

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 of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Fisher Building
other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 3011 West Grand Boulevard not for publication
city, town Detroit vicinity
state Michigan code MI county Wayne code 163 zip code 48202-3099

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	_____ buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	_____ objects
			_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this 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 meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

5. 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 of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Trade

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Office building

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

Commercial Style

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation granite

walls marble

roof green tile

other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Fisher Building stands on the northwest corner of West Grand and Second Boulevards in what is known as the New Center area, about three miles northwest of the central business district of Detroit. West Grand Boulevard is one of Detroit's main corridors with easy access to downtown. The New Center complex was designed to help alleviate heavy downtown traffic. Originally designed as a three-building unit with the Fisher as the centerpiece, this beautifully finished office tower was designed in the shape of an L, with a 28-story central office tower (442 feet high) with two flat-roofed wings of 11 stories extending to the north and west.

The basic, vertical emphasis of the Art Deco design, which is sometimes characterized as the American Vertical style, is created by the projecting piers between the strip windows and the stepped-back massing of the tower. The tall, green tile, gilt crested chateausque roof of the tower is a landmark that can be seen from many places in Detroit.

The Fisher Building has fully architecturally articulated elevations on three sides. The west elevation, although partially detailed, was not as elaborately finished because a major addition was originally planned to be joined to this side of the building.

The first three stories of the building are girded in polished, dark gray, Minnesota granite while the upper stories are grayish Maryland marble. All of the visible metal-work on the exterior, including the elaborate arcaded shop windows and the ornate doors, are solid bronze. The focal point of the exterior is the West Grand Boulevard entrance. Above the bronze and plate glass doors are intricate cast bronze panels with medallions of allegorical figures by noted Hungarian artist Geza Maroti, who also designed the lavish interior decorations. The gray granite surround is ornamented with carved decorative blocks.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D NHL #4

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance

Significant Dates

Architecture

1927 to present

1927-1928

1930-1931

Cultural Affiliation

Significant Person

Architect/Builder

Kahn, Albert

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Detroit enjoyed a building boom in the 1920's as a result of the burgeoning automobile industry and was third nationally after New York and Chicago in the design and building of the skyscraper forms. Tall buildings flourished during the period of prosperity following the First World War and just preceding the Great Depression. The Fisher Building is part of that tradition, begun by Cass Gilbert with his Woolworth building that used the tall form with setbacks and an overlay of ornament to soften the severe box-like shape. The Fisher's interior contains some of the most beautiful detailing of any American skyscraper ever built. The Fisher brothers intended the building to be a public monument as well as a gift to a more beautiful Detroit at the staggering cost of \$9,000,000 in 1927. The architect Albert Kahn had a national reputation for his industrial buildings but was known in Detroit as well for his commercial, civic and domestic structures, and this skyscraper is one of his greatest achievements.

Albert Kahn (1869-1942) was born in Germany and came to America as a boy of 11. His family was poor but he sought education and a profession in the New World. Kahn began as a office boy in the Detroit architectural firm of Mason and Rice and in 1891 won the scholarship award of the American Architect magazine for a year's study abroad. Henry Bacon, another young architect, who would later design the Lincoln Memorial, was also an award-winning student in Europe and the two joined forces to travel and sketch together. Bacon taught Kahn a great deal and he brought back to Detroit a whole new architectural vocabulary. As Kahn's reputation grew, he joined George Nettleton and Alexander Trowbridge to form a new firm and, in 1897, the firm became Nettleton and Kahn.

His commissions began to bring him powerful patrons including James E. Scripps, who owned the Detroit News; Henry Joy, president of the Parkard Motor Car Company; Henry Ford; and George C. Booth, who inherited the News from his father-in-law and who would later be the patron of Cranbrook. Kahn's early reputation was based on his efficient, large-scale factory buildings that were far more humane and light and airy than the typical 19th-century "sweat shops." Part of

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

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 # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property approximately 3.4 acres

UTM References

A

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4	6	9	2	7	0	0
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 Zone Easting Northing

B

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 Zone Easting Northing

C

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D

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

This is the original boundary of the lots on which the Fisher building was constructed.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carolyn Pitts, Historian
 organization History Division, NPS date 2/9/89
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 city or town Washington state DC zip code 20013

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The interior of the building is bisected by a thirty-foot wide, forty-four-foot high barrel-vaulted arcade that extends from the West Grand Boulevard entrance to the Lothrop Avenue entrance. A similar arcade extends through the west wing parallel to West Grand Boulevard to the west parking lot entrance. The arcade and entrance vestibules are among the most elaborately decorated spaces of their kind in the nation. The walls and columns are sheathed in large panels of forty different types of marble. The floors are laid in patterned marble. The vaulted ceilings are covered with murals and stenciling which are heavily gold leafed. At the crossing of the two arcades is a shallow dome painted with nudes surrounding a patterned central medallion. The other murals consist mostly of colored and gold leaf geometric stenciling with the representational forms limited primarily to figures, eagles, fruits and flowers and lunette panels depicting old adages, and symbols alluding to economic concepts. Superb bronze grills, bas-relief, wall medallions, and light fixtures further enrich the space, which is lit by numerous eight-foot-tall, frosted glass Art Deco lantern-style chandeliers. The bronze elevator doors at the arcade level are cast into multiple small square panels in the Renaissance manner with bas-relief scenes. At the upper levels, the elevator doors have an abstract Art Deco intaglio floral design of blossoms shaped like cogs and gears.

The second and third floor arcades and the upper floor corridors in the tower and office wings are also sheathed in Tennessee golden vein marble and American walnut is used for the doors and woodwork. The offices have marble window sills and plaster walls.

The building is divided into several functional units. The arcades are lined with shops on the first level, although originally the second and third level arcades were also commercial space. Below the main arcade is the concourse level, which originally contained shops and restaurants. From this basement level pedestrian tunnels extend under the streets to the General Motors Building across West Grand Boulevard and to the New Center Building at Second and Lothrop Avenues.

In the center of the main arcade is the entrance to the Fisher Theater. This was originally an elaborately decorated movie palace in the Art Deco-Mayan style seating 3000. In 1961 the interior of the old theater was demolished and the space rebuilt as a sleek modern style legitimate theater seating about 1600. A new brass entrance treatment was installed in the arcade at the same time.

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The north wing of the building extending along Second Avenue to Lothrop was originally constructed as the professional wing. The offices were equipped with the necessary utilities to service medical offices.

The offices in the tower and Grand Boulevard wing were rented to other professionals as well as a radio station on the twenty-eighth floor. The Fisher Brothers occupied luxuriously decorated suites on the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh floors, which are still partially intact.

The building also includes an eleven-hundred-car, ramped, parking garage, which at one time contained a service station and waiting rooms for both patrons and chauffeurs.¹

The building was completed at a cost of \$9,000,000. It won the Architectural League of New York's Silver Medal in 1929 honoring the most beautiful commercial structure of the year.

Footnote:

¹ Les Vollmert, Michigan History Division, National Register Form, 1980.

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the success of these large factories was the use of reinforced concrete throughout the structures, which he perfected along with his engineer brother, Julius. In 1910 Albert Kahn began work on the Ford Highland Park plant, and, in 1912-15, the first continuously moving assembly line was installed. Other industrial plants were designed for the Dodge Brothers, Burroughs Adding Machines, Buick Motor Cars and the Fisher Body plant (1921) in Cleveland, Ohio.

Kahn's commercial and domestic buildings would bring him an outstanding reputation as well. He did a number of buildings during World War I for Army air fields and many bases, many of them finished with fine brick work embellished with tiles. His houses for the wealthy in the Detroit suburbs are largely in the Arts and Crafts mode, including the house George Booth commissioned for Bloomfield Hills (today the Administrative Offices of Cranbrook Schools). Along with his engineering triumphs, Albert Kahn's reputation as a commercial architect was impeccable and his greatest opportunity came in 1927 when the Fisher building was commissioned.

It was to be the first and largest of three units of a vast shopping and office complex planned by the Fisher brothers of the Fisher Body Company. This would provide a secondary business district that would relieve the congestion in downtown Detroit and at the same time be more accessible to the suburbs.¹ ...

The aesthetic aspects of such an important commission required considerable study. Kahn was alarmed about the trend of architecture in the ebullient twenties. In his opinion Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Mendelsohn had gone too far in the glorification of steel and glass. He recognized that the modern skyscraper deserved an exterior treatment expressive of its structure, but he was wary of indulging in the strange or the bizarre. ... The architect Cass Gilbert of New York had found an analogy between the soaring lines of the skyscraper and those of the Gothic cathedral. He endowed his Woolworth Building and New York Life Insurance Company Building with Gothic details and silhouettes. The latter building with its steep Gothic roof was probably the prototype of the Fisher Building, but Gilbert's fussy Gothic details were abandoned in favor of a more modern decorative treatment. In his design of the Fisher Building, Kahn was undoubtedly also influenced by the work of Holabird and Root in Chicago and of Eliel Saarinen, who was then President of the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The building is basically L-shaped in plan with the 26-story tower at the corner. Shop windows facing the streets on two sides of the building are framed with round arches, and a magnificent marble-walled arcade, giving access to the shops from the rear, extends from one end of the building to the other. ...

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The design of the Fisher Building was a reaction against the so-called 'packing case' type of building, which was considered devoid of interest in the flamboyant twenties. The problem of handling great facades with a multiplicity of windows was solved by breaking the planes into panels by recession of the wall surfaces. Vertical emphasis was achieved by grouping windows in pairs and trios in these panels, and by introducing continuous piers. The transition from the eleven-story wings of the Fisher Building to the twenty-eight story tower was gracefully accomplished by a series of setbacks that produced a tapering effect. The first three stories of the building were faced with pinkish gray granite and the remainder was done in white marble.

The seven Fisher brothers had made a fortune by providing bodies for the thriving automobile industry. Pioneers in their field, they were responsible for developing the closed body which transformed the nascent automobile from a pleasure vehicle into the indispensable utility which we know today.

The Fishers were determined to make Detroit their home and to use their wealth in furthering the progress of the city. They dreamed of a magnificent office and shopping complex.

Perhaps the general Gothic conformation of the Fisher Building was too sober to make allowance for the pagan splendors to which the Fisher brothers aspired. This may explain why there was a change to the Roman style on the ground floor. The general tone was set by the heroic round arch at the entrance and the round arches that frame the shop windows along the streets. This is but scant preparation, however, for the magnificence of the interior, where a vast arcade, extending from one end of the building to the other, provides access to the rear of the shops. Upon the walls gleam forty different varieties of marble that would dazzle even the most jaded Roman emperor.

Considering the Fisher brothers' taste in materials, they could hardly be expected to be satisfied with ordinary architectural ornament. Previously Albert Kahn had adorned his buildings with traditional statuary and Classical or Renaissance details. Although he still believed in adhering to the "basic principles" of architecture, he was nevertheless attempting to evolve from historical forms a new architecture adapted to modern life. Concurrently he was searching for new decorative motifs. An early supporter of the English Arts and Crafts movement, he followed with interest the related movements in other countries. It was a time when artists were reacting against academic stereotypes and attempting to come closer to the wellsprings of artistic production by examining other artistic traditions.

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In 1927 George G. Booth had commissioned Eliel Saarinen to build the Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills. Among the artists working on the school was Geza Maroti of Budapest. In his work he had developed an individual manner based on the Magyar tradition . . . Using stylized patterns and brilliant colors, he made sculpture and painting the willing servants of architecture. Kahn found what he was looking for in the work of Maroti and engaged him to design a comprehensive decorative scheme for the Fisher Building. An impressive feature of this scheme is the main entrance arch, which was ornamented with granite carvings in relief. On the interior, the barrel vault of the arcade was decorated with the colorful frescoes and mosaics in stylized designs. Also noteworthy are the bronze plaques in low relief on the walls and the richly embossed bronze elevator doors.²

The seven Fisher brothers maintained lavish private suites on the 26th and 27th floors. Eventually "Bodies by Fisher" was absorbed into the General Motors Corporation and the three surviving Fishers sold the building in 1962. The Trizec Corporation, Ltd., of Montreal, who meticulously maintain the jewel-like interiors, bought it in 1974.

Kahn was known at the end of his career as the most internationally important industrial architect in an age of mass production -- his factories were spacious, efficient and full of light. Kahn was not a theorist like Sullivan or Frank Lloyd Wright, but he was just as involved in design, especially of 20th century forms. Paul Cret, AIA, wrote a fitting tribute to his close friend after Albert Kahn's death:

The "architecture of tomorrow" had little interest for one so engrossed in creating the architecture of today. He had the humility of the good craftsman who puts forth his works as naturally and freely as an apple tree produces apples. He never courted honors or publicity, and, when honors came, he accepted them with the most touching modesty.

Generous in his appreciation of other men's work, and charitable in his readiness to help younger men, he was a force in the city which had become dearer to him than his birthplace.

The profession, as a group, was slow in recognizing his worth; yet he was the best answer to our criticism in showing that the talent of the organizer, the clear vision of a businessman on current problems, are not incompatible with the creative mind of the artist and with his persistent quest for beauty.³

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Footnotes

- 1 W. Hawkins Ferry, The Legacy of Albert Kahn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), pp. 20-21.
- 2 Ibid., p. 24.
- 3 "Frank P. Brown Award." Tribute delivered by Paul Cret, AIA. Philadelphia: The Franklin Institute, 1942. Unpaged.

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Ferry, W. Hawkins. The Buildings of Detroit. Detroit: Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1986. Rev. ed.

_____. The Legacy of Albert Kahn: Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1970.

"The Fisher at Fifty," Michigan History Magazine (Sept/Oct. 1978), pp. 13-17.

"Frank P. Brown Award." Tribute delivered by Paul R. Cret, AIA. Philadelphia: The Franklin Institute, 1942. (Unpaged.)

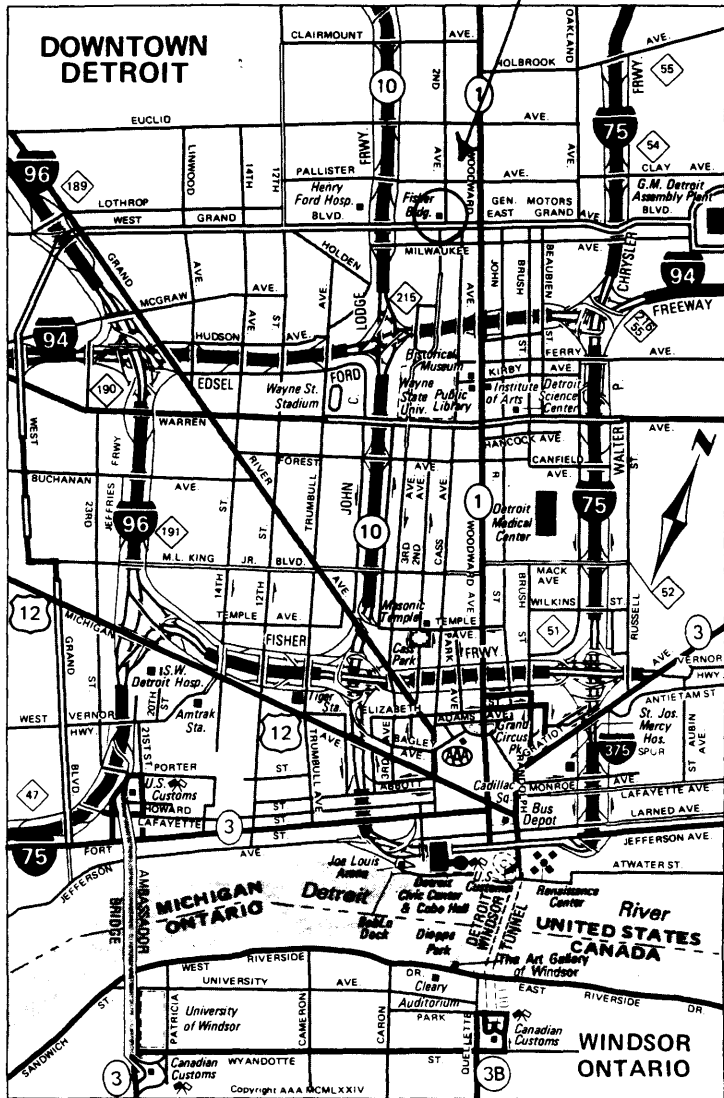
"The New Fisher Theater," Supplement to Detroit Free Press, May 14, 1961.

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Bounded on the north by Lothrop Avenue, on the east by Second Avenue, on the South by West Grand Boulevard, and on the West by Fisher Way (an alleyway). This includes Lots 23-41, except second, as opposite Lot A and vacant alley adjoining the Stewart Subdivision, Liber 8, Page 71 of Plats, Wayne County Records.



FISHER BLDG.

