

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

**FOR NPS USE ONLY**  
RECEIVED **MAR 31 1975**  
DATE ENTERED **MAY 30 1975**

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

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Northern Life Tower [preferred]

AND/OR COMMON

Seattle Tower

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

1212 - 3rd Avenue

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Seattle

VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

#7 - Hon. Brock Adams

STATE

Washington

CODE

53

COUNTY

King

CODE

033

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL <input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Tower Associates

STREET & NUMBER

Seattle Tower Building, Third and University Street

CITY, TOWN

Seattle

VICINITY OF

STATE

Washington

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

King County Auditor's Office

STREET & NUMBER

King County Courthouse

CITY, TOWN

Seattle

STATE

Washington

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Seattle Historic Building Survey

DATE

1974

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Department of Community Development

CITY, TOWN

Arctic Building, 306 Cherry Street, Seattle, Washington

STATE

## 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Northern Life Tower is a 27-story steel frame skyscraper built in 1928 near the center of Seattle's downtown financial district. At the time of its completion, the tower was the highest building in the city, rising 446 feet above sea level and 327 feet above the sidewalk. It rests on a monolithic concrete slab foundation with over 100 tons of steel reinforcement. The ground floor is faced with Texas Pink granite blocks, and the remaining surfaces are brick veneer trimmed with terra cotta. The brick is heather brown at the base of the building gradually changing in tone up the tower shaft with an increasing rate of change toward the top where it is ultimately a light tan. This is a subtle effect made less obvious at present by years of soot accumulation. The mortar and the terra cotta are also graduated in similar tones of brown, creating a deliberate monochrome effect that once included the brown tinted sidewalk.

The architectural massing of the structure is characteristic of the set-back skyscrapers typically designed in response to zoning ordinances enacted in large cities during the 1920's to control the bulk of tall office buildings.

There is a distinct stylistic resemblance between the Northern Life Tower and the second place proposal of Eliel Saarinen for the Chicago Tribune Tower competition of 1922. At its base the building is a full quarter block square, but the tower is less than 1/3 of this area in its cross-section toward the upper stories. This basic tower stands centered at the front of the lot three bays wide flanked with two one-bay lateral set-backs occurring at the third and fifth stories. Toward the back of the lot is a full width 16-story rectangular wing (seven bays wide and three bays deep) partially engaged to the tower establishing a "T" shaped plan for the sixth through sixteenth floors. This wing is extended upward a few stories like a penthouse for the three central bays that are contiguous to the tower in back, creating the penultimate step in the massing. Above this level the tower begins a series of eight minor concentric setbacks at various vertical intervals, effectively rounding off the shaft toward the top.

As is apparent in the architect's renderings, the major setbacks respond to the height of both neighboring structures, incorporating them into the sculptural composition. The rhythm of windows and piers is unmistakably similar to the adjacent building on Third Avenue. These directly neighboring buildings still stand.

In his own writings, the architect refers to the Northern Life Tower as a "composition in vertical piers which soar without hesitation from the sidewalk to the flagpole except, of course, the minor hesitations that are introduced towards the top". In between each major pier is a minor mullion pier, beginning at the third floor. The spandrels and windows are recessed between deep reveals so as to prevent them from reading as horizontal lines. The ornamental terra cotta and decorative brick work (used only in a "restrained treatment") are confined to spandrels and the tops of piers at all setbacks.

To overcome the "horizontal line and box effect" where the setbacks occur, the piers continue beyond the spandrel setbacks before they are drawn inward themselves.

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Toward the top, the corner piers are drawn in at a level lower than the tops of the piers between them, further rounding and de-emphasizing these horizontal lines.

At night the tower was originally illuminated by more than 200 flood lights located in the offsets and directed upward. One color faded into another in a phantasmagoric display -- an imitation of the aurora borealis, commonly known as the northern lights.

The 75 foot by 16 foot lobby is elaborately finished with marble walls, intricate bronze panels and escutcheons, and a ceiling decorated in low relief designs; reportedly surfaced in gold leaf. On the upper wall at the far end of the lobby is a gilt relief map of the world and a bronze clock. There are five elevators, and above, and opposite the doors in recessed panels are hidden floodlights. These are directed upward from behind bronzework fixtures indirectly filling the room with a golden light reflected from the ceiling. The glass in the chandeliers has been replaced, and the original bronze decorated high speed Kastner & Hect elevators have been removed, with the exception of a shuttle car from the 24 to the 27 floors.

The remainder of the first floor consists of approximately 10,000 square feet of commercial space. The entire second floor, which is the ground floor at the back of the sloping lot, is a parking garage with a capacity of 55 cars.

The upper office stories have wide corridors with marble floors and inlaid marble wainscoting. Most of the original light fixtures on these floors have been removed, and many of the inlaid mahogany doors have been replaced by the various tenants. Nearly all of the offices have been extensively redone and their terrazo floors are generally carpeted.

There are roughly 116,000 square feet of total rentable office space.

The original heating installation is a vacuum steam system conducted in insulated wrought iron piping. The ventilation equipment was provided with an air washer to remove smoke and stale odors.

When the cornerstone was laid, it contained sealed photographs of early Seattle, Mount Rainier, and an aerial view of the Puget Sound region. There were also included copies of the Seattle newspapers, a general history of the Northern Life Insurance Company, and freshly minted United States coins of all denominations.

The Northern Life Tower has been recently dwarfed by nearby buildings nearly twice its height, although it is still unquestionably one of the most elegant tall buildings in the Pacific Northwest.

# 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 checked="" 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

1928

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

A. H. Albertson

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Northern Life Tower was designed to house the home offices of the Northern Life Insurance Company, founded in Seattle in 1906. Plans for the building were drawn by the local firm of A. H. Albertson, Architect, Joseph W. Wilson, and Paul Richardson, Associates.

This building is considered to be the first appearance in Seattle of the Modernistic or Art Deco style, and it is probably among the earliest major works on the West Coast with this stylistic innovation. As asserted by Marcus Whiffen and Walter Kidney, the rise in Modernistic Architecture is traceable to the Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratifs of 1925, which served to popularize a taste for "modern" or innovative decorative motifs. This was in direct contrast to the then prevailing taste for historical eclecticism. The 1925 Exposition would eventually contribute to the foundations of a more intellectual modern approach by diluting the popularity of buildings with discernible references to historical precedent.

The design of the Northern Life Tower bears an obvious resemblance to the influential second prize submission for the 1922 Chicago Tribune Building competition by the Finnish Architect, Eliel Saarinen. Louis Sullivan praised his proposal as "a lonely cry in the wilderness". For several years in the late Twenties and early Thirties, Saarinen's work served as the inspiration for numerous skyscrapers throughout the United States. The Northern Life Tower is Seattle's only tall building with direct evidence of this influence.

The planned construction of the Northern Life Tower drew considerable attention from major architectural periodicals and other professional journals. Feature articles appeared in *Architect and Engineer*, *The Architect*, *Skyscraper*, and *the Pacific Builder and Engineer*.

There are, in Seattle, several smaller buildings similar in style to the Northern Life Tower built in the years following its completion. Notable among these are the old Federal Building on First Avenue, Harborview Hospital, and the Veterans' Hospital.

Abraham H. Albertson was born in New Jersey in 1872. He attended Columbia University and graduated with a degree in architecture in 1895. In 1907, he came to Seattle as supervising architect for the White-Henry-Stuart Building (since partially demolished). His most significant commission after the Northern Life Tower was St. Joseph's Church, Seattle, an austere but awesome monolithic concrete (CONTINUED)

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Castel, A. B. "Northern Life Tower", Pacific Builder and Engineer, August 4, 1928, p. 31.

McLeod, George K. "Northern Life Tower - Seattle", Skyscraper, October, 1928, p. 7.

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than one

UTM REFERENCES

*47M OK*

A	1   0	5   5   0	5   2   7   2	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

*050*      *740*

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

Jacob E. Thomas

ORGANIZATION

Office of Archaeology & Historic Preservation

DATE

February, 1975

STREET & NUMBER

P.O. Box 1128

TELEPHONE

753-4116

CITY OR TOWN

Olympia

STATE

Washington

# 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

*Charles H. McFarland*

TITLE

Director - Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission

DATE

*March 25, 1975*

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

DATE

*5/30/75*

ATTEST:

*Charles Adams*

DATE

*5-30-75*

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

*Adams*

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structure, also locally recognized as an innovative accomplishment in architectural aesthetics. Albertson was a fellow of the American Institute of Architects, and he served for several years as president of the Seattle chapter of the A.I.A.

In writing about the Northern Life Tower, Albertson is surprisingly poetic. His explanation of the inspiration for the tower's gradual color transition from brown to buff is as follows: *Lake Washington, which adjoins Seattle, lay under a panoramic play of light. From a bluff above the lake the waters of the far shore glistened in silvery whiteness in response to the pale sun hidden from the observer by a lowering sky immediately overhead. The nearer waters of the shore below were as dark as the rain laden clouds above and from the nearby shore to the farther side the gradation was striking -- like an artist's graded water color wash laid down on a four-mile stretch, foreshortened. Here was the cue for the shading of the brickwork of the Northern Life Tower.*

Elsewhere he philosophically explains that the building was designed in three-dimensional models, not on paper so as to eliminate the tendency toward a flat, drab facade.

Other buildings in Seattle by Albertson include numerous churches, the Stimon Building, the Cobb Building, the White Building Annex, the Y.M.C.A., and the Law Building and the student infirmary on the University of Washington campus.

Structural engineers for the Northern Life Tower were the firm of Hall and Stevenson. The general contractor was the Sound Construction and Engineering Company. All bronzework was designed by Ernest Waters, a local artist.

The Northern Life Insurance Company was founded in Seattle by D.B. and T.M. Morgan, with assets of \$170,232. Their first headquarters was a 12' x 12' room in the Colman Building. As the firm prospered, it was moved to larger offices where it remained until, after the death of T.M. Morgan in 1919, D.B. Morgan decided to construct his own building "finer than anything on the Pacific Coast". The plan was announced in April 1927 to build the structure at a cost of \$1.5 million.

Original specifications called for a 24-story building, although that figure was later increased to 27 stories - one floor higher above sea level than the 42-story Smith Tower. The Smith Tower stood on lower ground and it was at that time often referred to as "the tallest building west of the Mississippi".

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Ground was broken in February, 1928, and the entire staff of the Northern Life Insurance Company attended the ceremony. One year later, the building was completed.

Within six years, Morgan had paid for his building. He died in 1943 leaving a tremendous fortune. The firm presently has total insurance in force far in excess of \$500 million.

In 1962, the Seattle Chapter of the American Institute of Architects issued a special citation for the Northern Life Tower "in recognition of an older building's professional excellence and enduring quality". The committee commented that it is "a structure as pleasing to look upon today as it was 30 years ago; gracefully elegant, it is a source of inspiration to architects of this generation".

Although it is less than 50 years old, the Northern Life Tower has been recognized as an important architectural landmark for more than the past decade. As an influential early work in the Modernistic style, its historical significance is already established.

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Albertson, A.H. "Inspired by Nature", The American Architect,  
February, 1930, p. 34.

Duncan, Don, "Seattle's Architectural Yardstick", The Seattle Times,  
April 12, 1970, p. 9.

"The Northern Life Tower - Seattle", Architect and Engineer,  
December, 1929, p. 35.