joseph Finger worked for a Dallas architect who had a branch office in Houston and then moved from there into a series of partnerships. Initially with an architect, for whom

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Joseph Finger was kind of the junior partner, but in the later 1910s and early 1920s with architects that he was either the equal or even the senior partner. I think establishing himself as kind of a trustworthy architect who commercial compliance again to various institutions. In addition to his work for Jewish religious bodies, he also designed a number of schools for the Houston Independent School District so he sought kind of a broad client base even though he was especially identified with commercial architectural.

JL: Did he, ---you mentioned he did a lot of work for the Jewish community and he was a member of Beth Israel – do we know anything more about his connection with the Jewish community or the Jewish communities connection to him the relationship?

SF: I don't know in detail. My assumption is that, again, Finger was someone who was probably very good at making friends with people, and I think one or two people that I've talked to that actually knew him talked about him as a very agreeable person and kind of eager to establish bonds of friendship. So I think that probably kind of his friendly personality along with his demonstrated professional skill made him well liked both by his fellow Jews but, also, kind of in the broader community. I would think especially his ability to do work outside Houston and to do what they did in the 1920s major buildings in such cities like Port Arthur, Lake Charles, Texarkana, Shreveport indicates the extent to which he was able to kind of build bonds of trust with people.

JL: Could you talk about his relationship with other architects at the time such as Alfred Finn?

SF: It's a little difficult to sometimes know, what, how architects got along. I would say that for the most part probably Finn and Finger were competitors except that they did collaborate on occasion they were co-architects of Jefferson Davis Hospital. When Finger got the job to design

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Houston City Hall there was also the change of mayoral administration and that sort of one occasion where any kind of controversy entered the public sphere. The mayor who had replaced the mayor who had originally hired Finger raised questions about Finger's qualifications. He sort of cast aspersions on the structural soundness of some of Finger's recent buildings, but Finger basically survived that. He did not get fired by the city council, and that particular mayor was then defeated by the mayor who he had defeated who had originally hired Finger so it seems like in the end Finger was able to prevail.

JL: How did Finger get -- what's the story of Finger getting to where he is asked to design the City Hall?

SF: Again because I don't know that much about Finger's personal life and personal relationships, I assume that it was through his performance on public jobs as I mentioned to you he designed a number of public schools in Houston in the 1920s for Houston Independent School District. He had clients who I think put a lot of trust in him. James M. West who was a lumberman, a cattleman, oilman, and banker for whom Joseph Finger designed one of the largest houses built in Houston in the 1920s but he did a lot of other buildings for James M. West. So if nothing else, I would say that it's again Finger's performance because I'm not really aware of his specific personal relationships with most of the people who hired him.

JL: How did the design of buildings like, especially, City Hall reflect his view on the city?

SF: My impression is that Finger sought to make his client's look good. I don't really know that he had a kind of specific interpretation of life in Houston. I would presume that he can subscribe, supported Houston's effort to represent itself as a progressive and city, prosperous city kind of open to entrepreneurship. With the City Hall it is a design that is basically conservative but at the same time he adopted the kind of sky scraper building type as a model for this public

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building even though it is only 10 stories high but that's still in the depression decade made it one of the tallest new buildings constructed in Houston during that decade. The building is faced with fossilized Texas limestone which during the depression can be considered a material of Texan identity. It is liberally decorated with iconographic graphic carving and also ornamental cast metal screens so it incorporates decoration much of which has kind of a civic theme to it. The interiors of the building (especially the public interiors) the entrance, lobby, the City Council Chamber the corridors and stairways connecting them are wonderful examples of modernistic design. So as conservative as the building is on the inside on the outside on the inside it was again sort of representing Houston as sort of a city that embraces the new. Again I think this sort of effort to strike a balance to sort of have the best of conservative stability aligned with forward look of Modernity was probably a way that Finger kind of sought to satisfy every interpretation.

JL: Can you talk a little bit about one of his other buildings the 1940 Air Terminal building down at Hobby Airport?

SF: Yes, again, I think it is indicative of Finger's skill in winning public commission. At the same time he was designing, having built the City Hall he was also commissioned to design the first purpose built airport terminal for Houston as well as the adjoining air plane hangar. The Houston Municipal airport terminal again exemplifies the sort of the kind of modernistic design formula the symmetrical building kind of pyramidal profiles sort of the steps up from its spread out wings to the control tower on top of the building. It is a building that is sort of solidly built but one that none the less presents this image of Houston as kind of a gateway to Houston. As kind of a modern city and that theme was further carried out in the detailing the hanger that adjoins the terminal.

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JL: So if I were to look through Joseph Finger's building on a timeline can one see a changing style a move in a certain direction?

SF: Yes and it is, again, the kind of basic course of American architecture from the 1910s to the early 1950's. So in the buildings of the 1910s and the 1920s you would see particularly for the commercial and institutional buildings the sort of brick buildings kind of buff brick or red brick with decorative detail that used to be referred to some historical period. Changing then in the 1930's well in the late 1920s to modernistic design and then by the mid 1930's to a more streamlined modernistic design. By the late 1940's and early 1950's, Finger's office was still kind of pursuing this streamlined modernistic design by which time it had it was beginning to be the design preference of old fashioned architects who and it was sort of under attack by a rising generation of modern architects who were very contentious what they saw as sort of a compromise that modernistic architecture had made with the more conventional historically based architecture fashioned in the 1920s. So I guess by the time he died Finger's buildings would have appeared from the state of the art point of view as being somewhat old fashioned or at least kind of representing a trend that was really at the end of its period of acceptability.

JL: So did he continue to design straight up to his death?

SF: Yes in the 1940's entered another partnership with a young architect called George Rustay and Rustay continued that architectural firm I think they dropped Finger's name after his death but that firm persisted until around 1970. Rustay, Martin, and Vale continued that kind of cycle as they... after Joseph Finger's death sort of adopted more modern expression but then you could chart the change over time in their work and again sort of reflecting the dominant trends at the time in American architecture.

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JL: And then my final question pertains to the preservation of Finger's buildings. I guess how has his buildings overall and are there currently any endangered Finger buildings?

SF: Well sadly the one that is particularly in danger that I can think of immediately is his own house which is on Portland Place. It was a duplex; it is interesting that Finger lived fairly modestly. He and his wife and their one son shared this duplex with Mrs. Finger's sister, although it's a very solidly built building it has really been neglected for 30 years so it's almost falling down. It is very sad to see that condition. I once spoke with Mrs. Finger and what I remember her making a point of was that she said, "Her husband's buildings were always very well constructed," so I think that has proved to be in their favor and certainly in the 1990's as Houston has entered into kind of a more preservation friendly attitude a number of Finger's buildings such as the Texas State Hotel in downtown Houston, the Levy Store on Main Street which became the Commerce Building, these buildings have been rehabilitated. I think some of Finger's buildings outside of Houston such as the McCartney Hotel in Texarkana seemed to be in a very sad state. But I guess one has trusted the fact that because of their good construction they can withstand a lot of neglect and abuse and therefore be candidates for rehabilitation.

JL: Real quick because it is a building I've been trying to find more about but it's been kind of difficult to. What happened with the Turn-Verein building?

SF: The Turn-Verein building the Turn-Verein in the early 1970's moved to Sharpstown into a very insignificant building. They own that property and basically let it fall into an extreme state of neglect. So when the property was finally sold it was in such bad condition that although some people bought it saying they were going to rehabilitate it they did not so it deteriorated further. When it was ultimately sold it was to a developer who wanted to build I think a

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pharmacy there. So it was demolished and it was very sad to kind of see its decline because it really sat vacant I would say for at least 15 years and just deteriorated.

JL: Okay that is all for today.

SF: It's good to meet you good luck on your project.

JL: Thank you very much.

End of interview

