

Dallas Landmark Commission Landmark Nomination Form

1. Name

historic: Alex W. Spence Junior High School

and/or common: Alex W. Spence Middle School Academy date: 1939, '66, '88

2. Location

address: 4001 Capitol Avenue

location/neighborhood:

blocks: 25/986 (2006)

survey: John Cole

tract size:

3. Current Zoning

4. Classification

Category ___ district <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) ___ structure ___ site ___ object	Ownership <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public ___ private ___ both Public Acquisition ___ in progress ___ being considered	Status <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied ___ unoccupied ___ work in progress Accessibility <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes:restricted ___ yes:unrestricted ___ no	Present Use ___ agricultural ___ commercial <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational ___ entertainment ___ government ___ industrial ___ military	___ museum ___ park ___ residence ___ religious ___ scientific ___ transportation ___ other,specify _____
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5. Ownership

Current Owner: DISD

Contact:

Phone:

Address:

6. Form Preparation

Date: March, 1996

Name & Title: Kate Singleton

Organization: City of Dallas

Contact: Kate Singleton

Phone: 670-5200

7. Representation on Existing Surveys

Alexander Survey (citywide) ___ local ___ state ___ national ___ National Register
 H.P.L. Survey (CBD) ___ A ___ B ___ C ___ D ___ Recorded TX Historic Ldmk
 Oak Cliff ___ TX Archaeological Ldmk
 Victorian Survey ___
 Dallas Historic Resources Survey, Phase ___ high ___ medium ___ low

For Office Use Only

Date Rec'd: _____ Survey Verified: Y N by: _____ Field Check by: _____ Petitions Needed: Y N

Nomination: Archaeological Site Structure(s) Structure & Site District

8. Historic Ownership

original owner: DISD

significant later owner(s):

9. Construction Dates

original: 1939

alterations/additions: 1966, 1988

10. Architect

original construction: Mark Lemmon

alterations/additions: Clutts and Parker, Dale Selzer

11. Site Features

natural:

urban design:

12. Physical Description

Condition, check one:

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

unaltered
 altered

Check one:

original site
 moved (date _____)

Describe present and original (if known) physical appearance. Include style(s) of architecture, current condition and relationship to surrounding fabric (structures, objects, etc.) elaborate on pertinent materials used and style(s) of architectural detailing, embellishments and site details.

Spence Junior High School, constructed in 1939, was designed by locally prominent architect Mark Lemmon. He was chosen as architect for this building at a school board meeting on July 19, 1938. (DISD Minutes July 19, 1938) This building, with its modern style was a change for Lemmon. Usually, his designs for such buildings were rooted in traditional styles executed with stunning details. (DMN Jan. 14, 1989) The contractor was Nathan Wohlfeld and millwork was provided by Clem Lumber Company (R.H. Clem owned Bishop Court). The brick was from the Ferris Brick Company and all the glass was supplied through United Glass and Mirror.

This building was Lemmon's recognition of emerging European modernism. This genre, emanating from Europe, began to influence American architectural styles in the 1920's. The revivalist styles that had been popular since World War I gave way to innovative European styles. Art Deco and Art Moderne became popular before World War II and the International Style caught on after the war. Stylistically, Spence Junior High School can be considered Art Deco.

Art Deco was the first the first widely popular style in the United States to break with the revivalist tradition represented by the Beaux Arts and period design. Art Deco takes its name from the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs and Industriels Modernes, which organized works of "new inspiration and real originality". (Poppeliers, p.39) It was a style that consciously strove for modernity and an artistic expression to complement the machine age. (Poppeliers, pp.38-39)

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Art Deco first came to Dallas on a large scale with the design and construction of the Centennial buildings at Fair Park in 1935-36. Mark Lemmon, as one of the Centennial architects, became fluent in the architectural vocabulary of this style. Specifically, he worked on the design of the Hall of State and the Dallas Museum of Natural History. His other outstanding building of this genre was the Cokesbury Bookstore, constructed in 1936-37 (demolished).

The "Art Deco Style" design of the school building is characterized by the following elements: vertical emphasis; simplified and streamlined form; highlights of stylized decoration, and low relief geometric decoration. At Spence, these characteristics are demonstrated by the use of some faced stone and anodized aluminum windows and doors; use of a planar stone as accents around the window and door openings, along the roof edges or parapets; brick used in a planar manner; aluminum signage mounted above the entry, and vertical windows with decorated spandrels connecting windows of adjacent levels.

Spence is typical of many public buildings of this style in the limited use of Art Deco elements. It has exterior stone at selected portions of the building mass: main entry and auditorium; stone coping at the top of the parapet, and limited stone ornamentation. The vertical element is a brick tower with ornamentation. The body of the building is clad in light brick which complements the color of the stone.

The school is a two story building which sits on a large expansive yard. The site is bounded by Capitol on the south, North Carroll on the east, Belmont on the north and North Peak on the west. The area surrounding the school is a mix of residential and commercial.

Like many of the schools of this era, Spence has a very functional floor plan. In a letter Mark Lemmon is told to "...confer freely with both Dr. N.R. Crozier, Superintendent and Mr. W.H. Freese, Maintenance Agent, with reference to certain standardized features to be incorporated into the building." (Letter in DISD Files) The main entrance is at the south east corner. The auditorium and cafeteria are on the west side of the building. A news report of the time described the building as "streamlined as the modern textbook." (DMN 2-2-40) The article further described the interior as having tile lined walls and extra wide corridors lined with lockers and recessed water fountains. The bandroom had an oak block floor and an acoustically treated ceiling. The building was equipped with a motion picture projection booth, library, wood working and metal shops, music and art rooms and a library. The building had a unique feature in that folding doors could be unlocked from a recess in the wall and corridors could be blocked off when necessary. (DMN 2-2-40)

The exterior of the building is a light tan brick, running bond pattern with large windows on prominent facades. The windows provide excellent natural light for most of the building. The structure of the building is steel frame with flat roofs throughout the complex. Cast stone coping, patterned brick work and metal accents adorn the building.

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The main entrance is at the southeast corner of the building. It is cast concrete section of the building which is two and a half stories tall. The main entrance faces south with three metal doors and a large one story bay window above the doors. The bay window is reminiscent of the bay windows at Woodrow Wilson High School designed by Lemmon and Roscoe DeWitt in 1927. There is a compounded metal surround around both the doors and bay windows. On either side of the entrance are attractive metal period wall lights. The school sign is above the entrance and spans the face of the building. It is in metal letters and in keeping with the architectural style. The south facade of the entrance a bay of three metal windows on the first and second floors. Each window has a compounded surround. On the east side of the entrance, there are five windows across on the upper and lower floors. They are the same as the ones on the east facade. The rest of the south facade has four bays of windows, outlined by compounded brick surrounds, with four windows each across the first and second floors. Between the first and second story windows is a decorative metal panel. At the west end of the south facade there is a large window again with a compounded brick surround. Set back from the plane of the south facade is another entrance with double doors, a large metal transom with decorative metal work and another large window. Forward from this entrance but still set back from the main facade is the auditorium entrance. This entrance is also cast concrete. There are three double doors each set in a compound surround. The doors are metal with decorative metal inset over the glass. Above each door is a decorative metal panel, then a large metal window with a balconet. On either side of the middle door are decorative metal wall lights. The cast concrete has three small decorative educational motifs above each door; there is a decorative floriated pattern at each corner also.

The east facade has four bays of windows, the same configuration as the south facade. There is also a large window at the end of the bays and an addition which extends east. The two story addition was completed in similar brick and with similar windows patterns. The gym extends from the north facade as do two other extensions. The gym has large evenly spaced metal windows. There is a one story classroom directly north of the gym. Continuing west along the north facade there are various openings including doors and windows. The cafeteria on the north west corner of the structure has evenly spaced metal windows with compounded brick surrounds on three sides. On the west facade there is a two and a half story brick tower that has decorative brick above a metal double door. This tower is at the rear of the auditorium. The rest of the west facade which is the auditorium, has evenly spaced windows and doors with the same compound brick surrounds.

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The building remains relatively intact. There is an addition on the north facade of the building which was done in 1963. It added an additional 2,570 square feet to the building. The architects were Clutts and Parker and J.O. Smith as contractor. (DISD Files) The 1988 addition to the east facade is well done echoing materials and window patterns. This addition was designed by Dale Selzer. In his report to the school board, he stated, "The exterior design approach has been to produce a new building element which is compatible in appearance and character with the original building. The new two story addition will be similar in scale and material to the original but will reflect the current concern for energy efficiency, including limited use of exterior glass." (Report to DISD) This addition also supplied a handicapped accessible elevator which eliminated renovations to the older building. Although some deterioration is evident, the building is in very good condition.

Architecturally, Alex Spence Junior High School represents a style of public buildings and a design phase of a locally prominent architect. Aside from the Centennial buildings at Fair Park, there are not many large Art Deco buildings in Dallas. This building also represents architect Mark Lemmon's stylistic departure from classical forms. His other outstanding Art Deco building, Cokesbury Books has been demolished.

13. Historical Significance

Statement of historical and cultural significance. Include: cultural influences, special events and important personages, influences on neighborhood, on the city, etc.

Spence Junior High was among the initial "Junior High" schools built by the Dallas Independent School District. The school was named after Alex W. Spence, an attorney who had served on the school board for twelve years including president of the board. The building was designed by locally prominent architect, Mark Lemmon. Like several of the schools built in Dallas during the Depression, some funding came from the Public Works Administration. (DISD Minutes June 28, 1938)

At the time this building was constructed, the Dallas school district had begun a program of building junior high schools. Although the trend for Junior High Schools had begun at the turn of the century, by the 1920's there were still only 25 in the United States. By the early 1930's, Dallas Board of Education had decided to institute the construction of two junior high schools. Construction of Spence, the third one, was begun in 1939 as part of this building program.

The California School System began to set the trends for education across the country in the 1920's. They had established separate schools for children in their early teen years, 12 to 14, which they called "Junior High Schools". Usually, the Junior High had grades seven and eight; and sometimes nine. The Dallas School Board decided to adopt the Junior High School plan in 1932. (Rumbley, 117-118) The principal chosen for the first school, James T. Whittlesey, went to California to study this education concept. Whittlesey returned saturated with information. The school board, which included Alex Spence as president, was so enthusiastic that they had two junior high schools constructed.

In 1939, construction was started on Alex W. Spence Junior High. This school was to serve what was then the north part of Dallas. Originally, the school was to be called North Dallas Junior High, then Rusk. Finally, at a school board meeting on October 11, 1938, Mrs. Zumwalt made a motion to name the school after Alex Spence. The board voted unanimously in favor of the motion. (DISD Minutes October 11, 1938) It was named for Alex Spence who died in 1934 at the age of 41. Spence was president of the School Board when junior high schools were being discussed and he was immensely interested in the concept.

Alexander White Spence was born in Dallas. His father was Wendel Spence, a local lawyer. Alex Spence attended Central High School (Crozier Tech). He received his Bachelor of Arts, Phi Beta Kappa, from the University of Texas at Austin. Spence received his law degree from Columbia University in New York. During World War I, Spence was a staff captain in the army. On his return he joined his father's law firm, Smithdeal, Shook, Spence and Bowyer.

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Spence was very active in civic affairs effecting Dallas. In 1911 as a high school debater, Spence made a speech so important for its time that the Dallas News reprinted it. The speech described the tribulations of African-Americans, their contributions and the linked destiny of whites and African-Americans. This interest in racial issues continued throughout his life. Spence became a member of the Dallas School Board in 1921. While serving on the Board he worked to help under-privileged children. An editorial in the Dallas Times Herald after his death stated that Spence always endeavored to see that African-Americans ... "obtained a square deal. His ideal was a school system that would provide training in good citizenship for youngsters of all races and classes." (DTH June 14, 1934) Another article stated that, "he did much Negro welfare work and took unusual interest in Dallas colored schools". (DTH 6-15-34) Spence was also active in the Southern Interracial Commission.

According to Dr. Crozier, the school superintendent, Spence was interested in curriculum development and personnel. He worked to establish public health education in schools, the work-study-play plan, the democratization of athletics, the introduction of the junior high system, higher standards of scholarship and adequate pay for teachers. (DMN 6-15-34) He was vice president of the school board from 1926 to 1932 when junior high school system was being discussed. Spence was president of the school board from 1932 to 1934 when the junior high program was initially implemented. (Schiebel, pp. 232-235)

Aside from his work with the school board and in racial issues, Spence also taught adult classes in international relations at the Dallas Civic Federation. He was interested in social and economic trends as well as international affairs.

When he died June 14, 1934, Spence was well respected in the city. He was praised as being responsible for the quality and efficiency of the school system. (DTH 6-15-34) His funeral was attended by many civic leaders including Dr. Umphrey Lee, Louis Lefkowitz, A.V. Cockrell, Sam and Alex Acheson. The newspaper articles announcing his death indicated that "invitations have been extended his Dallas Negro friends to attend the funeral." (DTH 6-15-34, DMN 6-15-34) Flags at the local schools were flown at half mast. A plaque in the hall of the school describes Spence as: "Gentleman, Patriot, Scholar. The short years of his life were dedicated to the children of Dallas and their teachers in the cause of public education, to breaking through the barriers which divide the races of men, to building understanding among peoples of the earth."

Alex W. Spence was the third Junior High School to be constructed under the school board's plan. Dr. Crozier was superintendent and Dr. D.W. Carter was president of the school board. Other members of the board included Mrs. W.P. Zumwalt, C.M. Moore, Mrs. T.A. Waggoner, Fred Danford, L.O. Donald, Gabe Allen and Dan D. Rogers.

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This school was built on what was part of the original John Cole survey. Cole and his sons had received this property as land grants made by the state of Texas. (McDonald, p.202) The city of Dallas purchased this property from Cora Cole in August of 1938.

The school board had begun searching for sites for the three junior high schools in 1931. The first two, J.L. Long and Boude Storey, were chosen early. Apparently, the city negotiated with the Cole estate on various pieces of property for two years before acquiring the Spence site. The city paid \$26,775 for 11.9 acres. This area developed primarily after 1910 with mostly modest homes.

Spence is tied to Parkland Hospital in an interesting way. Parkland was looking for a temporary site for its medical school, Southwestern Medical in the early 1940's. On July 1, 1943, the first classes were held at Spence. The classes moved soon afterward.

By the 1960's this working class area had become culturally and racially mixed. Spence Junior High began to have a reputation as a "tough kids" school because of the mix of whites, Hispanics, American Indians and African-Americans. (DTH 3-26-69) In 1969, the school board authorized the DISD staff to work with University of Texas Education Technical Assistance Center to develop a proposal to deal with the problems of the changing school population and the diversity of cultures. They received a U.S. Department of Education grant to develop a pilot program. the program was to be used at Spence and North Dallas High School. It was called, "Coping with Problems Posed by Desegregation through Increased Leadership Development and Increased School/Community Involvement". The program taught leadership skills to teachers, counselors and community members. (DISD Minutes March 26, 1969)

By the early 1970's, innovative programs were being instituted. Spence had a Mariachi program, possibly the only one in the United States. Students could learn how to play and sing traditional Mariachi music. The Mariachi teachers believed this was the first time this type of music, usually only an oral tradition was written down. (DTH 4-27-73)

In 1974, Reverend Zan Holmes began working in this neighborhood as the leader of the Tri-Ethnic Committee. This group used Spence for its meetings which brought together whites, African-Americans and Hispanics to discuss community issues.

In 1977, Spence became a Middle School. A Talented and Gifted School has also been incorporated into Spence, virtually a school within a school. This combination has worked very well.

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In the 1980's Spence students, teachers and programs have won awards and have been recognized in Dallas and around the country. In 1980 at the ground breaking for the Dallas Museum of Art, Van Bui, a Spence art student, spoke along with Mrs. Alex Spence, a long time Museum trustee. In 1985 Dennis Gonzales, director of the Mariachi ensemble at Spence, received rave reviews for Anthem Suite jazz album. That same year art work from Spence decorated the halls of the new outpatient clinic and bed tower at Parkland hospital. The Sesquicentennial Art and Essay competition had winners from Spence. Then Vice-President Bush attended the program honoring the winners.

In 1988, the Women's Guild of Dallas Easter Seals chose the artwork of several Dallas students to be auctioned at a fund raiser. Teacher Teri Duke's student Viengked Sengprachanh had artwork chosen for the fund raiser. In 1989, Teri Duke and student Ramona Orta went to Japan. They won a competition called Japan Trail '89 sponsored by the Asia Society and TDK Corporation. Lily Dam, an ESL teacher, was chosen as one of 20 to participate in a conference at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. by the State Department Bureau of Refugee Programs.

Melquiades Canizales, a Spence student, won a billboard contest sponsored by Champs Sports. The billboard designed by Canizales was displayed at 15 locations around Dallas. The prize was \$10,000 in sports equipment for the school. Danny Barentine, the athletic director for Spence, is the first Texan to be picked to run in the 1996 Olympic Torch Relay. Barentine was nominated by student Josefina Perez. She wrote an essay about Barentine which won him the privilege of carrying the Olympic Torch. (DMN Feb. 1996)

Mark Lemmon who designed the Art Deco Style Spence was hired by the School District as an architectural consultant. He was born in Gainesville, Texas and received degrees from the University of Texas and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He spent 18 months in France during World War I. He was enthralled with French architecture and translated that love into his own designs. While in New York, he worked on Grand Central Station and the Commodore and Biltmore Hotels. (DTH 1-16-59) Lemmon was one of Centennial architects who, under George Dahl's guidance, designed the buildings at Fair Park. A poll of Dallas architects taken in 1940 by Architectural Record, cites nine outstanding contemporary buildings-four were designed by Lemmon including Spence Junior High. (DMN 1-14-89)

Lemmon was a master at historical architecture. His best examples of this genre includes Perkins Chapel at SMU, an excellent example of classic Georgian Architecture; Highland Park Methodist with its Gothic details; Highland Park Presbyterian, and Third Church of the Christ Scientist.

Lemmon also designed churches in Galveston, Houston, Tyler and San Angelo. In Dallas, he designed Tower Petroleum Building, Southland Center, Corrigan Tower, the Federal Center,

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Cokesbury Book Store (demolished), Woodrow Wilson High School, Braniff Operations Base, and several residences. The Southland Center was the tallest building west of the Mississippi when it was constructed in 1958. (Prairie's Yield, p.46) He was also one of the Centennial architects which included Ralph Bryan; DeWitt and Washburn; Flint and Broad; Fooshee and Cheek; T.J. Galbraith, Anton Korn, Walter Sharp; A.E. Thomas, and H.B. Thompson. Lemmon helped design the Hall of State and the Museum of Natural History at Fair Park. (Prairie's Yield, p.39) He first used a more modern architectural style, Art Deco, while working on the Centennial Buildings. He was consulting architect for the Dallas Independent School District, the University of Texas, and Southern Methodist University.

Spence Junior High School, one of the first Junior High Schools, represented a new educational trend for Dallas. Designed by locally prominent architect, Mark Lemmon, it is one of his few remaining modern style buildings.

14. Bibliography

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