CERTIFICATION OF PUBLICATION:
Omaha Preservation Administrator certifies publication in the Daily Record, the official newspaper of the City of Omaha, on Wednesday, May 27, 2009, notice re: Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission meeting, June 10, 2009.

MEMBERS PRESENT:  Douglas Bisson, Chairman
Albert Macchietto, Vice Chairman
Adrian Ferguson
Bryan Zimmer
Edward Quinn
John Schleicher
Eduardo Santamaria
Nicholas Hogan

MEMBERS ABSENT:  Sarah Burt

OTHERS PRESENT:  James Krance, Preservation Administrator

Mr. Bisson called the meeting to order at 1:45 p.m. with eight members present.

Mr. Quinn moved to APPROVE the minutes of the May 13, 2009, meeting.  Mr. Macchietto seconded the motion.

AYES:  Macchietto, Ferguson, Zimmer, Quinn, Schleicher, Santamaria, Hogan

ABSTAIN:  Bisson

Motion carried 7-0-1

NATIONAL REGISTER NOMINATION:
Case #H5-09-07
James Krance, Administrator
Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission – City of Omaha

REQUEST:  Approval of National Register Nomination
LOCATION:  2223 Dodge Street

Northern Natural Gas Headquarters Building

At the Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission meeting held on June 10, James Krance, Administrator of the Commission, presented this request.

Mr. Krance pointed out that the Northern Natural Gas Headquarters Building is located directly out the window to the north.

The Northern National Gas Building is located at 23rd and Dodge Street and is immediately across the street from Joslyn Memorial Art Museum and near Central High School. The building is nominated under Criterion “A” for its association with Omaha’s emergence as a regional headquarters location for service industry-related companies during the post-World II period. As Omaha’s economy shifted from a focus of commercial-processing to a focus on service industries, Northern Natural Gas Company became representative of the city’s corporate image. Also eligible under Criterion “C” for its embodiment of a type and period of design, namely corporate American architecture of the post-World World War II period as
manifested in the Modern Movement and International styles. Sheathed in glass and flat brick walls with simple stainless steel accents, the gas company building embodies Modern architecture. The building retains good physical integrity and significant, character-defining features are all intact. The period of significance of the building is 1951-1963, encompassing the years of construction of the building and the contributing parking garages.

During the post-World War II period, the city of Omaha witnessed the economy shift from commercial-processing dominated economy to a service economy. As the stockyards and smelters and meat packing industry declined, insurance, banking, finance, real estate corporate offices emerged.

Northern Natural Gas Company was in operation since the 1930’s but expanded rapidly in the 1950’s, as natural gas, a relatively new energy product at the time gained acceptance. During this period, the gas company became a rising star in Omaha’s growing service economy. The company expanded by building new pipelines and acquiring new customers. At the end of 1948, Northern served 242 cities and towns; by 1959 this number increased to 444 communities. By 1965, there were almost 20,000 miles of pipeline from the Mexican to Canadian border. Further demonstrating Northern’s rise to regional and national prominence was Fortune magazine’s, June 1957 listing of the company as one of the six major natural gas companies in the United States.

At the end of 1951, the company assembled its five disbursed Omaha offices into a new headquarters building. In 1957, the construction of the significant tower to the south was announced. The headquarters addition would accommodate the company’s growing work force, which increased from 2,500 to 3,300 between 1953 and 1958. The resulting structure reflected the new corporate architectural language of post-World War II American modernism, projecting an architectural image of organization, standardization, and efficiency; and provided Omaha with one of the tallest and most modern office buildings. The building sits on a high hill making it visible all over Omaha.

Criterion “C” is summarized under architecture. Modern architecture of the post-World War II period has roots in late nineteenth and early twentieth century architectural styles including the Prairie, Art Moderne, Art Deco and the International Style. Although established and accepted in Europe in the early twentieth-century, modern architecture was not widely accepted in America until the 1950’s following World War II. The first two structures share certain characteristic features, such as simple design, integration of all design elements, rectilinear, use of modern materials, expressed structure, little ornamentation, open plans and functional spaces.

The International Style and industrial architecture of the Bauhaus, transformed the tall office building into a sealed box with symmetrical and rhythmic elevations of curtain walls, comprised of banded glass buildings with steel mullions and polished surfaces. Using steel skeletons with glass skins an architectural image of organization, efficiency, standardization, and ambition embodied the principals of postwar corporate America.

Technological innovations became universal during the postwar period including mechanical ventilation, air conditioning, and fluorescent lighting. Air conditioning made possible the 1950’s sealed office box, so immediately recognizable by the uninterrupted windows.

Latenser & Sons, the son and grandson of John Latenser designed the Northern Natural Gas buildings. John Latenser designed other prominent buildings in Omaha such as Central High School, the courthouse, the Scottish Rite temple and a number of schools. The first building was built in 1951 and demonstrates the Modern Style by the simple use of materials, the banding of the masonry work, the banding of the windows and the horizontal emphasis of composition emphasizing the steel frame construction on the interior. The building is very indicative of the Bauhaus and Walter Gropius during the 1930’s.

The second building was built in 1957 and was actually preceded by two six-story additions that were designed and built in 1953 and 1954. The demolition of the additions in 1957 reflects the rapid expansion of Northern Natural Gas. The modern structural engineering, architecture and open plan allowed for the fifteen-story addition to be integrated into the headquarters’ existing building. The seventh through the fifteenth floors of the tower are the same except that on the fourteenth floor there is a circular stairway.
that connects to the fifteenth floor where there were offices with expansive views due to the floor to ceiling windows, which are approximately two stories in height.

During the 1960’s two parking garages that were built of concrete were added; the western parking garage in 1960 and the additional garage in 1963. Concrete was a material that gained prominence during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, continue the modern imagery propagated by the headquarter buildings through both contemporary materials and functional design. The garages also incorporate the company’s own product for the use of natural gas infra-red overhead heaters to prevent ice and snow accumulation on the driveways and garage approaches. The infrared heaters are still present near the ramp and the garage entrances. The garages are consistent with the national trend toward urban parking garages during the postwar period. As the nation experienced rising affluence during the postwar era and succumbed to a general “transportation affliction;” the rising number of vehicles in the urban and commercial core dictated the erection of parking garages to both protect and hide the vehicular clutter.

Mid-City Bank currently owns the building and Jim Fitl is the contact person. The company may want to market the building to take advantage of all state and national tax credits. The grant program hired the preservation contractor, Mead & Hunt to prepare the nomination.

In summary, Northern Natural Gas building is eligible for Criterion “A”, the commerce with the association and significant role of the Omaha growing service economy, during the post-World War II period and under Criterion “C”, architecture for the embodiment of modern architectural style as applied in a tall office building – one of the first tall, modern office buildings in the city of Omaha.

The composition of the building reflects the Bauhaus with the dark base and horizontality and the office tower expresses the international style. The integration of the original building and the second building is well done with the red granite base, the shaft and the three-part composition. The stainless steel panels that encompass the elevator core, stairway and bathroom core tie the masses together. Red granite can be found within the secondary entrance or the main entrance to the tower as well as the entrance to the original building.

The CEO for Northern Natural Gas was Harriman during the time that the original building was constructed. Harriman was closely associated with Joslyn and did not want the original headquarters building to compete with the Joslyn. At the end of World War II there was a renewal plan for downtown Omaha and there was consideration to move the government portion of the City of Omaha would move to the northwest corner of the downtown area anchoring with Joslyn.

The contractor for the original building was the Parson Construction Company and Kiewit was the contractor for the office tower. Mr. Macchietto stated that Parson Construction Company was the predecessor to Hawkins.

Mr. Krance distributed copies of the original blueprints for the nomination.

In response to Mr. Hogan, Mr. Krance stated all four structures are considered as contributing; the original building, the tower and the two parking structures because they were built during the period of significance, 1951-1963. Even though the area is not considered downtown, the building has a substantial amount of square footage so there would be a need for a significant amount of parking. A national register nomination does not inhibit the owner from demolition of the building or portions of the parking garage. The most important portion of this nomination would be the main office buildings.

In response to Mr. Bisson, Mr. Krance replied that the green space occurs to the east of the building. Mr. Bisson stated the potential for redevelopment in the area is increasing and will be in conjunction with other activities.

Mr. Quinn asked if there is guidance to the precedent that is being set by nominating buildings that are not over 50 years old. Mr. Krance answered that the time period when the parking garage was built was so close. He stated that the state and the consultant felt that it would be incorrect to exclude the parking garage. The 50-year rule is a guidance or a thumbnail guideline. For example, the local register has a pedestrian bridge that was built in the late 60’s and a neon sign that was done in the late 60’s.
Approximately 10 years ago, the group 2020 Omaha attempted to nominate the Indian Hills Theater, which was also built in the late 60's. According to the Department of Interiors guidelines, a new item could be nominated if it has the correct impact and significance.

Mr. Macchietto moved to APPROVE the nomination. Mr. Schleicher seconded the motion.

AYES: Zimmer, Quinn, Schleicher, Santamaria, Hogan, Macchietto, Ferguson, Bisson

Motion carried 8-0

Discussion:

Mr. Gary Bowen appeared before the commission to present information regarding the courthouse skylight. Mr. Bowen stated his firm was hired to do a study on the rotunda for the courthouse. The first project is the replacement of the original skylight as shown in a slide show that was presented. The original design is somewhat different from the actual building that was built in 1912. The architect was the original Latenser firm. In 1919, there was a fire that occurred in the rotunda, which is a six-story open space with a skylight at the top located in the middle of the building. The fire nearly destroyed the building, the interior of the rotunda has suffered some stress after restoration.

There are four different components: the skylight, the stained glass dome and the murals at the top of the rotunda and an overall rotunda restoration plan. The skylight is a very visible element on the top of the courthouse that is listed on the National Register. The stained glass dome is a feature of the building and the murals at the top of the rotunda are significant. The skylight is capped by a finial and the steel super structure holds up the skylight and the curved section, which is the stained glass dome. The murals have been over painted three times since 1919 and show water damage from the skylight, which has been leaking as evidenced in the photos by the paint peeling. Evergreen Studios completed 119 paint samples on the murals and are considered to be restorable or can be conserved.

The plan is to replace the skylight with a new modern insulated glass skylight that will replicate the original skylight. The original skylight was designed for collection of the condensation, which would run down into a collection gutter. Over the years the gutter has sagged, the wood has rotted and the weep holes have been clogged; the whole system is not a workable system. The new skylight, which should be completed in the fall of 2009, will look exactly like the original skylight and will consist of aluminum with insulated glass and copper channels in an aluminum frame.

The stained glass dome is magnificent but some of the lighter sections have been replaced. There are 8,000 pieces of stained glass that have been catalogued. The stained glass has never been cleaned. As indicated in the photos there is water damage and many sections of the glass are cracked or broken. The project to restore the original glass will cost approximately $150,000.00.

Evergreen Studios will complete an overall master plan for the paint in the rotunda. The rotunda has been painted nine times previously. An overall painting plan will be developed after the exploratory work is completed.

In response to Mr. Bisson, Mr. Bowen stated the work is already funded. The building is owned by Douglas County and managed by the Omaha Douglas Building Commission.

Mr. Jim Krance, Preservation Administrator, stated he is busy with the construction season and inspections of Landmark buildings. The contractor has completed the post-World War II neighborhoods and the gas company building survey. The major findings were historic districts such as the Fairacres area. Dillon Fairacres is an area with substantially built, late 1940’s to early 1950’s ranch-style houses and split-levels. There are a number of nominations for individual structures from substantial residences to a grain elevator shown in the recommendation section. The grain elevator is one of the largest elevators in the state and is located north of I-80 near the intersection of I-480, Kennedy and I-80.
In response to Mr. Quinn, Mr. Krance was not aware of any homes or buildings located in the Fairacres area that are on the National Register. The Chancellery Building located north of Dodge near 66th Street has been nominated as a modern office building. Other buildings that could be nominated would include the chapel at Brownell Talbot School, the memorial half crescent in Memorial Park, office buildings near 72nd & Dodge, and several modern looking homes located west of UNO. There are several homes in the low to moderate-income neighborhoods that are noteworthy located south of downtown in the Karen and Maenner Addition. Several churches and schools such as St. Thomas Moore Catholic Church and the former Archbishop Ryan High School are also noteworthy as well as the Satellite Motel near 60th & L Street.

**ADJOURNMENT:**

Mr. Ferguson moved to ADJOURN the meeting. Mr. Schleicher seconded the motion.

AYES: Quinn, Schleicher, Santamaria, Hogan, Macchietto, Ferguson, Zimmer, Bisson

Motion carried 8-0

The meeting adjourned at 2:45 p.m.

Debbie Hightower
Recording Secretary