

REPUBLIC NATIONAL BANK

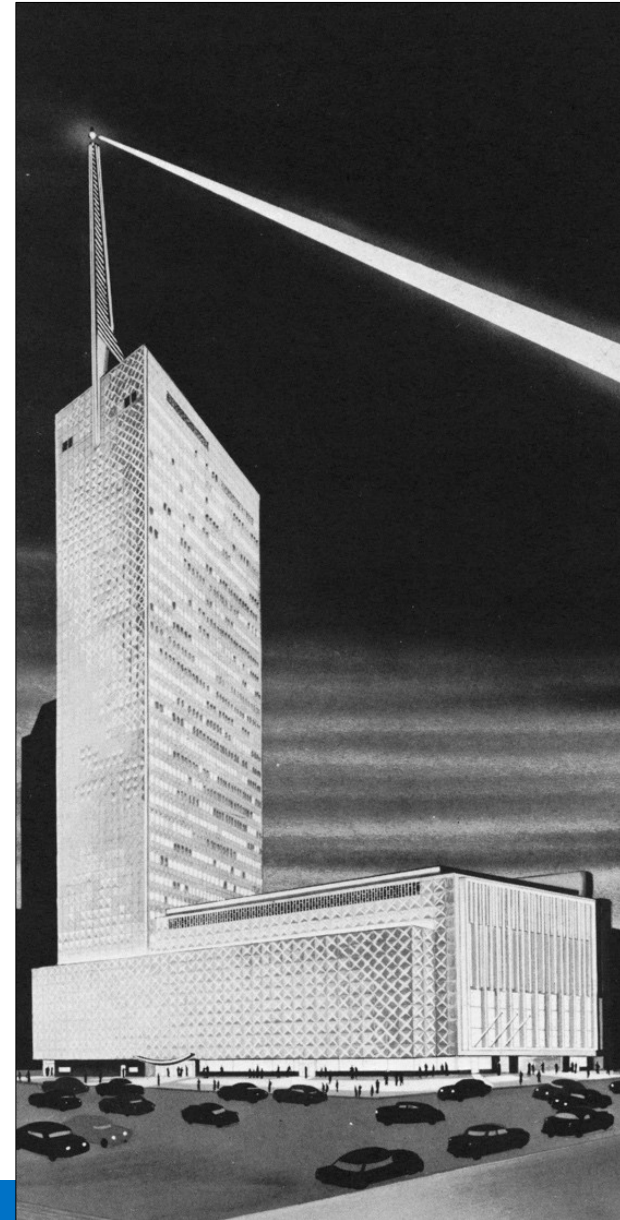
INTRODUCTION

The Republic National Bank Building, located in the heart of downtown Dallas, has a compelling legacy in advancing the skyline of Dallas and on the city's status as the financial center in Texas. Known today as the Republic Center, the Republic National Bank Building is a unique example of rich architectural advancements and design.

The 36-story building served as the headquarters for the Republic National Bank upon its completion in 1954 and instantly became a Dallas landmark. It was also the first significant office building to be completed after the Second World War in downtown Dallas. Its height has earned it the titles of “tallest building in Dallas” and “tallest building west of the Mississippi River.” The gentle setback of the building's design provided a pedestrian feel along the street.

According to David Dillon, award-winning former architecture critic for the Dallas Morning News, the Republic National Bank Building was considered a ‘prototypical fifties building,’ rising straight from the street to a flat top with minimalistic decoration. The distinct architectural style and form drove other banking institutions across Texas to follow suit with their own high-quality, modern, high-rise buildings. The building was one of the first in the United States to specifically utilize aluminum cladding, with most of the façade comprised of aluminum panels that remain intact today. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005 and designated a Dallas Landmark in 2004.

Figure 1 - Rendering of Republic National Bank Building



THE ARCHITECTS

In 1949 Republic National Bank hired Harrison & Abramovitz out of New York City, along with local Dallas architects Gill & Harrell, to design its new bank headquarters. Harrison and Abramovitz was a growing and visionary architecture firm out of New York and active from 1941 through 1976. This firm is best known for corporate buildings and towers throughout the US. They produced primarily modern designs in the rational and straightforward manner of the International Style.

The firm's first significant commission was the United Nations Building in New York City, completed in 1952. Another notable commission was the Alcoa Building in Pittsburgh, designed in 1950 and completed in 1953, which introduced a new design approach using stamped aluminum panel cladding and aluminum structural elements. These two buildings served concurrent design precedents for the Republic National Bank Building. Republic National Bank remains the only building west of the Mississippi designed by Harrison and Abramovitz. It continues to be an iconic part of their national portfolio of works that influenced the next generation of mid-to-high-rise buildings in Texas and beyond.

George Harrell FAIA began his practice in New York City, moving south while stationed as a navigation instructor at the Dallas Naval Air Station. Harrell maintained a private practice in Dallas until 1950 when he became a partner in Gill and Harrell, Architects and was selected as the associate architect for the Republic National Bank project. In 1956 he established the more prestigious Harrell and Hamilton firm. Harrell's experience with the Republic National Bank Building informed many of his well-known later building designs, particularly his banks.

When the Republic National Bank later sought to reclaim the "Tallest-In-Dallas" title, Harrell and Hamilton were selected to design two successive additions to the original high-rise in 1965 and 1981. Harrell would go on to serve as president of the Dallas chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the Texas Society of Architects, director of the Texas Research League and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, and chairman of the City of Dallas Urban Task Force.

Harrell and Hamilton eventually became Omniplan, which continues today and was honored by the Texas Society of Architects in 2000 with the Architecture Firm Award, the highest honor the Society can bestow on a firm. Omniplan and its predecessors have collectively been awarded 87 design awards, including five Texas Society of Architects 25-Year Awards. In 2003, Omniplan was presented with the Pinnacle Award and was named Firm of the Year by the International Interior Design Association.



Figure 2 -
George Harrell FAIA

"The building is a careful interpretation of what its owners wished to accomplish, both as to usage and philosophy. In conforming both to the spirit and letter of Dallas' progressive zoning ordinances, it is a positive step toward a more beautiful and more livable city of the future. It provides more air and more light and better facilities for the comfort and convenience of thousands of people who work in it, and in this way and many others is a good 'citizen' of the community."

**George Harrell, FAIA, Gill and Harrell,
Associate Architects for Republic National Bank**

BANKING AS A “COMPETITIVE” BUILDING TYPE

The decision in 1914 to locate a branch of the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas, combined with the Texas Oil Boom of the 1920s and 1930s, made Dallas one of the most influential banking centers in the nation. It was during this time of prominence and prosperity that Republic National Bank was founded.

The bank built its first headquarters in 1926 on Main Street in Dallas in the Neoclassical style, the predominant style in the banking industry at the time. Known as the Davis Building today, this was one of Dallas's earliest high-rise bank buildings. With its cupola, the building was slightly taller than its next-door neighbor and competitor, First National Bank.

Construction in Dallas' central business district in the 1930s stalled following the Great Depression. With shortages of construction materials during the Second World War, the Mercantile National Bank Building became the only bank building constructed during the war. Its modernistic clock spire surpassed the 1926 Republic National Bank (Davis) Building to become the tallest building in Dallas. The Mercantile National Bank Building's construction marked the start of a new era for bank building design in Dallas, where the height and modern architectural style representing optimism for the future became the norm in bank building design.

By 1948 Republic National Bank had become the largest bank in Texas. By the early 1950s, Republic had grown to a 60-million-dollar company. It had outgrown its Main Street office tower and desired a new, cutting-edge modern high-rise for its headquarters.



Figure 3 - Dallas 1957 Aerial Downtown with Republic Tower on Right

The Republic National Bank Building was completed in 1954, during continued competition between banking institutions to build the tallest building. Bank headquarters at the time were perceived to indicate the banks' stability, prosperity, and permanence. The buildings' height and choices of sophisticated design materials played an essential role in the ongoing competition to build taller, more opulent buildings. This competitive banking environment, alongside the Federal Reserve Branch, firmly established Dallas as a banking capital in Texas.

“For years, the powers-that-be seemed overly concerned with the “tallest” building thing and engaged in architectural pissing contests for years. For years, the powers-that-be seemed overly concerned with the “tallest” building thing and engaged in architectural pissing contests for years. For years, the powers-that-be seemed overly concerned with the “tallest” building thing and engaged in architectural pissing contests for years.”

- Paula Bosse, FlashBackDallas.com

HIGH-RISE MODERNISM IN DALLAS

The completion of the Magnolia Lounge within Dallas' Fair Park for the Centennial Exposition in 1936 introduced the International Style to Texas. It was designed by Architect William Lescaze, best known for designing, in conjunction with George Howe, the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society Building, or PSFS (1931–32), which introduced the International Style of high-rise architecture into the United States.

The completion of the Mercantile National Bank Building in 1943 gave Dallas its first high-rise building in the modern style. Conventional brick, stone, and marble cladding covered the steel structure of this 31-story tower. From its roof rose an illuminated weather beacon that flashed different colors depending on the weather. It was the only skyscraper built in Dallas during the Second World War and remained the tallest until the completion of the Republic National Bank Building in 1954.

The Republic National Bank Building surpassed the Mercantile National Bank Building in both height and adoption of the International Style. The building's strong verticality, open plan format, modern building materials, and modern systems heralded a new era in high-rise structure and bank architecture in the Southwest. Though the First National Bank Building would surpass it in height a decade later, the completion of the Republic National Bank Building was the start of the high-rise boom that created the lofty skylines of Dallas, Houston, and other Texas cities.



Figure 4 – Nighttime view of Republic National Bank from the south with Mercantile Bank in the foreground

REPUBLIC NATIONAL BANK BUILDING

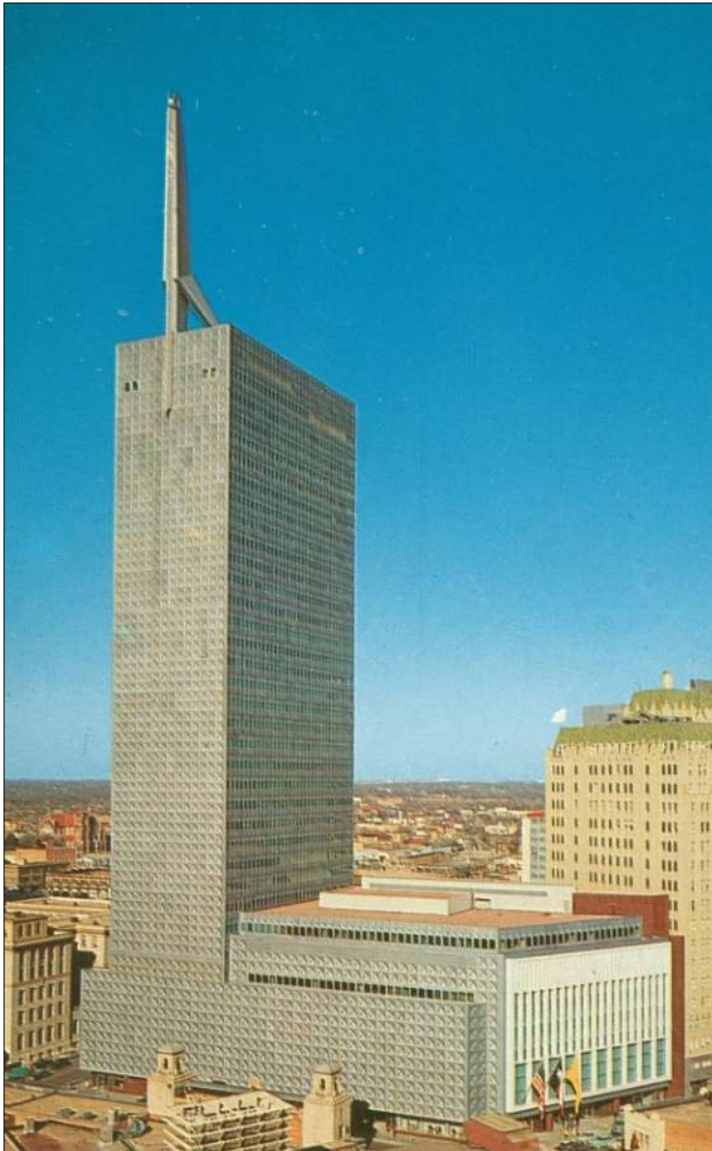


Figure 5 - Building as seen from the Southwest in 1955

As the first significant postwar commercial building to be built in downtown Dallas, the Republic National Bank Building had to be an iconic work of art and architectural landmark to surpass its competitors. At 598 feet in height with the spire, the then 25-million-dollar Republic National Bank Building was 53 feet taller than its competitor and the tallest building in the Southwest in the 1950s.

The original building comprises two masses - an eight-story banking lobby as part of a base and a 36-story office tower with four basement levels. The building forms reflected the programmatic needs of the bank, with large, open banking floors in the first eight levels accommodating the banking lobby, customer services, bank offices, an auditorium, and flexible lease space giving room for expansion of the bank's offices. The street-level facades allowed for the inclusion of retail and other amenities for the bank customers. The site accommodated drive-in and walk-up banking tellers at the corner of Bryan and St. Paul Streets and four drive-up tellers in the basement that were accessible from the streets above.

The center's overall exterior design embraces modern materials and technologies while employing a modern design aesthetic utilizing traditional materials at the pedestrian level. The interior likewise embraces modern aesthetics, incorporating materials traditionally found in affluent banking establishments such as marble, gold, teak, and wood paneling. The entire collection of materials works harmoniously to complete an image of opulence and progress.

With its red, white, and blue lights made of "Lumenarc" tubing - "a newly-developed, super-brilliant luminous tube" - and topped with a half-billion candle-power beacon that was reportedly visible up to 120 miles away, the Republic National Bank Building overshadowed the Mercantile National Bank's clock and weather spire to become the most recognizable building on the Dallas skyline, a status it still holds today.

EXTERIOR FAÇADE MATERIALS

The Building fenestrations consist of a regular pattern of bands of single-pane, operable casement windows, except for the Pacific Avenue façade which contains a series of evenly distributed single-hung aluminum windows surrounded by a framework of decorative marble panels which provides visual relief to the building and orients the visitor to the original main building lobby. The original lobby entry to the tower was located at the corner of Ervay and Bryan Streets, featuring a revolving door and storefront windows.

Along Pacific Avenue, a considerable amount of storefront glazing on the first two floors of the Pacific Avenue façade at the lobby initially allowed pedestrians a view into the modern interiors of the bank. The exterior of the 8-story section along Pacific Avenue, which served as the main pedestrian entrance, used white Cherokee Georgia Marble to clad the façade and frame the glazing. Nero Nube and Calcata Statuary Golden Vein Marble wrapped the columns outside and inside. At street level, a series of glass and aluminum revolving doors provided access to the lobby.

The Ervay façade is almost entirely devoid of windows above street level. At street level, storefront windows offer views into retail spaces. Windows are set upon a granite base. An original, large decorative ‘eyebrow’ marquee accents this primary entry point.

The Bryan Street façade features the building’s typical historic fenestration on the upper floors and modern street-level storefronts matching those on the remainder of the building — the easternmost and southernmost façades of the 36-story high-rise tower feature typical fenestration and details.

The Ervay Street side of the tower features the building’s most notable architectural element, a large aluminum-clad spire at the top. The spire’s form represents the Republic star, with the central two vertices bending backward while the lower vertex engages the face of the tower’s top seven floors. The final form resembles the shape of a

rocket set to launch, a novel and newsworthy occurrence in the US during the 1950s.



*Figure 6 - Embossed Exterior Panels became the bank’s iconic logo
Looking up toward the spire along Ervay Street.*

INTERIOR DESIGN AND MATERIALS

The interior of the 1954 building expressed the opulence that reflects a prosperous institution while incorporating modern designs inspiring cultural and technological progress. The opulent interior had the largest unobstructed banking area in the world, with expanses of polished wood, white marble, and gold leaf. The building's dazzling opening drew national attention, with Life Magazine sending a photographer to capture its splendor in a feature article two months after the opening.

The building featured an expansive open lobby, a two-story teller area, the trendy women's banking center, and the modern conveniences of drive-up tellers at the street and basement levels. In addition, the ground floor provided an arcade of retail stores and other services to customers, an early version of a genuine modern mixed-use center.

The well-appointed main banking floor on the second floor included a linear marble and glass-fronted tellers' counter. The creamy white marble along the tellers' counter had grey, black, and gold veining. Marble window surrounds and sills and marble-wrapped columns adorned the main banking floor's street-side seating area. The terrazzo floor included aluminum and gold accents with the Republic Star Logo incorporated into the chessboard-patterned floor, among many other finishes.

The acoustical ceiling above reflected a similar chessboard pattern. Circular air vents incorporated lighting, while fluorescent lights sat within the design. These are no longer present, but the more opulent gold leaf inlaid 333' long serpentine balcony of the third floor is still intact. This balcony pushed the edge of the third-floor opening over the main banking floor. An extra touch was an ebonized teak rail that snaked along the entirety of the golden balcony. Another focal point of the main lobby was a circular opening with four escalators ascending to the main banking floor.



Figure 7 - Top: Main Banking Floor with gold leaf serpentine balcony
Bottom Left: Bank staff with Republic Star Logo uniforms.
Bottom Right: Ornate Terrazzo Flooring with Republic Star Logo

"Dazzler for Dallas: Its new bank is huge, handsome, and full of gold."
- The building was featured in Life Magazine on February 28, 1955.

DALLAS' BEAMING TOWER

Like Gotham's "bat signal", Dallas had its own incredibly powerful beacon spotlight courtesy of the Republic National Bank Building. The top of the Republic National Bank Building's beaming spire at 598 feet high topped the Mercantile National Bank Building by 53 feet and surpassed other buildings in Houston and Kansas City by more than 100 feet.

According to a December 1, 1954, Life Magazine article on the opening, the ornamental tower had 2 miles of Lumenarc, a specialty neon-like tubing, in red, white, and blue. The beacon was at the tower's pinnacle, sitting atop the iconic 150-foot-tall rocket allowing the newest skyscraper to outshine the Mercantile Bank's weather antenna two blocks away.

The beacon's five-foot diameter lens was designed, manufactured, and installed by the Federal Sign Company of Texas and housed a mercury lamp retrofitted to a military searchlight shell. At half a billion candlepower, rotating 12 times per minute, the beacon was visible for 120 miles and only limited by the earth's curvature. The tower's height was thought to be determined by this unique spotlight or the fixed directional beacon pointed at Love Field. The FAA approved such lights at 598 feet elevation; if the top of the spire were above 600, they would have had to raise the instrument ceiling at Love Field 100 feet higher.

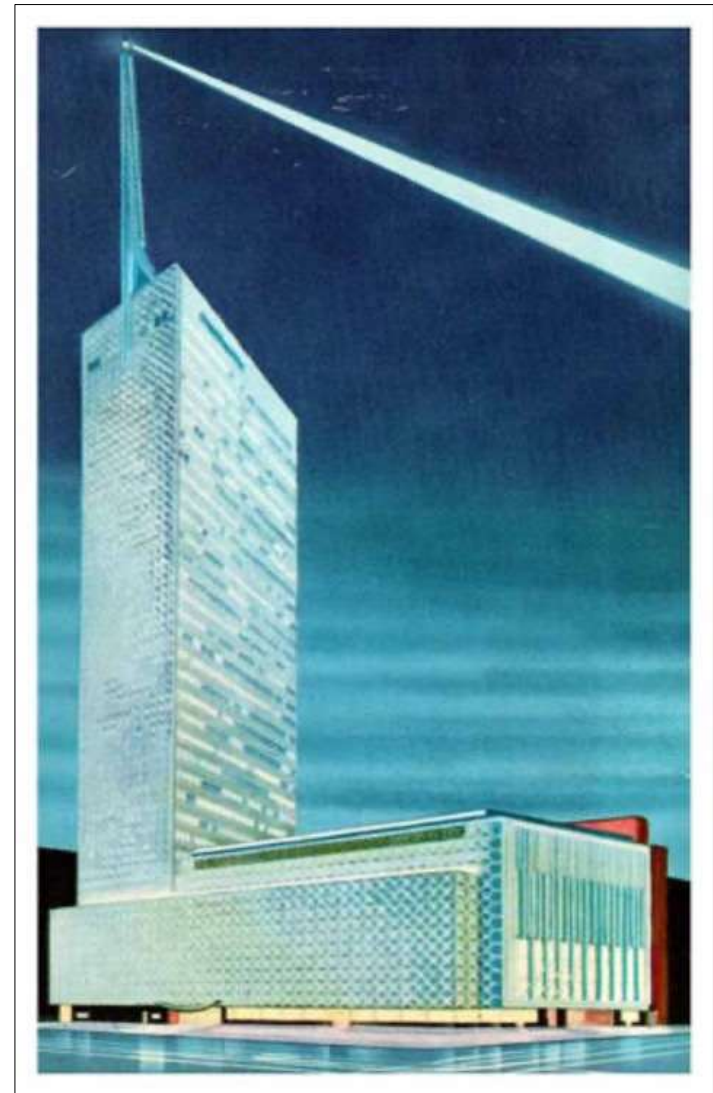


Figure 8 –CurtTeichColor© Art Curation Vintage Postcard of Republic National Bank Building

REPUBLIC TOWER II ADDITION (1965)

A 52-story addition, called Republic Tower II, was later constructed at the northeast corner of the site; the grand opening was held in January 1965. This second tower had a ground floor base aligned with the original eight-story base of the 1954 Bank Building. Matching aluminum panels were used on the new tower, blending the addition with the original building into a cohesive office complex with different masses and heights. The lower levels were intertwined with the interior lobby and corridors. With the completion of Republic Tower II, the Republic complex occupied three-fourths of the city block and contained 1,700,000 square feet of banking and office space. The architects for this new tower were Harrell and Hamilton of Dallas.

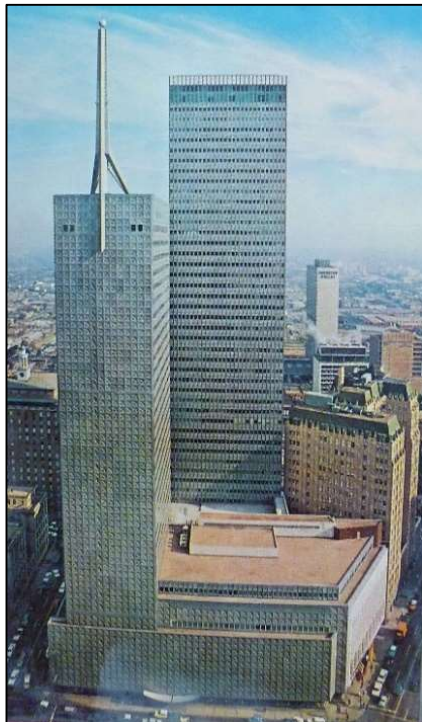


Figure 9 - 1965 Addition of Second Tower on the right

REPUBLIC TOWER III ADDITION (1981)

In 1978, the Medical Arts Building, the last remaining structure on the block not associated with the Republic National Bank complex, was demolished, and a new 8-story addition was built. The addition was designed to complement and connect with the existing 1954 and 1965 buildings. This addition provided the complex with added lobby and office spaces and connected to the Dallas Pedestrian Network retail concourse below. Harrell and Hamilton's firm, later renamed Omniplan, continued to be the Dallas-based architect for this addition. With this addition, the Republic National Bank complex now occupies the entire downtown block.



Figure 10 - 1981 Addition in the foreground completing the block viewed from Pacific Avenue and St Paul Street



REPUBLIC CENTER COMPLEX IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

In 1985, Republic National Bank, which had since been renamed Republic Bank and was one of the largest banks in the southwest, planned for a 60-story building across the street. However, the project was terminated in 1987 when rival InterFirst Corporation acquired the bank, and most tenants left the Republic Bank complex.

The Republic Bank complex was closed in the mid-1990s to allow for the building to be renovated and restored, which included rehabilitating the interior public spaces, removal of identified hazardous materials, including asbestos which was common in mid-century buildings, and upgrading the building to create a state-of-the-art facility which was completed in 2000.

Much of the bank-specific infrastructure, such as conveying systems and armored-car areas, has been removed or abandoned. However, the main lobby and banking space remain spatially intact, with the serpentine balcony and marble details still in place. The circular stair was retained in future renovations, but an elevator tower has replaced the escalators for accessibility. The Republic Center's exterior changes have been limited to storefront and entry door changes and the loss of the drive-in teller areas. The exterior was restored while preserving much of the original façade, associated materials, and iconic towers.

Figure 11 - Republic Center viewed Today from Ervay Street and Pacific Avenue - Photograph Taken by AIA Dallas on May 18, 2023

AWARD-WINNING ICONIC LANDMARK

The Republic National Bank Building, known today as Republic Center, still stands as a dramatic icon in Dallas. The original 1953 Republic National Bank building remains the 11th tallest building in Dallas today. It retains a remarkably high degree of integrity in its design, materials, skill craft, feeling, location, setting, and association with downtown Dallas. The building exterior is preserved and continues to shape the Dallas skyline, with its unique materials and features and its influence on architecture over time.

The Republic National Bank Building received the 25-Year Award from AIA Dallas in 1993, the Citation Award from AIA Dallas in 1981, the Merit Award from Texas Society of Architects in 1977, and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2005 and designated as a Dallas Landmark in 2004.

While no longer serving as the headquarters of an active bank, the original building and its associated additions continue to attract tenants for its residential and commercial office spaces. The city-block complex is part of a larger downtown urban fabric with pedestrian connections to adjacent buildings and other award-winning projects, including Pacific Plaza Park and Thanksgiving Plaza. In essence, Republic Center will continue to endure and serve as a highly-identifiable landmarked icon that forged the then-next generation of buildings in Dallas in the mid-century and will continue to be an integral part of downtown Dallas.



Figure 12 - Republic Center complex today viewed from Pacific Plaza Park

DESIGN TEAM

Architects

Harrison & Abramovitz,
Gill & Harrell

Structural Engineers

Edwards & Hjorth

Foundation Engineers

Moran, Proctor, Freeman & Meuser

Mechanical Engineers

Jaros, Blum & Bolles

Electrical Engineers

Zumwalt & Vinter

PHOTO SOURCES

Figure 1 - Rendering of Republic National Bank Building
Image Source - flashbackdallas.com

Figure 2 - George Harrell FAIA
Photo source NCModernist.org/Harrell.htm

Figure 3 - Dallas 1957 Aerial Downtown with Republic Tower on Right Side. Photo credit: UTA Digital Library Gallery
library.uta.edu/digitalgallery/img/10005410
Creator: Squire Haskins Photography, Inc. (Photographer)

Figure 4 - Photos by Joe Scherschel for Life Magazine in 1955

Figure 5 - Building as seen from the South in 1955 – Photo Source
Texacolor Card and Novelty Co., Dallas, Texas

Figure 6 - Embossed Exterior Panels became the bank's iconic logo –
Photo source David-ilzhoeter.pixels.com

Figure 7 - Top: Main Banking Floor with gold leaf serpentine balcony
Bottom Left: Bank staff with Republic Star Logo uniforms.
Bottom Right: Ornate Terrazzo Flooring with Republic Star Logo
Photos Source: Life Magazine, February 28, 1955

Figure 8 –CurtTeichColor© Art Curation Vintage Postcard of Republic
National Bank Building - photo source ebay.com

Figure 9 - 1965 Addition of Second Tower on the right. Vintage postcard –
Photo source flashbackdallas.com

Figure 10 – Contemporary photograph. 1981 Addition in the foreground
completing the block – Photo source squarefoot.com

Figure 11 -. Republic Center viewed from Pacific Avenue & Ervay Street –
Photo by AIA Dallas taken on May 18, 2023

Figure 12 - Contemporary photograph. Republic Center complex today
viewed from Pacific Plaza Park – Photo source republiccenter.com