

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

DATA SHEET

FOR NPS USE ONLY
RECEIVED DEC 9 1975
DATE ENTERED MAR 30 1976

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Commonwealth Building

AND/OR COMMON

Equitable Building

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

421 S.W. Sixth Avenue

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Portland

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

Oregon

VICINITY OF

CODE
41

COUNTY

Multnomah

CODE

051

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

DISTRICT

BUILDING(S)

STRUCTURE

SITE

OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

PUBLIC

PRIVATE

BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

IN PROCESS

BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

OCCUPIED

UNOCCUPIED

WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

YES: RESTRICTED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

NO

PRESENT USE

AGRICULTURE

COMMERCIAL

EDUCATIONAL

ENTERTAINMENT

GOVERNMENT

INDUSTRIAL

MILITARY

MUSEUM

PARK

PRIVATE RESIDENCE

RELIGIOUS

SCIENTIFIC

TRANSPORTATION

OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Lexton Ancira Incorporated (telephone: 816/531-7229)

STREET & NUMBER

Ind-Continent Bank Bldg. - 401 Main Street

CITY, TOWN

Kansas City

VICINITY OF

STATE

Missouri 64112

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Multnomah County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Portland

STATE

Oregon 97205

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Statewide Inventory of Historic Sites and Buildings

DATE

1974

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

State Parks and Recreation Branch, State Highway Building

CITY, TOWN

Salem

STATE

Oregon 97310

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

EXCELLENT DETERIORATED
 GOOD RUINS
 FAIR UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

UNALTERED
 ALTERED

CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE
 MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Equitable, or Commonwealth Building, occupies a half block on the west side of S.W. 6th Avenue between Stark and Washington Streets in Portland. Completed in 1948, it was designed by the nationally prominent Pacific Northwest architect, Pietro Belluschi, and was the first office block of the International style to be erected in the United States.

Originally twelve, it is now an elegantly restrained thirteen-story glass and aluminum box. The lives of the steel skeleton frame as expressed in natural-colored aluminum on the exterior, with vertical and horizontal elements in careful balance. The rhythms created by the panels of green-tinted glass and anodized aluminum spandrels are subtly changed on the ends of the building. The exterior wall at the ground floor is set back so that the columns supporting the upper floors suggest free-standing piloti. Above, the maximum difference in relief of elements of the facade is 7/8 of an inch. In these and other respects, the Equitable Building anticipates design elements to be used in curtain wall structures of the 1950s and '60s. In 1956 and 1957 the extra floor was added to the main block and several floors were added to the connection with the Plaza Hotel to the west - neither to the detriment of the original design. A marquee, however, has been added along 6th Avenue, which tends to break up the clean lines of the facade, and the windows on the ground floor have been remodeled. The building nevertheless substantially retains its original appearance.

SEARCHED
INDEXED
SERIALIZED
FILED
APR 11 1968
FBI - PORTLAND

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7

PAGE 1

Equitable (Commonwealth) Building, Portland, Multnomah County, Oregon description, revised March 22, 1976.

The Equitable, or Commonwealth Building, occupies a half block on the west side of SW 6th Avenue between Stark and Washington Streets in Portland. Completed in 1948, it was designed by the nationally prominent Pacific Northwest architect, Pietro Belluschi.

The Equitable building was originally built as an elegantly restrained twelve-story glass and aluminum box. The lines of the steel skeleton frame were expressed in natural-colored exterior aluminum sheathing, with vertical and horizontal elements in careful balance. The rhythms generated by the infill panels of green-tinted glass and anodized aluminum spandrels were subtly differentiated so that there are fewer rhythmic elements per panel on the broad east and west faces of the building than there are on the ends, thus establishing a careful counterpoint between the two.

In 1956 and 1957, an extra floor was added to the main block and four floors were added to a connection with the Plaza Hotel to the west. A marquee, which tends to break up the clean lines of the facade has been added on the Sixth Avenue side, and there has been some remodeling of the shop fronts at street level which interfered with and clutters the forthright simplicity of the original design.

The following discussion of the Equitable building is taken from an article by Marion D. Ross, AIA, Head, Department of Art History, University of Oregon, which appeared in the July 1972 AIA journal:

"While developing a regional expression in domestic and religious buildings, Belluschi produced a quite different structure. This was the Equitable Building in Portland, completed in 1948. The office had a long record of commercial work of distinguished quality, but this structure introduced an altogether different direction. Influenced by the International Style, it was the first building of its kind to be executed in this country. This 12-story office building had the taut skin and sparse detail that was soon to be the major form of expression for office buildings. It is not quite correct to call it a curtain wall building for it is really an extremely logical and refined expression of the concrete frame. As the *Architectural Review* noted at the time, it took the concern of Louis Sullivan for frame structure all the way to its final logical conclusion."

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"With a maximum difference in surface relief of 7/8th of an inch, it has hardly been rivaled in later structures. The design incorporated many important technical innovations, such as the use of the heat pump, but it was and still is the excellence of its shimmering surface that gives it its great appeal to the eye. In part, the design had been anticipated in a project prepared during the war years, and some of its features were suggested in the design for shops, of which Belluschi produced a number in the earlier '40s. Possibly the closest earlier design was that for an addition to the Ladd & Bush Branch of the United States National Bank of Oregon in Salem, built in 1940. This simple volume of space was faced in granite and glass and stood as a perfect foil to the older building, an ornate French Renaissance structure of 1868. The Belluschi addition has since been replaced by a continuation of the 1868 design."

"In the Equitable Building, the ground floor wall is set at the back face of the supporting columns, suggesting that had there been more space they might have been free-standing. This and some other features of the design had been anticipated in a project for an office block for *Progressive Architecture* in 1943. Perhaps if the clients had had more space and been willing to sacrifice some of the rental units on the ground floor, the Equitable Building would have had the open area and the "pilotis" which were introduced in the Lever Building in New York City several years later. In many respects, the Equitable anticipates the character of design of the Lever Building and other curtain wall office structures of the following decade."

"Since completion in 1948, two minor additions in 1957 and 1958 have been made without injury to the original design. In fact, the slight increase in height has been helpful. Portland was not yet a market for a really tall office building, and only recently has it had one or two. While the Equitable Building was the first of its kind in the US, it has a restraint and dignity that have kept it a distinguished structure when many of the thin-skinned buildings that followed it have begun to look a bit arbitrary and old-fashioned. The structure was economical as well as efficient, costing \$2 million when built."

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW

<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES: 1948

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

Pietro Belluschi

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Equitable, or Commonwealth Building, was the first office block in the International style to be erected in the United States. Built in 1948, it created considerable controversy in Portland for being at that time a radical design, but was immediately praised by national critics for its design innovations and straight-forward use of materials: natural-colored aluminum sheathing, cast and anodized aluminum spandrels, and heat-absorbing double plate green-tinted windows. Novel, too, was the use of a heat pump, which extracts heat from or discharges it to well water in the earth below to heat and cool the building. A modular approach to lighting and electrical service allowed great flexibility in locating interior partitions. Elegant, flexible, and economical, it foreshadowed what was to become the standard vocabulary for office buildings of the following two decades.

The design also reaffirmed the national reputation of Pietro Belluschi, a prominent Pacific Northwest architect who had previously received national attention for the Portland Art Museum (1932) and the Finley Mortuary (1937). Belluschi was born in Italy in 1899. Following his graduation from the University of Rome in 1922, he immigrated to America and continued his studies at Cornell. In 1927 he joined the office of the prominent Portland architect A. E. Doyle and quickly rose to the position of chief designer. Following the death of Doyle in 1928, he assumed leadership of the firm, changing the name to A. E. Doyle and Associate in 1933, and Pietro Belluschi in 1943.

During the 1930s and '40s, Belluschi's work, especially residences and churches, began to show the development of an increasingly regional character, which has since become known as the Northwest style. It is characterized by low massing and ample roofs with a combination of hip and gable and broken slopes. The spacial sense of modern architecture is combined with materials, especially timber, and natural colors of the Pacific Northwest. Some faint Japanese influence may be felt, but by and large it is based on regional vernacular building forms and techniques. The International style Equitable Building firmly cemented Belluschi's reputation as a versatile designer of national importance. He left Oregon in 1951 to become Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and has been the recipient of numerous honors and awards.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 1

Equitable (Commonwealth) Building, Portland, Multnomah County, Oregon; significance, revised March 22, 1976.

The Equitable, or Commonwealth Building, was the first metal and glass "crystal tower" in Miesian School of the International style to be erected in the United States. Completed in 1948, it created considerable controversy in Portland for being, at that time, a radical design, but was immediately praised by national critics for its design innovations and straight-forward use of materials: natural-colored aluminum sheathing, cast and anodized aluminum spandrels, and heat-absorbing double plate green-tinted windows. Novel, too, was the use of a heat pump which extracts heat from, or discharges it to, well water to heat and cool the building. A modular approach to lighting and electrical service allowed great flexibility in locating interior partitions. Elegant, flexible, and economical, it foreshadowed what was to become the standard vocabulary for office buildings of the following two decades.

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9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Ross, Marion D., "The Attainment and Restraint of Pietro Belluschi," AIA Journal, July, 1972.

Vaughan, Thomas and McMath, George. A Century of Portland Architecture. Portland, Oregon Historical Society, 1967, p. 175.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY .23

UTM REFERENCES

A	1 0	5 2 5 2 5 0	5 0 4 0 6 8 0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME/TITLE

D. W. Powers III, Preservation Specialist/Architect 12/18/75

ORGANIZATION

Oregon State Park and Recreation Branch

DATE

STREET & NUMBER

300 Highway Building

TELEPHONE

(503) 378-6118

CITY OR TOWN

Salem

STATE

Oregon

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

Edward H. Tolbot

TITLE

State Parks Superintendent

DATE

12/18/75

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Acting

John A. [Signature]

DATE

3/30/86

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

DATE

3-30-76

ATTEST:

Robert B. Kethig

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Acting

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only

received 9/12/86

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

Page

Name Commonwealth Building

State OREGON

Nomination/Type of Review

Name change approval

Date/Signature

10/9/89

ja Keeper
Attest

William B. Budney

Keeper

Attest

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**



Continuation sheet

Item number 1

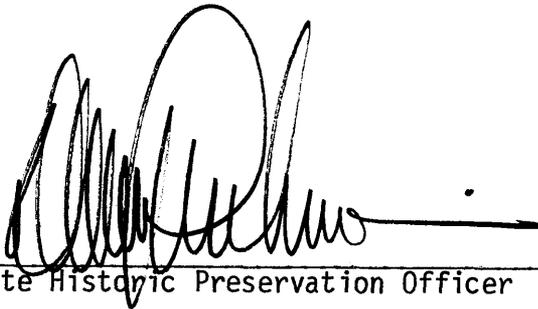
Page 1

EQUITABLE BUILDING
421 SW 6th Avenue
Portland
Multnomah County

Control number: 76001584

Listing date: 3-30-76

The purpose of this continuation sheet is to correct an error in citing historic and common names of the above-named property. The correct historic name of the property is Equitable Building, and the historic name is the preferred style. The common name of the property is Commonwealth Building.



Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

Date: September 5, 1986