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Seaholm Plant
Austin, Travis County, Texas

Summary

Seaholm Plant, designed by the nationally recognized Kansas City, Missouri, engineering firm of Burns & McDonnell, was built in two phases in 1950 and 1955. Originally referred to as "Power Plant No. 2" in the 1949 construction documents, Seaholm Plant was dedicated posthumously on June 2, 1960, to Walter E. Seaholm, a prominent figure in the administration of Austin's municipal utilities from the 1920s until the mid-1950s. Seaholm Plant is a wonderful example of Burns & McDonnell's Art Deco style, sharing many design elements with their other municipal waterworks and powerhouses of the 1930s through 1950s. As was common with Burns & McDonnell designs, great attention was paid to the massing, scaling, and detailing of Seaholm, but it was unique in its solid concrete construction; all prior Burns & McDonnell plants were clad in brick even if they had a concrete structural frame (and most were steel). Seaholm is nominated on the local level under National Register Criterion "C" as an engineering work embodying "distinctive characteristics of a type" and possessing "high artistic value."

Electric power arrived in Austin in 1893, and the city has owned its own generation and distribution system ever since.¹¹ In 1927, however, municipal ownership of the power plant was jeopardized when Texas Power and Light Company (TP+L) made a bid to purchase Austin's municipal utility, claiming they could operate it more cheaply than the city. Walter E. Seaholm, working as Superintendent of the Electric Department (1922-1933), proved the TP+L engineers wrong by demonstrating more economical operation of the plant than the engineers thought possible, thus ending TP+L's bid to purchase the municipal utility.¹² The dedication plaque on Seaholm's east entry acknowledges Walter E. Seaholm's important role in the "preservation of this city's ownership of its electrical system...."

At the time Burns & McDonnell was commissioned to design Seaholm Plant, Walter E. Seaholm was serving as Austin's Director of Utilities (1945-1950), and during the second phase he was the City Manager (1950-1955). He had also served the city as the Director of Utilities from 1934 until 1942 and stepped up as the Acting City Manager from 1942 until 1945 while Gupton Morgan (appointed) was called to duty in World War II. In addition to Walter E. Seaholm's 1927 stand against TP+L, he also deserves recognition for his ingenuity during the Colorado River flood in June, 1935, which knocked out the city's power and drinking water. He obtained power by patching into TP+L's system and also established an emergency drinking water pump.¹³

Walter E. Seaholm graduated from The University of Texas at Austin in 1920 with an electrical engineering degree after World War I interrupted his studies. He had two sisters and was married, but had no children. Seaholm was extremely active in the community, not only as an appointed city official, but also as the

¹¹ "Municipal Power Plant Serves Double Purpose," *Austin American-Statesman* (29 January 1958).

¹² "Seaholm Previously Victorious," *Austin American-Statesman* (26 January 1955).

¹³ "Power Man Seaholm Never Blew a Fuse," *Austin American-Statesman* (25 April 1948).

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President of the Texas Society of Professional Engineers, Ex-Students Association of UT, Kiwanis Club, and Child and Family Services. In 1953 he was recognized as "Engineer of the Year" by the Texas Society of Professional Engineers, Travis Chapter, and named "Mr. Front Page of the Year" by the *Austin-American Statesman*. His tenure serving the city ended in 1955, not long before his death, when a 3-2 vote in City Council ousted him as City Manager. At the time of his death on December 22, 1956, Walter E. Seaholm was living in Austin at 1601 Palma Plaza; 14 his house still exists and appears to retain a high degree of integrity, appropriate for nomination under Criterion "B."

In 1948, when Seaholm was commissioned, Austin was a town of nearly 132,000 people. World War II and post-war shortages meant the city had not upgraded its infrastructure since 1940 when its population was just 87,930.¹⁵ Not only did a larger population mean greater demand for electricity, but so too did lifestyle changes. Many American families had purchased televisions, and although television sets did not draw much electric current, families were sold on electrical amenities advertised on television—such as dishwashers and washing machines—that did. Air conditioning, which also represented a large current draw, was also being widely installed.¹⁶ In addition to meeting Austin's increased demand for electricity, the new Seaholm Plant also served as the home of the entire municipal electric department.

Despite the fact that Burns & McDonnell were not local engineers, it was logical that Austin turned to the Kansas City firm for the design of its new plant. Founded in 1898, Burns & McDonnell had positioned themselves by 1948 as the foremost national experts on municipal power plant design.¹⁷ Co-founder Robert E. McDonnell was a prolific contributor to trade journals, writing articles that championed public ownership of utilities. He believed municipal ownership was the only way of ensuring quality electrical service over profits, thus earning the reputation as the nemesis of privately held electric companies. McDonnell served as a Congressional advisor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt,¹⁸ and also advocated municipal utilities as an effective revenue generator for cities; indeed, Seaholm made Austin money—so much so that city leaders were often tempted to raid Seaholm's expansion funds for contributions to the General Fund.¹⁹

Although Burns & McDonnell got off to a slow start in 1898, by their 25th anniversary in 1923 they had designed 232 water works, 115 sewer systems, and 87 lighting plants. By their 50th anniversary in 1948, the same year Burns & McDonnell was hired by Austin to design Seaholm, Burns & McDonnell had billed a total of \$664 Million. Their focus on water and sewage plants shifted in favor of power plants; by 1948 over 50% of their revenues had been generated by lighting and power plant design. Burns & McDonnell had completed projects in 854 American cities and 45 states in its first 50 years and continues to thrive today. Still operating out of its Kansas City headquarters, Burns & McDonnell now has international offices and has diversified to

¹⁴ 1953 City Directory, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

¹⁵ Reference Desk, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

¹⁶ Jack Cashill, *A Century of Excellence: Burns & McDonnell*, 1998.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dave Ege, personal interview, 27 March 2000.

¹⁹ "Full Text of Seaholm's Last Address to Council," *Austin American-Statesman* (10 February 1955).

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offer architectural and consulting services as well as engineering expertise. In addition to water, sewer, and power plants, their completed work includes airport terminals, hangars, and runways, roads, parking facilities, warehouses, bridges, dams, power distribution systems, and chemical processing plants.²⁰

Part of Burns & McDonnell's pre-World War II success can be attributed to the 1936 passage of the Rural Electrification Act, initially passed by Congress to subsidize construction of power distribution systems to rural areas, such as Texas' Hill Country, and later interpreted to support governmental assistance in the construction of power generation facilities. No assistance would be provided to private holding companies, however. The government only subsidized municipal or cooperative utilities through the formation of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA). With an extensive portfolio of municipal work and a founder who espoused public ownership, Burns & McDonnell was poised to garner many of the municipal contracts for new electrical work nation-wide following formation of the REA.

Burns & McDonnell's Seaholm Plant, with both a site-cast concrete structural and cladding system, is unusual. All other pre-1950 Burns & McDonnell powerhouse and waterworks projects documented in their 100th anniversary commemorative history, *A Century of Excellence: Burns & McDonnell*, are of masonry construction. Only one other, a brick-clad powerhouse in Wallingford, Connecticut, was partially made of concrete: it has a concrete structural frame.²¹ Constructing a powerhouse with a daunting array of plumbing entirely of site-cast concrete made accounting for every pipe breach in the concrete floors, walls, and roofs imperative. If a structural steel frame with masonry cladding were used instead, the architects at Burns & McDonnell only needed to check the shop drawings for conflicts between piping and the steel; brick masons could then simply brick around pipes as they clad the frame.²² Seaholm's exclusive use of concrete, however, made for the most elaborate set of shop drawings ever seen by one of Burns & McDonnell's civil engineers.²³ A former mechanical engineer and an architect for Burns & McDonnell claim that Seaholm used a concrete frame because war shortages associated with the aftermath of World War II and the coming of the Korean War resulted in long delays for structural steel orders.²⁴ It is less clear, however, why Burns & McDonnell specified concrete cladding. There is some speculation that political interests in Austin drove the decision, or perhaps the use of concrete was associated with another large-scale civic project at the time, like dam construction.

Seaholm is also a plant type, the semi-outdoor type, which was only popular in temperate climates, particularly the south.²⁵ With its boilers outside, exposed to weather, and its generators housed within a building, Seaholm is representative of a powerhouse type that compromised ease of boiler maintenance in favor of cost savings, avoiding a covering for the massive boilers. Not many years after Seaholm was constructed, powerhouse construction became characterized by either completely outdoor boilers and generators, such as

²⁰ Jack Cashill, *A Century of Excellence: Burns & McDonnell*, 1998.

²¹ Dave Ege, personal interview, 27 March 2000.

²² Ethel S. Wonderly, personal interview, 20 May 2000.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ethel S. Wonderly, personal interview, 20 May 2000, and Dave Ege, personal interview, 27 March 2000.

²⁵ Dave Ege, personal interview, 27 March 2000.

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Austin's Decker Creek Plant (1977), also designed by Burns & McDonnell, or enclosed powerhouses clad only in corrugated metal panels. Either way, opportunities for the kind of detailing present in Seaholm were lost.

The *raison d'être* for Seaholm was to house five Westinghouse hydrogen-cooled turbine generators. Phase one was designed to house only two 20 megawatt generators, #5 and #6, to augment the 24 megawatt output by generators #1 through #4 housed in the old powerhouse immediately to the east. Before completion of the first phase, however, plans were made for expansion, indicated by the temporary masonry infill in the west wall shown in the as-built drawings. The expansion in phase two originally housed only #7 and #8, two additional 20 megawatt generators, but included space for the addition of a larger, 40 megawatt unit. Walter E. Seaholm was particularly proud of the cost-savings incurred by planning ahead for the addition of Unit #9.²⁶ It was not unusual for a city's load profile to double every 7 to 10 years. Typically the extra capacity was accommodated by simply doubling the generator output at some point. In Austin's case, they jumped from 20 megawatt units to a 40 megawatt generator. Once generators got bigger than approximately 25 megawatts, the larger boilers required (like #9) became more efficient if they were "hung," expanding downward when hot rather than upward, like the ground-mounted boilers #5-#8.²⁷

Seaholm was built with ash pits under Boilers #5 and #6, although they were never used because #5 and #6 were never fired with coal.²⁸ The Oil Pump House and four underground tanks were also built to permit Seaholm to be run on No. 6 crude oil, but it was fired primarily on natural gas. Accommodating the ability to burn three types of fuel was typical, for the REA required all subsidized plants to be designed with flexibility.²⁹ The Texas REA-funded plants in San Miguel and the Brazos Electric Cooperative's Miller Plant were the first to convince the REA to relax the restriction that boilers be suitable for conversion to coal firing.³⁰ In short, there was nothing at all remarkable about Seaholm's power generating technology, but the sheer scale of its boilers and generators is still awesome.

What is noteworthy about Seaholm Plant is its architectural design. Although a "power plant" would suggest an unadorned, functionally-direct design, Seaholm is thoughtfully scaled and detailed. The form work for much of Seaholm's exterior walls was constructed using wood battens nailed to plywood such that the large concrete exterior walls have a scored pattern of 4-foot by 4-foot panels. This panelized system indicates the designers gave careful consideration to proportioning the elevations of Seaholm, breaking down the immense scale of the large powerhouse into a rational composition of elements more closely related to human scale. While these panels retain the imprint of the wood grain from the plywood form work, other regions of Seaholm utilize smooth corrugated surfaces (for the spandrel panels), or flat rubbed concrete (for the entry surrounds), portraying a joyful manipulation of the material by the designers.

²⁶ "Full Text of Seaholm's Last Address to Council," *Austin American-Statesman* (10 February 1955).

²⁷ Dave Ege, personal interview, 27 March 2000.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. According to Harold Wonderly (as reported by Ethel S. Wonderly), however, Seaholm was *not* a REA project.

³⁰ Ibid.

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Burns & McDonnell's work displays a certain level of consistency, beginning with the Art Deco styled Cincinnati waterworks plant built in 1938 (Figure 8-26), that carries through to Seaholm. Cincinnati established the precedents seen on Seaholm of rectangular massing culminating in parapets capped with concrete coping. At its base, the water-table is also concrete, and its face sits forward of the building's brick exterior. To either side of the celebrated entry "portal" (which is quite similar to the entry on the 1932 Fort Collins, Colorado, power plant) are fluted concrete spandrel panels.

Lakeside Station, located in Springfield, Illinois, and built in several phases in the 1930s through 1950s establishes a vocabulary for expansion also observed in the two phases of Seaholm (Figure 8-27). The original phase became subsumed in a larger building that created a unified composition of two entries located within celebrated "portals" on either side of a symmetrical facade. Lakeside also has recessed, vertical bands of windows and is labeled with Moderne style supergraphics. Such stylized graphics, a remarkable feature of Seaholm, seem to have been a Burns & McDonnell specialty. Two brochures prepared by Burns & McDonnell, one in the early 1940s and a second in 1948 are both labeled with Moderne text (Figure 8-28). Supergraphic signage on Burns & McDonnell plants can be observed as early as 1938 in McPherson, Kansas (Figure 8-28), or 1937 in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Illuminated supergraphics for dramatic night-time lighting appear in 1937 in Kansas City and in the 1950s in Sibley, Missouri. But only Seaholm seems to have merged all three concepts together: Moderne supergraphic text that is dramatically illuminated, both on the west elevation and above each entry in the principal facade. In fact, Seaholm appears to be the culmination of all previous Burns & McDonnell powerhouse and waterworks designs, synthesizing all elements, including the use of glass block windows in addition to the other elements listed above, that are characteristically Art Deco. Seaholm is arguably the only Burns & McDonnell plant in which a merging of all the critical Art Deco design elements have been synthesized into a single building.

The architectural drawings of Seaholm list the initials of the designers and detailers responsible for the design of the powerhouse. The principal designer for the first phase is indicated as Ralph M. Mitchel (R.M.M.), who was the Chief Architect of Burns & McDonnell. He was assisted by detailer Ethel Sklar (E.S.), a woman who was a registered architect working for an engineering firm in the late 1940s, certainly unusual for her time. Ms. Sklar (now Mrs. Wonderly) thinks she was responsible for the sign designs and recalls that a subcontractor by the name of Kansas City Ornamental Iron (she thinks) did all sign subcontracting for Burns & McDonnell.³¹ Harry A. Lind (H.A.L.) also completed further detailing. All of the design for the expansion of the Turbine Generator Building in phase two is credited to Keith Edwards (K.E.), who became the Chief Architect of the Power Division.³² Expansion of the Water Intake Structure was designed by Andy A. Zahner (A.A.Z.), who later became the chief HVAC engineer after returning to school for his engineering degree. Leo D. Boswell assisted Zahner in the design. Two detailers are also listed: Jack Avery (J.A.) and the unidentified R.R.F.

³¹ Ethel S. Wonderly, personal interview, 20 May 2000.

³² Dave Ege, personal interview, 27 March 2000.

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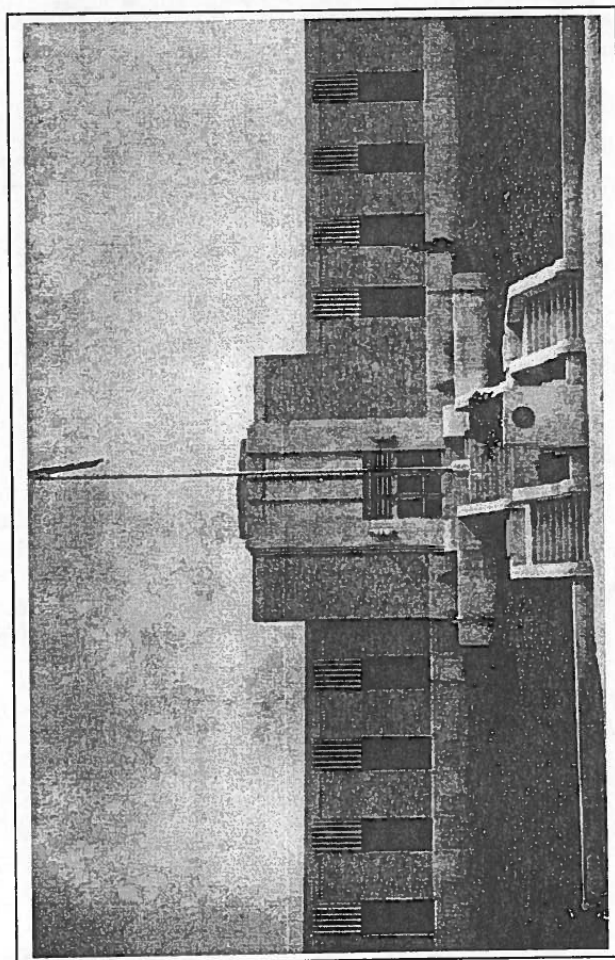
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1938 Burns & McDonnell Water Treatment Plant, Cincinnati, Ohio. This plan established much of the vocabulary observed on Seaholm.³³

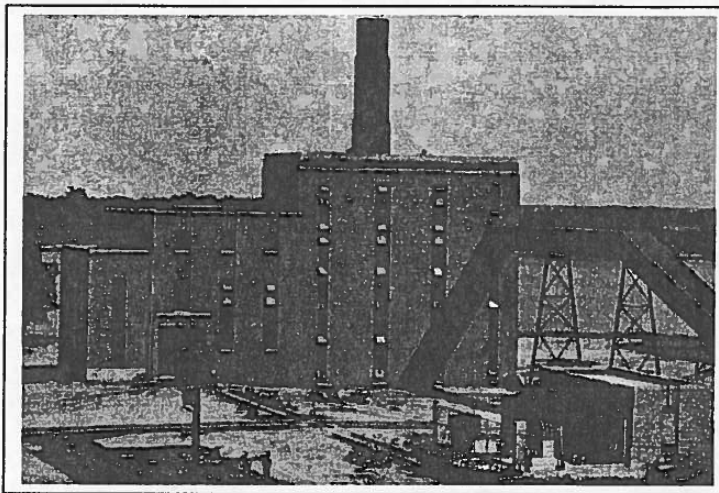
³³ Jack Cashill, *A Century of Excellence: Burns & McDonnell*, 1998.

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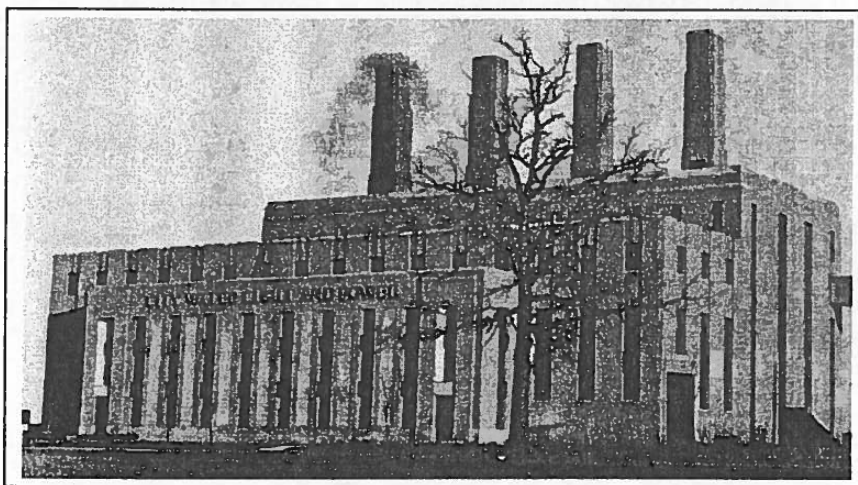
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Phase One (1930s), Lakeside Station, Springfield, IL.³⁴



Phase Two (1950s), Lakeside Station, Springfield, IL. This expansion has much in common with Seaholm.³⁵

³⁴ Jack Cashill, *A Century of Excellence: Burns & McDonnell*, 1998.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

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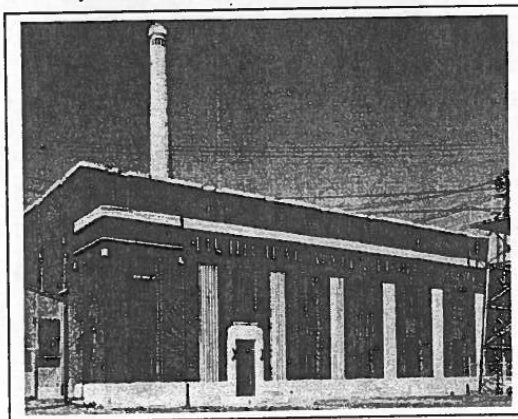
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1940s Burns & McDonnell Promotional Brochure. Note the Moderne-style font, similar to Seaholm's signs.³⁶



1937 McPherson, Kansas, Plant with Supergraphics.³⁷

³⁶ Jack Cashill, *A Century of Excellence: Burns & McDonnell*, 1998.

³⁷ Ibid.

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Seaholm Plant retains a high degree of integrity in its location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, and feeling. Its original site remains relatively unmolested; the old power plant that was to the east was demolished in the early 1960s and an outdoor electric substation erected in its place. Large Live Oak trees have grown up to the north of the Water Intake Structure on the fill between the Turbine Generator Building and the Water Intake Structure, but there have been no new buildings constructed that obscure the view of either. The original design of Seaholm has been remarkably preserved. The only addition attached to the original building is the truck loading dock and offices on the west, designed in 1972 by Simpson Associates, Inc. Although mated to the Turbine Generator Building, the original roll-up and man door are still visible inside; the building fabric does not appear to have been destroyed, but simply encapsulated. In 1987 Parshall and Associates designed the small concrete block infill between the loading dock addition and Boiler #9, removing two windows from the original concrete block base supporting Boiler #9. Much of the original material still exists, although asbestos abatement has removed all of the pipe insulation that made the pipes larger, filling the breaches in the exterior walls more completely. Most significantly, the wire mesh, plaster, and canvass that originally covered the asbestos insulation wrapping the boilers has been removed and replaced with corrugated aluminum covers.³⁸ The workmanship remains intact, including the Moderne aluminum signage on the west and south elevations. All elements combine to preserve the feeling of Seaholm.

Seaholm Plant last put power on the grid in 1989 when it had no longer become profitable to operate. Running the plant reportedly cost more than the city could charge for the electricity Seaholm could produce. It could no longer compete with the much larger, more efficient Decker and Holly Plants.³⁹ In addition, Seaholm was contaminated with PCB, mercury, lead, asbestos, and cadmium, which will require a 10 month remediation effort by Eagle Construction and Environmental Services, Inc., that will cost \$3,250,645.⁴⁰ In many cases it is difficult to separate remediation activities from demolition; as a result, Seaholm's interior will soon be stripped of all its machinery and power generating equipment.

Preservation of Seaholm Plant is imperative because it embodies a collection of finely crafted construction details that exemplify the height of Art Deco design by the nationally recognized engineering firm Burns & McDonnell. Situated at the periphery of Austin's CBD in the middle of the popular hike and bike recreation area around Town Lake, Seaholm is not a piece of necessary, but unattractive, infrastructure that is so often relegated to the outskirts of town. Instead it is a carefully detailed participant in the cityscape; one of the local news channels uses an image of Seaholm in its nightly introduction that shows a montage of images that define Austin. But Seaholm's prominent location jeopardizes its integrity. Many groups are vying for the

³⁸ Dave Ege, personal interview, 27 March 2000.³⁹ Harold Reynolds, personal interview, 27 March 2000.⁴⁰ Rose San Miguel, personal interview, 11 May 2000.

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decommissioned plant, seeking various uses for the Turbine Generator Building and the Water Intake Structure, including a science and technology museum, a restaurant, a state aquarium, or a mass transit hub. Whatever adaptive use Seaholm assumes, it is essential that its historic fabric not be compromised.

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The newspaper articles from the *Austin American-Statesman* are conveniently gathered in the public utilities Austin Files at the Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Cashill, Jack. *A Century of Excellence: Burns & McDonnell*. 1998. This text, published by Burns & McDonnell in commemoration of its 100th anniversary, was invaluable in describing the founding of the firm and significant projects throughout its history. It also gives a general account of the political climate of the power industry as well as an account of America's evolution of dependency upon electricity.

"City's New Power Generating Plant to be Opened to the Public Sunday." *Austin American-Statesman*, 3 May 1956.

Ege, Dave. Burns & McDonnell. Personal telephone interview. 27 March 2000. Mr. Ege was an engineer for Burns & McDonnell when the first phase of Seaholm was designed. Although he is retired, he remains active with the firm at its headquarters and provided significant advice on technical issues pertaining to Seaholm and powerhouses in general.

"Engineering Society to Honor Walter Seaholm with Dinner." *Austin American-Statesman*, 24 February 1953.

"Freelance." *Austin American-Statesman*, 11 February 1955.

"Full Text of Seaholm's Last Address to Council." *Austin American-Statesman*, 10 February 1955.

McComas, Mike. Burns & McDonnell. Personal telephone interview, 23 March 2000. Mr. McComas is an engineer with Burns & McDonnell's St. Louis office and is presently the most senior engineer (non-retired) in the Energy Division.

Minutes, City of Austin City Council, September through November, 1948, pg. 1055. Although the *Minutes* could be a potentially useful source listing when the city accepted Seaholm, as

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well as contract prices and contractors, they are difficult to use because they are not indexed.

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"Municipal Power Plant Serves Double Purpose." *Austin American-Statesman*, 29 January 1958.

Operating and Maintenance Instructions, Combustion Engineering-Superheater, Inc., February 21, 1952. Austin Energy has many of the operating manuals, which list specifications for Seaholm's equipment, in its corporate library.

"Power Man Seaholm Never Blew A Fuse." *Austin American-Statesman*, 25 April 1948.

Reynolds, Harold L., Jr. Fire & Emergency Specialist, Austin Energy. Personal interview, 27 January 2000. Mr. Reynolds is the only Austin Energy employee currently on-site daily at Seaholm and is responsible for leading tours of the plant.

San Miguel, Rose. Project Manager, Technical Services, Austin Energy. Personal interview, 11 May 2000. Ms. San Miguel is responsible for overseeing the decontamination and remediation of Seaholm prior to its rehabilitation.

"Seaholm Episode." *Austin American-Statesman*, 14 January 1955.

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"Seaholm Selected." *Austin American-Statesman*, 14 April 1942.

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Wonderly, Ethel S. Personal telephone interview. 27 March 2000. Mrs. Wonderly (formerly Ethel Sklar) was a registered architect working as a Designer for Burns & McDonnell from 1943 through 1976. She is listed as a "Detailer" on the original drawings of Seaholm, Phase One, and provided many of her personal memories of working on the plant in a tape-recorded phone interview that has become part UT Austin's Alexander Architectural Archives (along with an outline transcription of the conversation). Her husband, Harold Wonderly, was a Civil Engineer who joined Burns & McDonnell in 1953. He was also able to provide some details about Seaholm's construction through Mrs. Wonderly.

Archival Material

Original ink on linen as-built architectural drawings for "Power Plant No. 2, City of Austin, Texas." In the possession of Austin Energy, 721 Barton Springs Road, Austin, Texas.

Original ink on linen as-built architectural drawings for "Addition—Power Plant No. 2, City of Austin, Texas." In the possession of Austin Energy, 721 Barton Springs Road, Austin, Texas.

Biography File: Walter E. Seaholm. Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Austin File: AF—Public Utilities—Electric Utility Department. Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Historic Photo file of Seaholm. Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.