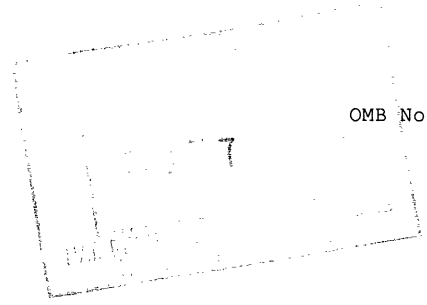


1528

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name: Pioneer Theater-Auditorium  
other names/site number: Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts

2. Location

street & number 100 South Virginia Street not for publication N/A  
city or town Reno vicinity N/A  
state Nevada code NV county Washoe code 031 zip code 89501

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination      request for determination of eligibility, meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets      does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant      nationally      statewide X locally. (      See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Renee Johnson, SHPO 12-6-04  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property      meets      does not meet the National Register criteria. (      See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register      See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register      See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register

     other (explain):

[Signature] 1-19-05  
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

**5. Classification**

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.) N/A

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RECREATION AND CULTURE Sub: Theater/Auditorium  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RECREATION AND CULTURE Sub: Theater  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Geodesic Dome  
\_\_\_\_\_

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete  
roof Aluminum, steel  
walls Concrete, stucco, steel, glass  
other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.) See continuation sheets.

### 8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

PERFORMING ARTS

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance 1967

Significant Dates 1967

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Bozalis, Dickinson and Roloff/TEMCOR

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.) See continuation sheets.

### 9. Major Bibliographical References

**Bibliography** (Cite books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets. See continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**Primary location of additional data**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Geographical Data**

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Acreage of Property 1.139 acres

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	<u>11</u>	<u>258430</u>	<u>4378530</u>	3	___	___
2	___	___	___	4	___	___

\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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name/title Mella Rothwell Harmon  
organization State Historic Preservation Office date August 31, 2004  
street & number 100 N. Stewart Street Telephone 775-684-3447  
city or town Carson City state NV zipcode 89701

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**Additional Documentation**

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**  
A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.  
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**  
Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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**Property Owner**

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(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority  
street & number P. O. Box 837 telephone \_\_\_\_\_  
city or town Reno state NV zip code 89504

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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
**CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section 7 Page 1

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**7. Description**

The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, now called the Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts, was designed by the Oklahoma City architectural firm Bozalis, Dickinson, and Roloff, and completed in December 1967.<sup>1</sup> It is located at Virginia and Mill Streets in downtown Reno, on the site of the old State Building, which had occupied the space since 1927. Early twentieth-century structures designed by Frederick J. DeLongchamps stand to the west, and to the north of the center. The Pioneer Center dominates the concrete and brick plaza lying immediately to the west of the building. From the front, it looks like a bird that has swooped down to the ground with its wings spread.

The exterior walls of the Pioneer are made of reinforced concrete with the exception of the stage loft, which has a structural steel framework. The walls below ground are made of concrete. Five post-tensioned concrete arches support the gold-anodized aluminum geodesic dome roof, 140 feet in diameter. The roof, consisting of 500 faceted panels, was fabricated and erected by Temcor, a Torrance, California company. An interior steel-frame dome provides structural support for the roof. The building has a concrete foundation. The exterior stage loft rises up behind the dome of the Pioneer Center, obscuring the rear supporting arch of the dome. The loft's walls are metal lath covered with Portland cement plaster and stucco. The walls under the two side arches are covered with the same material. Low-E glass vertical window panes fill the space under the two front arches.

Entrances into the Pioneer lead directly off of the street-level plaza. The lobby wraps around the front part of the building, underneath the front two arches. Gold aluminum panels, molded into large stars, cover the ceiling, a stark contrast to the dark blue color of the interior walls. The theater balcony is entered from a concourse on the street level. Staircases and elevators descend to the orchestra and exhibit hall level underground. The main seating area of the theater contains 987 seats. The large balcony, which covers approximately one-third of the auditorium's floor space, contains 513 seats. The floors on both levels slope downward toward the stage. The walls of the auditorium are covered with a walnut wood veneer. Long vertical wood strips painted

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<sup>1</sup> The local associate architectural firm on the Pioneer Theater project was Ferris and Erskine, and the general contractor was Brunzell Construction.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**7. Description, continued**

gold are attached to the wall to create a three-dimensional surface. The steel frame interior dome supports the catwalks, sprinkler system, and lobby ceiling. The acoustically treated dome underside contains "clouds" suspended from the ceiling to further enhance the theater's acoustics.

Integrity

The building possesses a high degree of all seven aspects of historic integrity. The only changes made to the building since its construction are the replacement of carpeting, the stage floor, and about 300 seats on the main level, all damaged by a flood in 1997. Recently, a 200-seat black-box theater was built underground below the Pioneer's expansive plaza and the pioneer statue was moved from in front of the building to the corner of the plaza. This move provides greater visibility of the building's remarkable swooping roofline.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Criteria Consideration G

The Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts is 37 years old and under Criteria Consideration G must exhibit exceptional significance to be eligible for the National Register. Indeed, the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium has special significance under Criterion A for the role it has played in the history of the performing arts in Reno, Nevada at the time the city was undergoing a significant shift in population that radically changed the character of the community. The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium is also exceptionally important under Criterion C as a rare example of geodesic dome architecture in Nevada and as the lone monumental survivor of the gold-anodized geodesic dome in the state.

Criterion A—The Performing Arts in Reno

Reno started life in 1868 as a dusty railroad town serving the vastly wealthy Comstock Lode. Virginia City was the seat of high culture with its internationally renowned Piper's Opera House.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

Piper's drew the likes of Edwin Booth, John Philip Sousa, Maude Adams, and Lilly Langtry. When Comstock fortunes began to decline later in the century, Nevada's entertainment center moved to Reno. Performing arts at the time consisted of shows put on by traveling performers, some of whom would go on to national fame (Land and Land 1995:62-63).

Reno's first theater was Dyer's, built when the railroad town was but one year old. Dyer's suffered from construction defects and collapsed a few years later. Smith's Academy of Music followed Dyer's and it was the only venue for the traveling entertainers until 1889 when Hammond and Wilson's Theater was built. However, Reno's main stage was the McKissick Theater, built in 1890, and at the turn of the twentieth century melodramas were performed at Wheelman's Theater. McKissick's was surpassed in size by the Majestic Theater, built by U.S. Senator George S. Nixon in 1910. The Rialto Theater was built five years after the Majestic and it began importing headline entertainment (Land and Land 1995:63). Within a few years, the Rialto Theater changed its name to the Granada and Reno became one of the most popular theater towns between New York and San Francisco. Big-name entertainers appeared on the Granada's stage and the railroad offered special Reno stop-over privileges to New York theater companies *en route* to San Francisco. Following World War I, the extravagant live performances ended and Reno's theaters switched to the latest entertainment technology, cinema (Land and Land 1995:63).

The twentieth century saw Reno change from a raucous railroad town to the "Nation's Divorce Headquarters," which brought with it the concomitant flow of wealthy easterners who were accustomed to a certain level of sophistication. Their urbanity was tempered, however, in the loose moral climate of Reno that allowed lascivious behavior—kept under wraps at home—to be freely exhibited. Rather than demanding a world-class production of *Swan Lake*, Reno's temporary residents sought out the risqué floor shows at The Dog House. Instead of attending Lawrence Tibbett's<sup>2</sup> baritone performance in Wagner's *Tänhauser* at the Met, New York's elite was singing along with Reno's favorite crooner, George Hart, piano-side at the Willows.

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<sup>2</sup> Mr. Tibbett did a six-week divorce stint in Reno in the 1930s.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

Amidst all the divorce-related rannygazoo, Reno's permanent citizens exhibited more decorous behavior by attending such local cultural events as films at the local movie houses and productions of the Reno Little Theater. Reno Little Theater was established in 1935 by Evelyn Brussard, Blythe Bulmer, Dick Hillman, Randall Ross, Grace Semenza, Margaret Bankofier, Ray Frolick, Doris Shaver, and William Miller. The first production was held in the University of Nevada's Education Auditorium in October 1935, under the direction of Ed Semenza. In 1941, Reno Little Theater acquired Dania Hall on Sierra Street and converted it to a theater.<sup>3</sup> In 1954, Reno Little Theater added the Circlet in the basement. The Circlet was used to stage plays of an experimental nature. Reno Little Theater's schedule was demanding and productions included current hits performed to a high professional standard (Reno Little Theater n.d.). With the exception of the casino entertainment, until the 1960s Reno Little Theater was the community's only live theater venue.

Casino gaming, as we know it today, began with the legalization of gambling in Nevada in 1931. Reno, as Nevada's largest and most well-known town, developed gambling as a legal commercial endeavor. The first gambling halls were typical smoke-filled affairs, catering to a largely male clientele. With the influx of divorcées and automobile tourists, particularly following World War II, Reno casinos began to cater to more women and couples. When the Mapes Hotel was built in 1947, it incorporated overnight accommodations with restaurants and entertainment. Big-name musicians and Hollywood performers appeared on stage at the Mapes and the Riverside Hotel across the street. Although the lavish casino productions were attended by local residents, they were intended to attract the tourist trade. Reno's permanent population was growing rapidly at mid-century<sup>4</sup> and the demand for a wider range of cultural events was increasing.

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<sup>3</sup> Early renovations to the Reno Little Theater building were designed by architect Lehman Ferris. Architect Ed Parsons submitted plans for alterations in 1964.

<sup>4</sup> The population of Washoe County, in which Reno is the largest community, increased by 35% between 1940 and 1950, and 41% between 1950 and 1960.



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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

Reno was not alone in its desire for cultural facilities. In the 1960s, cities across the country engaged in an active program of building facilities for the performing arts, and halls to accommodate and attract the growing convention industry. The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium was designed to be used as a venue for the performing arts as well as a convention center, and is a product of both of these civic concerns. The 1960s were years of tremendous growth in Washoe County. To meet the demands of a growing population, Reno city government undertook capital improvements in convention facilities, auditoriums, a new city hall, and the expansion of public safety services (Rowley 1984:70). In the early 1960s, the Washoe County Fair and Recreation Board sought to provide adequate convention space for the area. A political dispute over the location of the building arose between board members who wanted a downtown convention hall and supporters of a site south of Reno.<sup>5</sup> Those who favored the southern location argued that the convention center should be located away from the downtown casinos. The two groups agreed on a compromise, and the board approved construction of two buildings—the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium and the Centennial Coliseum, the latter now called the Reno-Sparks Convention Center. For a number of years, the Reno Community Concert Association had advocated the construction of a building that would serve as a venue for the performing arts, and successfully petitioned the board to provide performance space in the downtown building. In 1963, the board passed a resolution calling for the construction of a "theater-type" facility downtown (*Nevada State Journal* December 7, 1963).

Shortly before the opening of the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium in 1968, Reno Mayor Roy Bankofier noted that "the auditorium is going to mean a great deal from the standpoint of increasing cultural aspects—probably there will be operas and plays as well as the convention phase of it" (*Reno Evening Gazette* 4 Jan 1968). Bankofier's prediction was accurate; the Pioneer Center has served primarily as a home for the performing arts. The building's small meeting rooms, coupled with a shortage of parking in the area, resulted in little convention business. The Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority operated the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium at a loss for years before turning over operation of the building to the Reno Performing Arts Center

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<sup>5</sup> The conflict over a downtown events center continues today.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

Association, a group made up of representatives of 14 local arts and community groups, in 1988. The arts association changed the name of the building to the Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts, a name that more accurately reflects its function. The Pioneer Center has served as the most prominent venue for the performing arts in Reno, and the home of a number of local groups, including the Reno Philharmonic Orchestra and the Nevada Opera, both of which were established the year following the opening of the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium.

Reno's population growth in the 1960s was accompanied by the growth and development of artistic and cultural activities. Supported to a large extent by a growing university community, as well as the availability of a first-class performance hall, theater, music, opera, and the visual arts became more prominent aspects of Reno life (Rowley 1984:74). The availability of first-rate musicians, singers, and dancers, who performed at local casinos, added to the available talent. The Pioneer Center has ensured the continued existence of these groups by providing a permanent home for the Reno Philharmonic Orchestra and the Nevada Opera, and functioning as the premier performing arts venue in Reno for a variety of performers. The Reno Philharmonic Orchestra was founded in 1968 under the direction of Gregory Stone, and has become a nationally-recognized symphony orchestra. In 1982, the orchestra presented a tribute concert to the violinist and composer Efrem Zimbalist, Sr. Artists that have performed with the Reno Philharmonic Orchestra include Luciano Pavarotti, Ray Charles, Judy Collins, Jerry Lewis, and George Shearing (*Reno Magazine* October 1987: 42).

Another institution that owes its growth and development to the Pioneer Theater is the Nevada Opera. The Nevada Opera was founded in 1967 by Dr. Theodore Puffer, who specialized in translating foreign language productions into English. The Nevada Opera presented the North American premiere of Tchaikovsky's *Joan of Arc* in 1975, and has performed a selection of programs ranging from Italian Grand Opera to contemporary *avant garde*. The Nevada Opera has also presented the American premiere of *Doctor Faust*, and a performance *Of Mice and Men* that was conducted by its composer, Carlisle Floyd (*Reno Magazine* October 1987: 42). The Reno Little Theater initially served as the group's home, but the Nevada Opera outgrew the 300-seat auditorium, and moved into the Pioneer Theater in 1979. Other groups that have used the Pioneer Center as their home base include the Nevada Ballet Theater, the Sierra Nevada Chorale,

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

Washoe Community Concerts and the "Broadway Comes to Reno" series, currently in its tenth year.

Two years before the Reno Performing Arts Center Association took over management of the Pioneer Theater, Convention and Visitors Authority members discussed closing the building because it was operating at a loss. Board members Don Carano and Dave Howard predicted a public outcry if such a move were seriously considered (*Reno Gazette-Journal* 27 June 1986). The Washoe County Community Concerts Association and the Sierra Nevada Chorale, two of the groups for whom the Pioneer Center has served as home, presented petitions to the convention authority urging that the building remain open because of its importance as a community cultural amenity. Newspaper editorials at the time stressed the importance of performing arts to the local community. One writer commented: "Performances of classical music, ballet, opera and drama are important to local residents' personal satisfaction and well-being. This deserves protection, and the arts organizations that bring these niceties of civilization to Reno deserve to practice their calling without being made to feel like the bad guys" (*Reno Gazette-Journal* 10 July 1987). The concern over the potential loss of the Pioneer brought about a beneficial collaboration among the various performing arts groups in the form of the Reno Performing Arts Board. In 1988, the *Reno Gazette-Journal* reported: "All in all, the changeover at the Pioneer offers many opportunities that did not exist before. Truly, this is an exciting time for culture in the Truckee Meadows" (June 1, 1988).

The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium represents a pivotal moment in Reno's growth and development, when the population had reached a size and level of sophistication that required a leap in capacity and quality of performance art space. The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium filled this need and it continues to be a vital cultural facility in Reno. To demonstrate the importance of the arts to Reno, over the past few years the community has been developing an arts and culture district that encompasses cultural facilities along Reno's magnificent natural resource, the Truckee River. The district includes a number of historic properties that have been adapted to

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

house cultural events and activities.<sup>6</sup> As an anchor for the east end of the district and as the only building built as a performance arts space that still functions in that capacity, the Pioneer is an important cultural and historic resource. For these reasons, the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium satisfies the exceptional significance requirements under Criteria Consideration G for its role in Reno's performing arts history.

Criterion C—The Geodesic Dome

*Modernism in Reno*

The Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts has special significance under Criterion C as an outstanding example of geodesic dome architecture in Reno. Although the geodesic dome represent a branch on the family tree of modernist architecture, the style gained a degree of popularity during the period that architectural modernism was gaining mainstream acceptance. By the late 1950s, Reno was beginning to experiment with modernism, which grew out of the Bauhaus School earlier in the twentieth century. Such notable European transplants as R.M. Schindler and Richard Neutra plied their trade in unadorned elemental architecture in southern California beginning in the 1930s, competing with American experimentalists like Frank Lloyd Wright (Harmon 2004).

One of Reno's early modernist works was designed by its favorite son, Frederick DeLongchamps. The Union Federal Savings and Loan building, which stood on the corner of Court and Sierra Streets until 2003, was built in 1959. The UFS&L has been compared by architectural historians to the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan designed by Richard Neutra and Robert Alexander in 1958. The USF&L's most distinctive details were brises-soleil, first employed in modern architecture in 1933 by Le Corbusier on the Maison Locative Ponsik in Algiers. Brises-

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<sup>6</sup> The facilities include the historic Riverside Hotel, which now operates as artists lofts and art gallery (National Register 8/6/86), the First Church of Christ, Scientist, which houses the Lear Theater (National Register 8/20/99), and McKinley Park School, which now operates as the City of Reno's arts and culture center (National Register 9/16/85).

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

soleil are exterior vertical panels that move with the sun and provide heat or shade to the interior of a building (Harmon 2004).

One of the key aspects of modernism in architecture was its break from the past by embracing new technology. New materials, such as steel, glass, plastic, and reinforced concrete, allowed buildings to take on appearances totally different from their predecessors. Architecture was also influenced by modern art through the use of abstract forms, space, light, and bold colors. Modern architecture became practical. Functional and economic efficiency overshadowed the elaborate building designs of the past. Besides the USF&L Building, Reno acquired other notable buildings in the modernist mode during the late 1950s and 1960s, including the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, the Nevada Historical Society, the Fleischmann Atmospherium-Planeterium<sup>7</sup> and the Church Fine Arts building on the UNR campus, the Centennial Coliseum, which is now the Reno-Sparks Convention Center, and the Washoe County Library (Harmon 2004).

The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, the golden-domed events center, was built by Temcor, a company whose co-founder, Don Richter, was a student of Richard Buckminster Fuller, the developer of the geodesic dome. Buckminster Fuller (Bucky, as he was known) defies description. Although not an architect or a structural designer in the traditional sense, Buckminster Fuller's view encompassed everything around him, including the physical, mental, and emotional. He was concerned with every aspect of life and nature. His designs greatly affected architects and architecture, and his geodesic dome have affected people everywhere (Packard 1995:230).

The Geodesic Dome

Although some architectural historians place the geodesic dome in the category of Populuxe architecture, it is in fact in a class by itself. Clearly within the modernist mode chronologically and philosophically, the dome manages to transcend modernism through its radical shape and the

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<sup>7</sup> The Fleischmann Atmospherium-Planetarium was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on September 22, 1994 at the age of 31 years.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

genius of its primary proponent, Richard Buckminster Fuller. The geodesic dome was a more serious expression of form and function than Populuxe. Its purpose was not to reflect society's fascination with space, but rather as a more technically advanced, efficient, and economical NPS means to enclose a large space and based on Buckminster Fuller's observation that the triangle is the strongest shape in nature. Further, Populuxe fell out of favor by the mid-1960s, but geodesic domes continued to be constructed throughout the 1960s to the present (Savage 2002).<sup>8</sup>

Buckminster Fuller is often credited with the invention of the geodesic dome, but the first one was built in 1922 by the Carl Zeiss Optical Works in Jena, Germany for use as a planetarium. Several other domes were built over the next three decades, but their use was restricted to planetaria. Buckminster Fuller did, however, vigorously promote the geodesic dome (or polyhedral building) for residential and commercial uses. Prior to World War II, Buckminster Fuller had been experimenting with alternative housing types to address failures he perceived with existing home-building methods. This resulted in his invention of the Dymaxion House.

The first Dymaxion units were based on the plan of the mass-produced sheet-metal grain bin developed by the Butler Manufacturing Company of Wichita, Kansas. Butler built the first Dymaxion House during the war, and it was shipped to the U.S.S.R. as temporary housing. Others were used by the U.S. military as low-cost, easy-to-erect-and-dismantle temporary housing for troops. It was in these grain-silo houses that Buckminster Fuller first observed the dome effect. The dome, it seems, induces a local vertical heat-driven vortex that sucks cooler air downward into a dome if it is vented properly (overhead and peripherally). After the war, Buckminster Fuller changed the design of the Dymaxion House to exploit the dome effect. They were manufactured by another company (Beech Aircraft) and used a single strut on a single foundation. Although it never proved popular, the Dymaxion House was the first conscious effort at an autonomous building in the twentieth century, and it led directly to the development of the geodesic dome (Butler Manufacturing n.d.).

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<sup>8</sup> Over the course of its 40 year history, Temcor has erected more than 6,000 aluminum domes throughout the world.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

After the war, Buckminster Fuller, and his young assistant Donald Richter, spent two years developing the calculations for the geodesic dome. Their computations were tested in 1948 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, with disappointing results. Buckminster Fuller was not deterred, however, and over the next few years, he and his assistant worked to refine the design, which he patented in 1954. To honor Buckminster Fuller's remarkable contributions, the United States Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp on July 12, 2004, the fiftieth anniversary of his geodesic dome patent. After 1947, the geodesic dome dominated Buckminster Fuller's life and career. Long fascinated with the need for more efficient and cost-effective housing, Buckminster Fuller saw the solution to the world's problems in nature's design principles. The geodesic dome was the result of his revolutionary discoveries about balancing the forces of compression and tension in building (*Palisadian-Post* 2004).

The first commercial application of Buckminster Fuller's dome in the United States was erected in May 1953 to celebrate Ford Motor Company's fiftieth anniversary. The celebratory dome consisted of an aluminum frame with a plastic skin and a 90-foot span (Savage 2002). The Ford dome was the first large-scale use of this type of structure for industry. Constructed of plastic and aluminum, the dome indicated the advantage of using these materials and the geometric method. Construction took only 30 working days and the building weighed less than 9 tons, compared to a conventional building that would weigh closer to 160 tons (Sharp 1991). In the 1994 book, *The Oral History of Modern Architecture*, author John Peter describes the Ford Rotunda as "a celebrated structural breakthrough" (26).

The next step was to market and build geodesic domes. Henry Kaiser, of Kaiser Aluminum, a revolutionary thinker in his own right, sought a license to mass produce Buckminster Fuller's designs in his Oakland, California aluminum works. In 1957, with Donald Richter as Kaiser's chief engineer and designer, the Hilton Dome at the Hilton Hawaiian Village Hotel in Waikiki, Honolulu, Hawaii was the first commission out of Kaiser's plant.<sup>9</sup> The Hilton Dome, with a 145-foot span, was built in 22 hours (Chapman and Hibbard 1998). By March 1958, Kaiser had been besieged by more than 12,000 inquiries into Kaiser Domes as a result of the publicity for the

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<sup>9</sup> The Hilton Dome was demolished in 1999 to make way for a high-rise development.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

Hawaiian Village dome. With requests for domes to serve a wide range of commercial uses, Kaiser discovered that adapting the design to specific uses and interior climate control were often difficult problems to resolve. The Citizens State Bank<sup>10</sup> in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma offered an early test case (Savage 2002).

By the 1950s, the financial institution decided its success necessitated expansion. They hired the local architecture firm of Bozalis, Dickinson, and Roloff, working directly with partner Robert Roloff, in the designs for the building. The bank wanted a design that could facilitate future growth and provide maximum convenience for their customers. Amenities included four drive-in windows and a walk-up window. The building plan allowed for the addition of more drive-in windows and expanded office space on the mezzanine level. The bank was one of the first buildings in the world to use gold-anodized aluminum, and it was the first application of a Kaiser Dome for a banking facility. Construction of the golden-domed bank drew lots of attention including several articles in the *Architectural Record*. The bank's striking gold color and daring shape caused the building to quickly become a local and state landmark (Savage 2002). On September 4, 2003, 45-year-old Citizens State Bank building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Despite the bank's success as a landmark, there were inherent difficulties adapting geodesic domes to commercial uses. They functioned best when they enclosed large open spaces like theaters and auditoriums. A number of such projects were undertaken in the late 1950s and 1960s. In 1957, Kaiser built two municipal domes in Virginia Beach, Virginia and Borger, Texas. In 1958, a domed theater-in-the-round was built in Fort Worth, Texas. The St. Louis Botanical Garden constructed the geodesic Climatron in 1959, and in the early 1960s, a number of domed Cinerama theaters<sup>11</sup> were built across the country. A Cinerama was built in Las Vegas in 1964.<sup>12</sup> The Cinerama Theater in Hollywood was built in 1963 and was the only geodesic

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10 The Citizens State Bank building was one of the 11 most endangered sites designated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2002.

11 Cinerama theaters were named for cinerama projection process developed in the early 1960s, which merges three 35mm negatives into a single image that is projected onto a giant screen (Cinerama Treasures.org).

12 The Las Vegas theater was demolished in 1986 for high-rise development.



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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

dome built of concrete. The Expo Dome at Montreal Expo '67 was erected the same year as the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium. Built as an exhibition hall and to look like "a lacy filigree against the sky" (Wright 1989:33), the three-quarter-sphere dome is 200 feet high with a 250-foot spherical diameter. Not just a building, Expo Dome was "a prototype of a new kind of built urban environment. . . . The dome projected an idea of an emancipated community . . ." (Tzonis et al 1995:27). The development of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome and its commercial application by Kaiser Aluminum through Don Richter's design of the Kaiser Dome led directly to the construction of the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium in Reno.

In 1964, with Richard Buckminster Fuller on the Board of Directors,<sup>13</sup> Donald Richter co-founded Temcor, to manufacture and erect architectural environmental enclosures, primarily clear-span domes. Playing off of the lessons learned with the Kaiser Domes, Temcor specializes in industrial applications (covering tankage) and architectural applications such as arenas, gymnasiums, theaters, and auditoriums. Temcor's earliest gold-anodized dome was the Valley National Bank building in Tempe, Arizona in 1962 (actually before the company was officially established). Between 1962 and 1967, Temcor built five more gold-anodized geodesic domes, so by the time Temcor erected the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, it had amassed considerable expertise and was a leader in the field (Temcor 2004).<sup>14</sup> Throughout his career as an assistant to Buckminster Fuller, as a chief engineer and designer at Kaiser Aluminum and at Temcor, Don Richter was responsible for the construction of more than 5,000 aluminum dome structures. Through the connection with Mr. Richter, Reno's Pioneer Theater-Auditorium is a direct product of the development of the Kaiser Dome, the first attempt to market and mass-produce Buckminster Fuller's design (Dagenais 1998).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Buckminster Fuller served on Temcor's board of directors from 1964 until his death in 1982.

<sup>14</sup> These other Temcor gold-anodized domes include an office complex for Placer County, Auburn, California, Golden Nugget Dome, Fairbanks, Alaska, a gymnasium at Bluefield College, Bluefield, Virginia, a church sanctuary at Divine Mercy Catholic Church, Merritt Island, Florida, and a tourist and information center for the City of Hampton, Virginia.

<sup>15</sup> Reno sports two recent Temcor domes, the National Bowling Stadium downtown and Sierra Pacific Power's Coal Storage Dome at its Tracy generation plant.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium

The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium was initially to be named the Apollo Theater, but it never caught hold (Barber 2003). The Pioneer name came from a statue entitled Humanity that was located at the Old State Building, which was demolished in 1966 to make way for the Pioneer Theater. The cast bronze sculpture was created by sculptor Byron S. Johnson in 1939 (although enigmatically the plaque reads: STATE OF NEVADA MCMXXVI). The statue depicts a pioneer family composed of a father, mother, and daughter looking westward to the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

Once the remains of the State Building were cleared away, ground was broken for the new building in June 1966. Nicknamed the "Golden Turtle," the building, originally operated by the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority, was completed in December 1967. Designed by the Oklahoma City architectural firm of Bozalis, Dickinson, and Roloff, the Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts features a gold-anodized aluminum geodesic dome comprised of 500 panels. The roof is a dome within a dome—an exterior aluminum dome and a steel frame dome on the interior. This type of dome was unlike any dome constructed by Temcor. The steel frame dome supports the catwalks, sprinkler system, and the lobby ceiling. The dome was erected by Temcor, a Torrance, California, company that also built the Cinerama Theater in Las Vegas in 1964.

The selection of a geodesic dome shows the confidence with which the process of cultural development was undertaken in Reno. Local government officials looked forward to Reno's future with unbounded optimism in the mid-1960s and they were willing to make a radical choice for the new theater. William Gravelle, chairman of the Washoe County Fair and Recreation Board, brought the idea for an aluminum dome convention hall before the board in 1964. He called it "revolutionary and beautiful in appearance" (*Reno Evening Gazette*, January 23, 1964). Further, Gravelle felt the dome, because of its prefabricated design, would be less expensive than a standard design building. Gravelle and two other board members toured existing domed auditoriums in Fort Worth, Texas; Tulsa and Pryor, Oklahoma; Virginia Beach, Virginia; and New York. Following the tour, Gravelle presented his findings to the board, and enthusiastically

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

endorsed the idea of building a domed auditorium in Reno, noting that besides being less expensive than "older styles" of buildings, they were relatively easy to maintain, and were both acoustically and aesthetically pleasing. Other board members also expressed support for the dome design, noting that such a building would be a tourist attraction as well.

It was specifically the Fort Worth auditorium, Casa Mañana, that caught Mr. Gravelle's eye. The 145-foot-diameter golden dome was about the same size as the building Reno wanted, and as Gravelle told the *Nevada State Journal*, "When the lights went on, they didn't just go on, they seemed to explode in the most spectacular way. It almost took our breath away" (*Nevada State Journal*, March 26, 1964). Discussions with Casa Mañana's architect, A. George King of Fort Worth, led Reno officials to estimate a price tag of \$992,000. When construction on the Pioneer was completed in December 1967, the final bill came to \$2.5 million. It was financed by a \$2.5 million revenue bond issue repaid by funds from the county's five percent tax on motels, hotels, guest ranches, and guest homes (*Nevada State Journal*, December 18, 1967).

The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium received an enthusiastic response from Nevada public officials upon its completion, both for its architectural style and the role that it promised to play as a focal point for the community. Nevada Lieutenant Governor Ed Fike hailed the building as "an architectural masterpiece" (*Reno Evening Gazette* 4 January 1968). Formal dedication of the building was held in January 1968, when Governor Paul Laxalt called the opening of Pioneer Theater-Auditorium the beginning of a "golden age" in tourism and convention facilities in Nevada. U.S. Senator Howard Cannon said the building was "wonderful and beautiful," and that it "in the not so distant future, Nevada will be known as the convention center of the world" (*Nevada State Journal*, January 8, 1968). U.S. Senator Alan Bible remarked that the opening of the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium was "another step forward in the development of a truly cosmopolitan atmosphere in this part of the state" (*Nevada State Journal*, January 8, 1968).

The Pioneer Center continues to function as an important venue for the performing arts in Reno. The creation of the Reno Performing Arts Center Association, an outgrowth of the convention and visitors' authority debate over the role of the Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, resulted in a unified arts community. The association has reduced the Pioneer Center's operating loss, which

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**8. Statement of Significance, continued**

ensures that the Pioneer Center will remain the focal point of the performing arts in Reno. Even before the grand opening of the building in January 1968, its importance was recognized. Chamber of Commerce president, Paul Garwood stated: "The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium will play a most important part in Reno's future—beginning right now. It will have a stimulating economic impact; it will also help build the image of Reno as a better place to live. I predict our local population will take more pride in this facility than possibly any other public building in the city" (*Nevada State Journal*, December 18, 1967).

Summary

The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium represents an expansion of Reno's cultural milieu at the middle of the twentieth century. It is also an outstanding and rare extant example of a monumental geodesic dome in Nevada. The building's architectural and structural significance is underscored by the fact that the Pioneer is prominently displayed on Temcor's glossy color marketing brochure. The importance of the geodesic dome to architecture was summed up by architect Robert Packard, "Buckminster Fuller placed his domes on many buildings in many different locations. They have become a part of the landscape and something of a symbol of an inventive phase of American architecture" (Packard 1995:231). Of the importance of the geodesic dome to people, Lloyd Sieden said, ". . . the true significance of the geodesic dome is most evident in the fact that it is often the dominant symbol employed at major future-oriented expositions. When most people remember the 1967 Montreal World's Fair, the 1986 Vancouver World's Fair, or Disney's EPCOT Center, the first image they recall is the geodesic dome. It properly stands as a monument to the work of Buckminster Fuller, who successfully shared his vision of a world that works for everyone" (Sieden 1989).

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**10. Geographical Data**

**Verbal boundary description**

The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium is located at Assessor's Parcel Number 11-119-02, Washoe County, Nevada.

**Verbal boundary justification**

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the Pioneer Center.

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**The Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada**

**Photographs**

Property Name: Pioneer Theater-Auditorium

Property Location: 100 South Virginia Street  
Reno, Washoe County  
Nevada

Photographer: Mella Rothwell Harmon

Date of Photographs: September 17, 2004

Location of Negatives: State Historic Preservation Office  
100 N. Stewart Street  
Carson City, Nevada

Photograph 1: Pioneer Theater-Auditorium with Pioneer Statue in the foreground  
Front (west) elevation, facing southeast

Photograph 2: Pioneer Theater-Auditorium with stage loft at the right rear  
South elevation and west elevations , facing northeast

Photograph 3: Pioneer Theater-Auditorium Stage Loft  
facing southwest