

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. 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.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Northern Federal Building

Other names/site number: _____

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

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

2. Location

Street & number: 386 Wabasha Street North

City or town: Saint Paul State: MN County: Ramsey

Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: N/A

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___national ___statewide ___local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___A ___B ___C ___D

Signature of certifying official/Title: Date State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	
In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria. Signature of commenting official: Date Title : State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the 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 ☐

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

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

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE/TRADE/business

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property:

Foundation: CONCRETE

Walls: GLASS

Roof: SYNTHETICS

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Northern Federal Building is located at 386 Wabasha Street in the downtown core of Saint Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota. The property is located at the northwestern quarter of the city block bounded by Wabasha Street North to the southwest, 6th Street East to the northwest, Cedar Street to the northeast, and 5th Street East to the southeast. The building was designed as speculative office space by local architectural firm Grover Dimond Associates incorporating Libbey Owens Ford's innovative "Vari-Tran Thermopane" reflective glass cladding system at the upper levels (Photo 1 and Figure 3). This glass curtain wall encloses levels three through sixteen of the building and is comprised of a thin-mullion, banded grid system that reflects the surrounding Saint Paul skyline. The building is capped with a thin band of beige aggregate-covered panels. Levels one and two are recessed and clad in black granite and large double-height banks of windows. Additional beige-aggregate covered panels are located at grade on the northwest and southwest elevations. The Northern Federal Building's minimalist reflective glass skin is its primary design statement, a choice typical of its Late-Modern architectural style. The reflective glass skin retains excellent integrity. The interior of the building was gutted by a former owner in 2020 as part of a failed redevelopment project, however the character defining

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public spaces of the central circulation core and double height lobby with central mezzanine both remain.

Narrative Description

Setting

The Northern Federal Building, is located in an area of downtown Saint Paul that was heavily redeveloped as part of the city's urban renewal era "Capital Centre plan." This part of the city is populated with Modern style towers that were constructed between c. 1955 and c. 1974; most of these buildings reflect the design language of the International Style (Figures 5-9). In its setting, the Northern Federal Building is notable for its distinctive Late-Modern style reflective glass cladding, which reflects the Saint Paul skyline, particularly the neighboring Osborn Building.

The Northern Federal Building is located at the northwestern quarter of the city block bounded by Wabasha Street North to the southwest, 6th Street East to the northwest, Cedar Street to the northeast, and 5th Street East to the southeast (Figures 1 and 2). It is built to the public sidewalk at the northwest and southwest, fronts a pedestrian plaza known as Osborn Plaza to the southeast, and is contiguous with the neighboring parking ramp to the northeast. The pedestrian plaza to the southeast is flat, and dotted with small trees, providing an unobstructed view of the upper levels of the Northern Federal Building, and the Saint Paul skyline that it reflects (Photos 2 and 8). Two other buildings also front Osborn Plaza – the Osborn Building (constructed 1968, 370 Wabasha Street, National Register #100003233) to the southeast and a parking ramp and retail building originally known as the "Skyway Building" (constructed c. 1968-1970, 56 6th St E) to the northeast. While all three buildings were constructed as part of the "Capitol Center plan," they were undertaken as separate developments and were not functionally related.

Exterior

The sixteen-story Northern Federal Building has a rectangular plan, flat roof, steel and concrete frame, and concrete foundation. The upper levels of the exterior are clad in a reflective glass curtain wall that terminates in a band of beige aggregate-covered panels and a flat roof (Photos 1-8). The horizontal bands of glass panels are organized in a rhythm of two alternating sizes, where the larger size panel corresponds to levels 3 through 16 at the interior and the smaller size panel corresponds to the structural and interstitial spaces between each level. At the top of the building the final two bands of glass and the band of aggregate-covered panels correspond with a double-height mechanical level. Both the reflective glass and the aggregate panels are original to the building.

Below the glass, the recessed first and second levels are clad in black granite with double height banks of windows and serve as a plinth for the upper levels of the building (Photos 1-3 and 8). Additional original beige aggregate covered panels are located at grade on the northwest and southwest elevations (Photo 9). A narrow band of anodized aluminum panels provides a visual transition between the second and third levels (Photos 1 and 5).

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The building's primary entrance is centered on the southeast elevation. The entry block is comprised of a bank of four aluminum-frame fully glazed doors flanked by full height sidelites (Photo 8). The primary entrance remains in its original location, however the current door configuration dates to Ecolab's 1998 remodel. A flat metal canopy is located at clerestory level above the entrance. The canopy continues to the southwest corner of the building and wraps onto the southwest elevation for one bank of windows (Photo 1).

The granite cladding and windows at the first and second levels and at the primary entrance date to 1998, when EcoLab purchased the building. EcoLab had constructed its headquarters building (the "Osborn Building," 370 Wabasha Street, St. Paul) on the same pedestrian plaza in 1968.

A secondary entrance is located at the eastern end of the northeast elevation. The entrance is composed of a pair of metal swing doors and provides ramped access to the building's lower levels. At the northeast elevation, the first and second levels of the building are contiguous with the neighboring parking structure. At the other three elevations, the first and second levels of the building are recessed both physically and visually, leaving the reflective glass curtain wall at the upper levels as the building's dominant exterior design statement.

Interior

The interior of the building was gutted by a former owner in 2020 as part of a failed redevelopment project.

Intended as speculative office space, the Northern Federal Building was designed with floor plates hung off a central structural and circulation core. During the building's period of significance, the first and second levels comprised a double height public lobby with a central mezzanine, levels three through fifteen were leasable office space, and the two lower levels and double-height sixteenth level provided mechanical and service space and storage.

A circulation core comprising four elevators and a staircase rises through the center of the building. The footprint of the elevator lobbies is extant at each level, with access to the lobbies provided by doors at the lobbies' northwest and southeast sides (Photo 15 shows the mezzanine elevator lobby, photos 22-23 show a typical upper-level elevator lobby). At the first level elevator lobby, evidence of the original adhered acoustical tile ceiling panels is visible (Photo 14). At the mezzanine level, textural bronze-look elevator doors are extant, and many of the lobbies retain what appear to be original operational panels for the elevators (Photos 13 and 23). The concrete stair is located directly to the southwest of the elevator lobbies, with separate access doors at each level (Photo 24).

The first and second levels comprise a double height public lobby with a mezzanine surrounding the central circulation core (Photos 10-12). At the ceiling, most of the finish material has been removed, but some areas of original adhered acoustical tile ceiling panels are extant. The exterior walls are comprised of double height windows separated by double height pilasters with flared capitals that connect in a series of round arches which stretch onto the second level ceiling. The pilasters and arches are clad in beige aggregate that matches the aggregate covered panels at the

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exterior of the building. At the first level, the space is open with circulation along the exterior walls and the circulation core at the center. The mezzanine is suspended off the circulation core and held back from the exterior walls on three sides, providing views from both the first level and the mezzanine of the double height windows and arches the exterior walls. At these three sides, the mezzanine terminates in a low wall and extruded aluminum railing. The wall retains some historic plaster finish. The extruded aluminum railing is assumed to date to the 1998 EcoLab remodel. At the northeast side, the mezzanine extends to the exterior wall of the building, where a connection to the City of Saint Paul's publicly owned skyway system is located. The skyway connection includes a single glass swing door, and two pairs of large, fixed windows. A vestibule space with a low ceiling is located along the wall providing a visual cue for the skyway connection (Photo 12). The date of the vestibule construction is unknown, but is typical of office buildings in downtown Saint Paul, which are connected to the public skyway system at the second level. All other finish materials were stripped from the lobby/mezzanine space as part of the failed 2020 project.

During the period of significance and throughout most of the building's life, levels three through fifteen were used as rental office space and level sixteen served as a mechanical level. At these levels, the building was also stripped of finish materials and partition walls during the failed 2020 project. Currently, levels three through five are partially finished as micro-unit apartments that date to the failed 2020 project. At these levels, units are arranged along the exterior walls and a corridor surrounds the central circulation core (Photos 16 through 18). Levels six through sixteen are currently unfinished, with open floor plates surrounding the circulation core (Photos 19 through 21). Levels 6 and 7 have some plumbing dating to 2020. Despite the removal of finishes, these levels retain several important character defining features, specifically the central circulation core including elevator lobbies, the original ceiling height and the original windows.

The lower levels are divided into various mechanical and storage spaces. They are finished with concrete floors, a combination of concrete and gypsum board walls, and generally unfinished ceilings with exposed systems.

Integrity

The Northern Federal Building was designed as a speculative office building in the Late-Modern style. The Northern Federal Building has not been moved and retains integrity of location. The Northern Federal Building was constructed in 1973 as part of Saint Paul's downtown urban renewal efforts. The building is located in a portion of downtown Saint Paul that was redeveloped as the "Capitol Centre plan", and the Northern Federal Building's immediate setting of other urban renewal era Modern style buildings within the greater downtown core of Saint Paul remains intact. The Northern Federal Building was designed in the popular Late-Modern mode of decorative glass skins that "reflect the surrounding buildings and sky." While the building's primary entrance and secondary exterior cladding at the first and second levels were altered in 1998, when Ecolab purchased the property, the current cladding serves the same design purpose as the original – providing a pedestal for the upper-level glass. With the glass cladding

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intact, the Northern Federal Building retains integrity of its most important exterior design statement and character defining material. It also retains the decorative exposed aggregate panels at the first level secondary elevations and at the roofline. At the interior, the building retains the primary public spaces, including the volume of its double height lobby/mezzanine with its aggregate covered pilasters and arches at the exterior walls and its central circulation core, including the original elevator lobbies and stair. Because the building was designed as speculative office space, many of the office levels changed spatial organization and finishes over time. At the upper levels, the building retains large windows. The Northern Federal Building retains the feeling of and association as a mid-century office building. The Northern Federal Building retains sufficient integrity to convey its history from its period of significance under Criterion C in the area of architecture as a representation of Late-Modernism in Saint Paul's central business district.

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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.)

- ☐ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1973

Significant Dates

1973

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Grover Dimond Associates (Architect)

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Northern Federal Building at 386 Wabasha Street in Saint Paul, Minnesota, designed by Grover Dimond Associates, is locally significant under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C in the area of architecture as a representation of Late-Modernism in Saint Paul's central business district. Late-Modernism rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s and marked a departure from the rationality of the International Style in favor of "the rhetorical devices of exaggeration, repetition, and paradox."¹ The Northern Federal Building embodies the "paradox of a building with glass walls and no windows" with its reflective glass cladding serving as a mirror for the modern city.² The Period of Significance for the Northern Federal Building is 1973, the year that it opened to the public.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Northern Federal Building at 386 Wabasha Street in Saint Paul, Minnesota, designed by Grover Dimond Associates, is locally significant under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C in the area of architecture as a representation of Late-Modernism in Saint Paul's central business district. Late-Modernism rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s and marked a departure from the rationality of the International Style in favor of "the rhetorical devices of exaggeration, repetition, and paradox."³ The Northern Federal Building embodies the "paradox of a building with glass walls and no windows" with its reflective glass cladding serving as a mirror for the modern city.⁴ The Period of Significance for the Northern Federal Building is 1973, the year that it opened to the public.

Saint Paul Urban Renewal and the Capitol Centre Plan

In *Past Choices/Present Landscapes*, their seminal work on the impact of urban renewal in the Twin Cities, Judith Martin and Antony Goddard describe post World War II Saint Paul as follows:

In the 1950s downtown St. Paul was clearly in trouble. Most downtown buildings dated from the 1880s. The building boom of the 1920s had affected St. Paul much less than Minneapolis; relatively few 1920s or newer buildings existed, and those that did were

¹ Docomomo, "Late Modern," <https://www.docomomo-us.org/style/late-modern>

² Ibid.

³ Docomomo, "Late Modern," <https://www.docomomo-us.org/style/late-modern>

⁴ Ibid.

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scattered throughout the central business district. Most block fronts were dominated visually by nineteenth-century buildings, so downtown *looked* old, especially since many of the older buildings had not been well maintained.⁵

City leaders recognized the lack of investment in downtown that was the direct result of the Depression and the war and, in 1944, formed the Central Business Development Committee and hired noted industrial designer Ramond Lowey to create a development plan for the central business district.⁶ In 1948 the city formed the Saint Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) as a mechanism for obtaining and channeling federal funds into the creation of new housing and downtown revitalization. Initially the HRA focused on investing in the area around the State Capitol, in part because infighting among “business and labor leaders and government agencies” stalled downtown investment efforts.⁷

In response to the perceived crisis of an aging downtown, the “City Planning Board stated, ‘Apparently, the sporadic efforts of individual interests have not been able to revitalize the Central Business District. There appears to be little factual basis for optimism concerning the ability of individual action alone to bring Downtown up to competitive standards.’ In 1958 the City Planning Board issued a report on the state of downtown that concluded that the City’s powers of eminent domain would be required to solve the problem of land assembly that thwarted private improvements.”⁸ The report also recommended:

- Establishing compatible land uses, including concentrating downtown retail along 7th Street;
- Increasing downtown density through the construction of taller buildings while providing open space to open up the downtown visually;
- Improving traffic and pedestrian circulation and improving parking;
- Redeveloping the “hole in the doughnut,” a “four-block area bounded by Wabasha, Minnesota, 5th and 7th streets, that was moribund” and which would eventually become the core of the Capitol Centre redevelopment project.⁹

To advance these goals, the Saint Paul Mayor’s Office in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce worked to create a new body called the Metropolitan Improvement Committee, which worked with the HRA to develop the “Capitol Centre plan.”¹⁰ The Capitol Centre plan was released to the public in 1962 and focused on redeveloping a twelve-block core of downtown

⁵ Judith A. Martin and Antony Goddard, *Past Choices/Present Landscapes: The Impact of Urban Renewal on the Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1989), 69.

⁶ National Register of Historic Places, Osborn Building, Saint Paul, Ramsey, Minnesota, #100003233.

⁷ Martin and Goodard, *Past Choices/Present Landscapes*, 71.

⁸ Hess, Roise and Company, “Minnesota Mutual Life Insurance Company Building, 345 Cedar Street, Saint Paul and the Saint Paul Urban Renewal Historic District: National Register Evaluation” quoting Jeffrey A. Hess and Paul Clifford Larson, *St. Paul’s Architecture: A History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 202.

⁹ Martin and Goddard, *Present Choices/Present Landscapes*, 70.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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Saint Paul. The plan spurred significant development in the area including the Northern Federal building.

A leading member of the “committee to formulate the Capitol Centre plan” was Saint Paul architect Grover Dimond, Jr. Dimond was a partner in Grover Dimond Associates, which was founded by Grover Dimond [Sr.] in 1948 as an architectural and engineering firm. Grover Dimond, Jr. joined the firm in the 1950s.¹¹ In addition to being instrumental in the execution of the Capitol Centre plan, Dimond was a partner in Convention Center Architects and Engineers “an interoffice consortium formed to develop the St. Paul Civic Center” and a member of INTERPRO, a collaborative firm that was responsible for the 1970 Comprehensive Plan for the Minnesota State Capitol Area. Through these roles, Dimond had an outsized impact on the broader postwar development of the city of Saint Paul; he was also the architect responsible for the design of the Northern Federal Building.¹²

Development of the Northern Federal Building

As part of the Capitol Centre project, in the summer of 1969 the Saint Paul HRA sought proposals for the redevelopment of the parcel on the southeast corner of East. 6th Street and Wabasha Street.¹³ Three proposals were received:

- Northern Federal Savings and Loan Association proposed “a 16-story office building, with the firm’s savings department and several retail shops on the first two floors and a restaurant on the top level.”¹⁴
- Midwest Federal Savings and Loan Association proposed a 16- to 22-story building that would be a replica of its 20-story headquarters buildings in Minneapolis.”¹⁵
- Economics Laboratory, Inc. [EcoLab] “the owner and principal occupant of the Osborn Building...indicated that it might wish to construct an office building comparable to its Osborn Building, but did not indicate any specific plans or a timetable for construction.”¹⁶

The HRA was “not willing to wait for further information from Economics Laboratory and...decided to go ahead with a choice between the two savings and loan associations.”¹⁷ The HRA selected the Northern Federal Savings and Loan proposal. Plans for the proposed building were presented to the HRA in December of 1969. Designed by Grover Dimond, Jr., the defining characteristic of the proposed building was its “reflective glass exterior.” A 1969 article about the proposed development in the *Minneapolis Tribune* noted that “the building’s top 13 stories will

¹¹ Alan Lathrop, *Minnesota Architects: A Biographical Dictionary*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 58.

¹² Lathrop, *Minnesota Architects*, 59; Capital Area Architectural and Planning Board, Published Records and Reports, Finding Aid, Minnesota Historical Society.

¹³ “2 Loan Associations Bid for St. Paul Building Site,” *The Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 7, 1969, p. 19.

¹⁴ “S&L Firms Vie for St. Paul Building Site,” *The Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 15, 1969, p.35.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “2 Loan Associations Bid for St. Paul Building Site,” *The Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 7, 1969, p. 19.

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have a glass exterior that will reflect the surrounding buildings and sky.”¹⁸ A 1973 follow up article about the building stated that “glass is a decorative theme” and that the exterior was clad in “mirror-like glass.”¹⁹ The “panoramic view from floor-to-ceiling windows” were central to the leasing campaign throughout the 1970s (Figure 4).²⁰

With construction complete, the Northern Federal Building was immediately recognizable as a uniquely modern element of St. Paul’s skyline. An aerial photograph dating to 1978 (Figure 10) shows the Northern Federal Building as dark, reflective glass standing in clear contrast to the white, beige, and red masonry buildings making up the rest of downtown St. Paul. When viewed at this distance, the only building that appears at all similar is the neighboring Osborn Building, which also appears dark, as a result of shadows cast by the metal fins that make up its cladding system (Figure 7).

Northern Federal Savings and Loan never occupied the Northern Federal Building, which was developed as speculative office space.²¹ Northern Federal sold the project to Yorktown Investments during construction and the building was sold again, to Carlson Companies, in 1976.²² The property was eventually rebranded as the Capital Centre Building.²³

According to architectural historians Jeffrey Hess and Paul Clifford Larson, when the Northern Federal building opened in 1973, it “in effect marked the end of the Capital Centre project, although the HRA did not officially close its books on downtown urban renewal until March 1974.” In their assessment of the Northern Federal building, Hess and Larson write,

Sharing a small concrete plaza with the Osborn Building [Ecolab’s headquarters, listed in the NRHP in 2018], the reflective glass block held up a mirror to its gleaming neighbor, creating what was arguably the only aesthetically successful pairing of buildings in the entire urban renewal undertaking. Two decades later, the affinity between the two buildings became even stronger. In 1998, Ecolab turned the Capital Centre Building into its corporate training center and remodeled the plinth...to match the black granite frame at the base of the Osborn Building.²⁴ (Figure 7 depicts the Osborn Building).

Ecolab used the building as a training center for nearly twenty years and, during its tenancy, updated the interior to reflect contemporary trends (Figure 11). By February 2020 the building

¹⁸ “16-story Glass-walled Building Planned for Downtown St. Paul,” *The Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 5, 1969, p. 20.

¹⁹ “Glass is a decorative theme,” *Star Tribune*, September 2, 1973, p. 31.

²⁰ Marketing materials also emphasized “the perfectly flexible office space...carpeting, draperies, wall coverings, and our own interior designer to help you plan your new office.” Advertisement “The Best Office Building in the Entire Metropolitan Area is Already Half Full,” *Star Tribune*, September 9, 1973.

²¹ Jeffrey A. Hess and Paul Clifford Larson, *St. Paul’s Architecture: A History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 214.

²² “Carlson Buys Northern Federal Building,” *Star Tribune*, October 1, 1976, p. 15.

²³ Hess and Larson, *St. Paul’s Architecture*, 214.

²⁴ Hess and Larson, *St. Paul’s Architecture*, 214.

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had been sold to a Chicago-based real estate developer in a foreclosure sale.²⁵ The developer planned to “convert the vacant 17-story office tower into ‘The Nicole,’ luxury apartments and offices suites over a 10,000-square-foot grocery store and wine bar.”²⁶ Work was undertaken and some of the former office floors were in the process of being built out as apartments when “unpaid contractors walked off the job” in 2021; the building eventually went into receivership before it was acquired by Kaeding Development Group and Inland Real Estate Acquisitions.²⁷

Late Modernism and the Northern Federal Building

In his book of essays *Late-Modern Architecture and Other Essays*, postmodern theorist Charles Jencks writes “architectural movements are complex affairs, part stylistic and part ideological, part unconscious practice and part conscious convention, and any transition from one era to another is bound to be a flowing thing.”²⁸ Such is the transition from “Modernism” to “Post-Modernism, where “Late-Modernism” is both its own style and the bridge between those two better known architectural typologies.

Where the design of International Style buildings emphasized the functionality and straightforward expression of form without ornament, Jencks argues that Late-Modern buildings push these architectural impulses to the brink of “irrationality” and “forced harmonization” by adhering so closely to a formal design language of grids, symmetry, and repetition that a building’s form and function are no longer easily identifiable through its exterior expression.²⁹

Likewise, while the Late-Modern and Post-Modern both embraced “applied skins” (curtainwalls) as significant design statements, those design statements differed greatly. The Late-Modern viewed the curtainwall as an abstracted formalist endeavor using what Jencks refers to as “structure as ornament.” Post-Modern buildings used skins to incorporate applied ornament, historical-references, and “traditional” building forms in an attempt to create “a more complex, inclusive architecture in which buildings were placed in sympathetic dialogue with their neighbors, an architecture that made clear links with history and that accepted the messy and seemingly chaotic quality of human activity.”³⁰

The Northern Federal Building is a notable example of the Late-Modern “glass container building” which Rachel Nugent and Sophie Roark of Rosin Preservation describe in their National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Executive Plaza Office Building in Kansas City, Missouri:

²⁵ “Troubled developer bought former Ecolab tower in St. Paul. Now it’s in receivership, mired in legal claims,” *Pioneer Press/Twincities.com*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.twincities.com/2022/02/15/former-ecolab-university-center-tower-in-downtown-st-paul-in-receivership-contractors-left-unpaid-for-the-nicole-project/>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid; “Inland, Kaeding plan 178 apartments at former Ecolab University tower in downtown St. Paul,” *Pioneer Press/Twincities.com*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.twincities.com/2023/02/07/inland-kaeding-plan-178-apartments-at-former-ecolab-university-tower-in-downtown-st-paul/>

²⁸ Charles Jencks, *Late-Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 6.

²⁹ Ibid., 32.

³⁰ Leland M. Roth, *American Architecture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 483.

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While Late-Modern does not denote a specific aesthetic, glass container buildings are a recognizable group sharing some of Late-Modern's characteristics, or "notions" as described in Jencks' work. Jencks' notion of *extreme repetition* is expressed in glass container buildings by a single size pane on a glass curtain wall set in a repeating grid. Glass container buildings display Jencks' notion of *structure and construction as ornament* by dispensing with other applied decoration. In place of added ornament, glass container buildings rely on exposed construction materials, in this case the external glass, for their aesthetic. Reflective glass often defines the outward appearance as a mirror. Glass container buildings exemplify structure as ornament by using a fluid curtain wall to enwrap the structure, highlighting the form and elevating it to a decorative element. An *antihistorical* notion is best expressed by resistance to using past styles in a revival interpretation. Glass container buildings lack references to previous architectural styles.³¹

Through the use of its repetitive and reflective glass cladding, the Northern Federal Building embodies all the "notions" of Late-Modernism described above. A notable deviation is that the Northern Federal Building utilizes two sizes of glass panes in its curtain wall, however they are still set in a repeating grid that covers 14 floors of the building at all four of its elevations. The Northern Federal Building was also the first, and only, mid-century building within the Capitol Centre development and within broader Saint Paul to utilize this Late-Modern design language.³²

The Northern Federal Building is clad in Libbey Owens Ford's innovative "Vari-Tran Thermopane" reflective glass cladding system. Libbey Owens Ford (LOF) began to manufacture Thermopane in 1946.³³ Marketing literature produced by the company during the 1960s describes Thermopane as "the first successful, mass-produced, insulating unit of its kind for general use. It is a factory-built glass unit composed of two or more lights of glass separated by ¼" or ½" of dehydrated captive air hermetically sealed around the edges at the factory with a metal-to-glass bond."³⁴ In 1968, LOF innovated the Vari-Tran reflective coating which "consisted of evaporated metals such as chromium or aluminum with a silica overcoat."³⁵ LOF marketing literature for the new material announced that "The age of sit-there-and-do-nothing glass is over," and that "Thermopane insulating glass made with Vari-Tran reflective coating improves working conditions in modern buildings. Available with golden or silvery tones, Vari-Tran softens sky brightness and rejects up to 82% of the solar heat." By 1972, Vari-Tran came in "52 varieties," and following construction of the Northern Federal Building, LOF began using

³¹ National Register of Historic Places, Executive Plaza Office Building, Kansas City, Jackson County, Missouri, #100000750.

³² "Downtown Saint Paul," *Architecture Minnesota* (July/August, 1975), 39.

³³ University of Toledo, Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections, "Libbey Owens Form Glass Company Records, 1851-1991 Finding Aid," https://www.utoledo.edu/library/canaday/HTML_findingaids/MSS-066.html

³⁴ Libbey Owens Ford Glass Company, "Glass for Construction," marketing pamphlet 1960, available Association for Preservation Technology, International Building Technology Heritage Library, <https://archive.org/details/buildingtechnologyheritagelibrary>

³⁵ Russell J. Hill, Steve Nadel and Michael Andreasen, "History of Large Area Coatings," *Society of Vacuum Coaters 2008 Summer Bulletin*, 38-39.

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the building in its marketing materials, including full page spreads in architectural journals throughout the mid-1970s (Figure 3).³⁶

Conclusion

The Northern Federal Building is a significant example of Late-Modern architecture in Saint Paul's central business district. Late-Modernism rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s and marked a departure from the rationality of the International Style in favor of "the rhetorical devices of exaggeration, repetition, and paradox"³⁷ and the utilization of curtain wall technology as an applied "skin." The Northern Federal Building embodies the "paradox of a building with glass walls and no windows" with its reflective glass cladding serving as a mirror for the modern city.³⁸ The Northern Federal Building retains integrity and embodies the distinct architectural language of the Late-Modern glass container style building.

³⁶ Libbey Owens Ford Glass Company, "Reach for a rainbow," marketing pamphlet, 1972, available University of Minnesota Northwest Architectural Archives.; *Progressive Architecture* 3:75.

³⁷ Docomomo, "Late Modern," <https://www.docomomo-us.org/style/late-modern>

³⁸ Docomomo, "Late Modern," <https://www.docomomo-us.org/style/late-modern>

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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Glass Company Records, 1851-1991 Finding Aid."
https://www.utoledo.edu/library/canaday/HTML_findingaids/MSS-066.html

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 # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency

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☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): RA-SPC-05447

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.5 acres

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude:	Longitude:
2. Latitude:	Longitude:
3. Latitude:	Longitude:
4. Latitude:	Longitude:

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☒ NAD 1983

1. Zone: 15	Easting: 492506	Northing: 4976998
2. Zone:	Easting:	Northing:
3. Zone:	Easting:	Northing:
4. Zone:	Easting :	Northing:

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Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The Northern Federal Building occupies one tax parcel (PID 062822120033) with the following legal description: The Northerly 77 feet of Lots 7 and 8, and that part of the Northerly 77 feet of Lot 6, lying Westerly of the following described line: Beginning at a point on the southerly line of the Northerly 160.6 feet of Block 9 distant 207.99 feet Westerly of the East Line of Block 9; thence Northerly at right angles to said Southerly line a distance of 160.6 feet to the Northerly line of Block 9 and there terminating; Except the Northernly 4 feet for widening East Sixth Street and except the Westerly 2 feet for widening Wabasha Street. All in Block 9, City of St. Paul (St. Paul Proper) Ramsey County, Minnesota.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary includes the tax parcel associated with the building both during its period of significance and today.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Laurel Fritz and Tamara Halvorsen, Principals
organization: Pigeon Consulting, LLC
street & number: 2395 University Avenue West, Suite 206
city or town: Saint Paul state: MN zip code: 55114
e-mail laurel@pigeonconsulting.com
telephone: 651-340-5665
date: 1/18/2024

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Northern Federal Building

City or Vicinity: Saint Paul

County: Ramsey State: Minnesota

Photographer: Laurel Fritz and Tamara Halvorsen

Date Photographed: August 2022 and October 2023

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0001)
Exterior, southwest and southeast elevations, camera facing north/northeast.

2 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0002)
Exterior, southeast elevation, camera facing northwest.

3 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0003)
Exterior, northwest and southwest elevations, camera facing south/southwest.

4 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0004)
Exterior, northeast and northwest elevations, camera facing southwest.

5 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0005)
Exterior, southeast elevation detail, camera facing northwest.

6 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0006)
Exterior, southeast elevation detail, camera facing northwest.

7 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0007)
Exterior, southeast elevation detail, camera facing northwest.

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8 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0008)

Exterior, primary entrance, southeast elevation, camera facing northwest.

9 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0009)

Exterior, northwest elevation, camera facing north.

10 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0010)

Interior, view of lobby with mezzanine at top left of image, camera facing northwest.

11 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0011)

Interior, lobby at mezzanine level, camera facing northeast.

12 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0012)

Interior, lobby at mezzanine level including closed public skyway connection to neighboring parking ramp. Camera facing east.

13 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0013)

Interior, mezzanine elevator door, camera facing southwest.

14 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0014)

Interior, ceiling at ground level elevator lobby, camera facing up and northwest.

15 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0015)

Interior, view of elevator lobby at mezzanine, camera facing northeast.

16 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0016)

Interior, corridor, third level (typical levels 3 through 5), camera facing northeast.

17 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0017)

Interior, apartment unit, third level (levels 3 through 5 typical), camera facing northwest.

18 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0018)

Interior, apartment unit, fifth level (levels 3 through 5 typical), camera facing southwest.

19 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0019)

Interior, view of level 7, (levels 5-16 typical), camera facing southwest.

20 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0020)

Interior, level six (levels 6 through 15 typical – plumbing typical of levels 6 and 7 only), camera facing northeast.

21 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0021)

Interior, level eleven (levels 6-15, typical) camera facing west.

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22 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0022)

Interior, level 6 elevator lobby (levels 3-15, typical) camera facing northwest.

23 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0023)

Interior, level 6 elevator lobby, (levels 3-15 typical, camera facing north.

24 of 24. (MN_Ramsey County_Northern Federal Building_0024)

Interior, stairwell between levels eight and nine (levels 2 through 16, typical) camera facing southeast.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations 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.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

Tier 1 – 60-100 hours

Tier 2 – 120 hours

Tier 3 – 230 hours

Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

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Figure 1. Site map showing the Northern Federal Building in immediate context. Legal parcel outlined in gold. Background map courtesy of Ramsey County.

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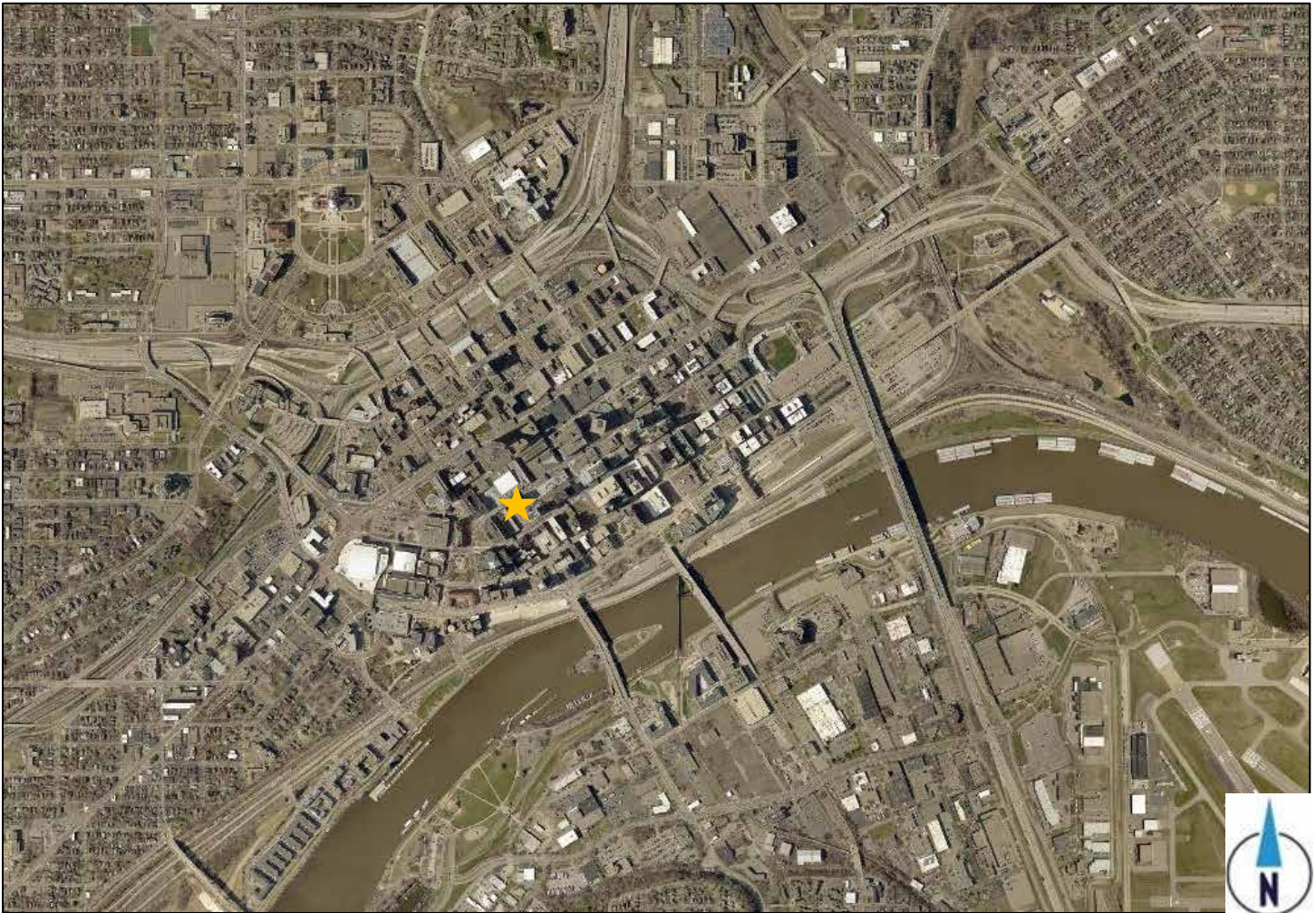


Figure 2. Site map showing the Northern Federal Building in context of downtown Saint Paul. Building location marked in gold. Background map courtesy of Ramsey County.

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WHEN YOU'RE AN INCH AWAY FROM 34° BELOW 0° OR 8° ABOVE, MAKE IT AN INCH OF HIGH PERFORMANCE GLASS.



Northern Federal Building, St. Paul, Minnesota. Office building, Minnesota.

76 Progressive Architecture 3 75

WHEN YOU'RE AN INCH AWAY FROM 34° BELOW 0° OR 8° ABOVE, MAKE IT AN INCH OF HIGH PERFORMANCE GLASS.



**THE GLASS FOR ALL SEASONS.
VARI-TRAN™-THERMO-PANE™**

While extremes may not be the norm, the people of St. Paul, Minnesota, have stepped very quickly through -34° winter mornings, and sweltered through long 88° summer days. Under these extreme conditions, architects and owners select building materials very wisely. At the Northern Federal Building in St. Paul, wise men selected LOF reflective Vari-TRAN™ coated glass in Thermo-Pane™ insulating units for the tower.

SAVINGS ON ELECTRIC ENERGY TO HEAT BUILDINGS.

In the 14-story tower portion of the building glazed with LOF high-performance glass, the amount of energy required for heating at a peak load is just over 2,600,000 BTUH. Had it been glazed in single-pane clear glass, the peak load requirements would have been 4,700,000 BTUH. The 2,100,000 BTUH difference reduces peak load system input by 559 kilowatts—amounting to a considerable savings in electrical heating cost.

OVER \$164,000 SAVED IN INITIAL A/C COSTS.

The total building cooling requirements were also reduced from over 900 tons to 736 tons. Over \$164,000 savings in initial costs resulted. In fact, Vari-TRAN 1-114's ability to cut solar heat gain has made the walls so efficient that during most of the summer only one of the two 268-ton A/C units installed is used.

THE WORKING GLASS FROM LOF.

LOF makes a wide variety of high-performance, hard-working glasses. Their versatility to meet the requirements of extreme conditions has been widely proven. If you would like to know how the right glass can save you building and energy dollars, our highly qualified architectural representatives will be glad to help you. Or write LOF, 811 Madison Avenue, Toledo, Ohio 43602.

LOF

Circle No. 388 on Reader Service Card

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Figure 3. Libby Owens Ford advertisement featuring the Northern Federal Building, 1975.
Advertisement taken from *Progressive Architecture*, March 1975.

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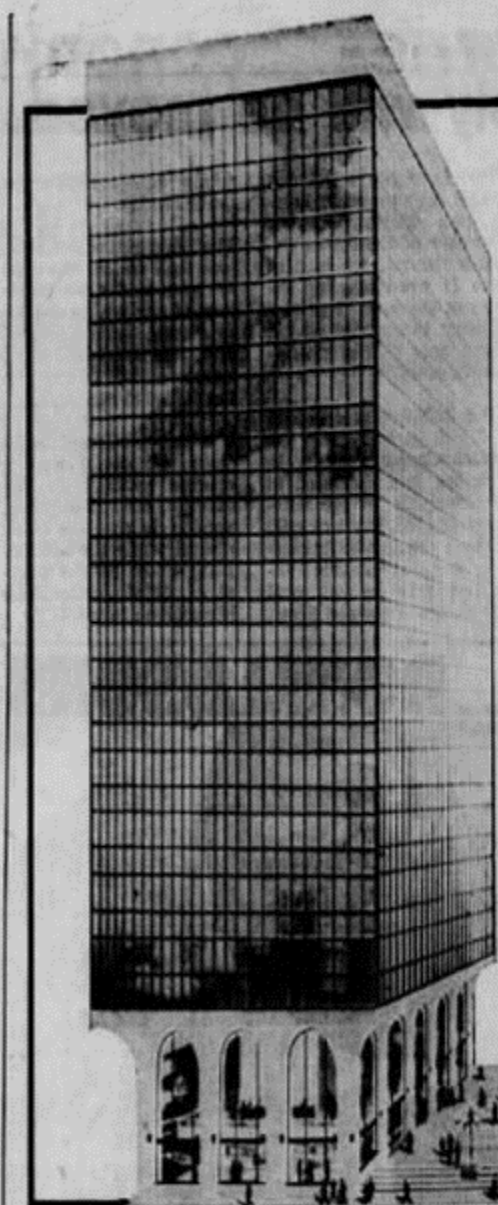
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The Best Office Building in the Entire Metropolitan Area is Already Half Full

While you have been watching the construction of the new Northern Federal Building others have already ventured inside for a look around and liked it so well they have leased new office space. In fact, the building is now 45% occupied.

Why? Because even without the finishing touches on the first floor this building offers the most attractive features of all the office space in the Twin Cities.

Features like the panoramic view from floor-to-ceiling windows, the central location in the heart of Saint Paul's retail and financial districts and the perfectly flexible office space with movable lighting, heating, air conditioning and electrical units.

Plus extras like the hall and office carpeting, draperies, wall coverings and our own interior designer to help you plan your new office.

We would like to take you on an unhurried tour of the building and model office so that you can see these features for yourself. Stop by or call us today and we will set up an appointment at your convenience.

Yorktown Investment Co.
1200 Northern Federal Building
Sixth and Wabasha
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102
Phone: 612/224-2303

For analysis of business trends, read Sylvia Porter's column in the Tribune.

Figure 4. Leasing Advertisement for the Northern Federal Building, from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, September 9, 1973.

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Figure 5. Minnesota Mutual Life Insurance Company, Ellerbee and Company, 1955. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

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Figure 6. Degree of Honor Protective Association Building, Bergstedt, Hirsh, Wahlberg and Wold, 1961. Photograph courtesy of the Degree of Honor Online Museum.

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Figure 7. Osborn Building, Bergstedt, Wahlberg and Wold, 1968. (Northern Federal Building in background right of image). Photograph by Amy Lucas, Osborn Building NRHP Nomination, #100003233.

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Figure 8. Northwestern National Bank, INTERPRO, 1969-1974. Photograph courtesy of LoopNet.

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Figure 9. Kellogg Square, INTERPRO, 1968-1972. Photograph courtesy of Kellogg Square.

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Figure 10. Aerial Photo of downtown Saint Paul, 1978. Northern Federal Building marked by red arrow, Osborn Building marked by yellow arrow. Photograph courtesy of www.LakesnWoods.com

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Figure 11. Real Estate listing photo showing the lobby of the Northern Federal Building circa 2018. Photo courtesy www.rimarketplace.com/auction/254/ecolab-university-center

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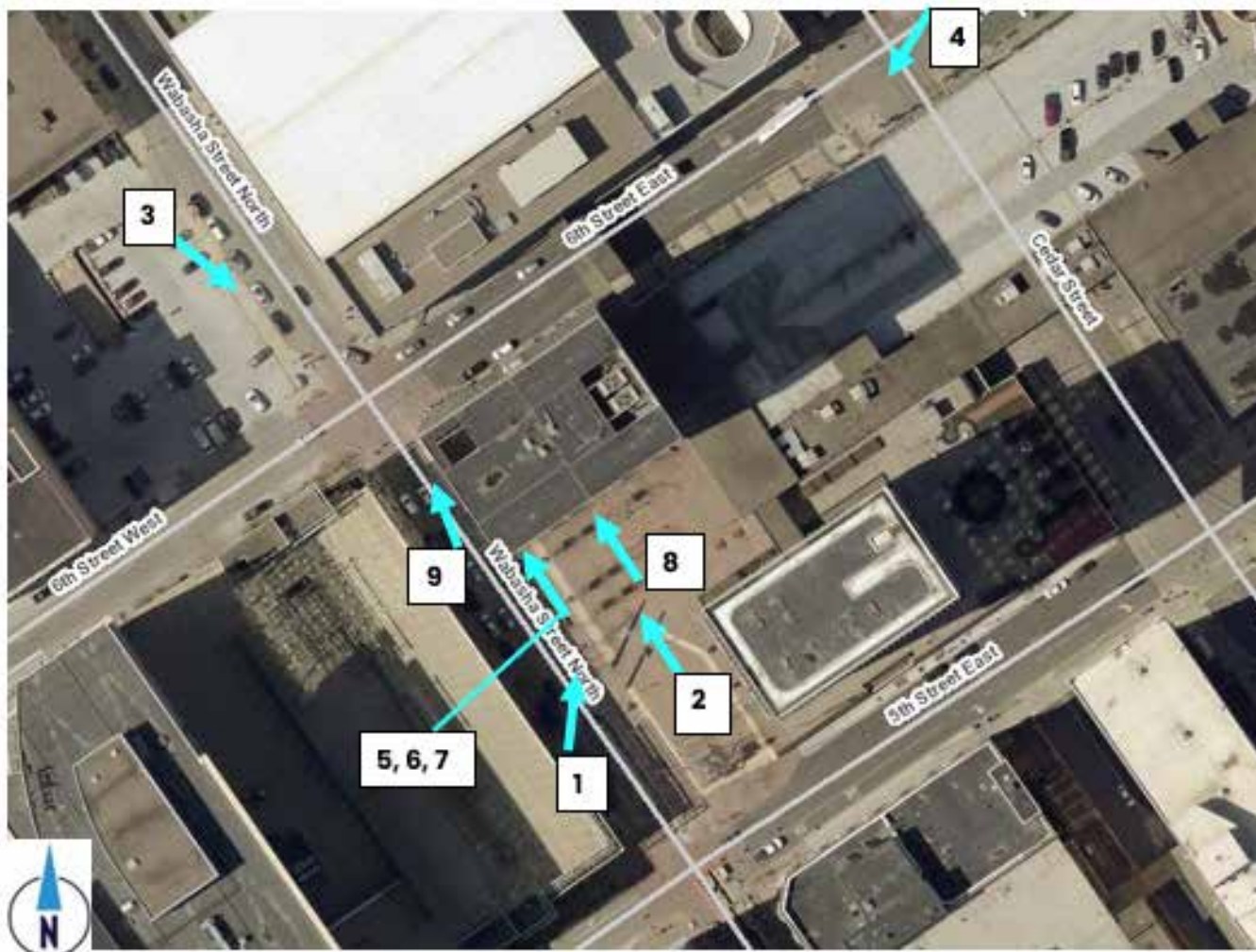
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Northern Federal Building – Exterior Photo Key

Background Image via Ramsey County Property Information

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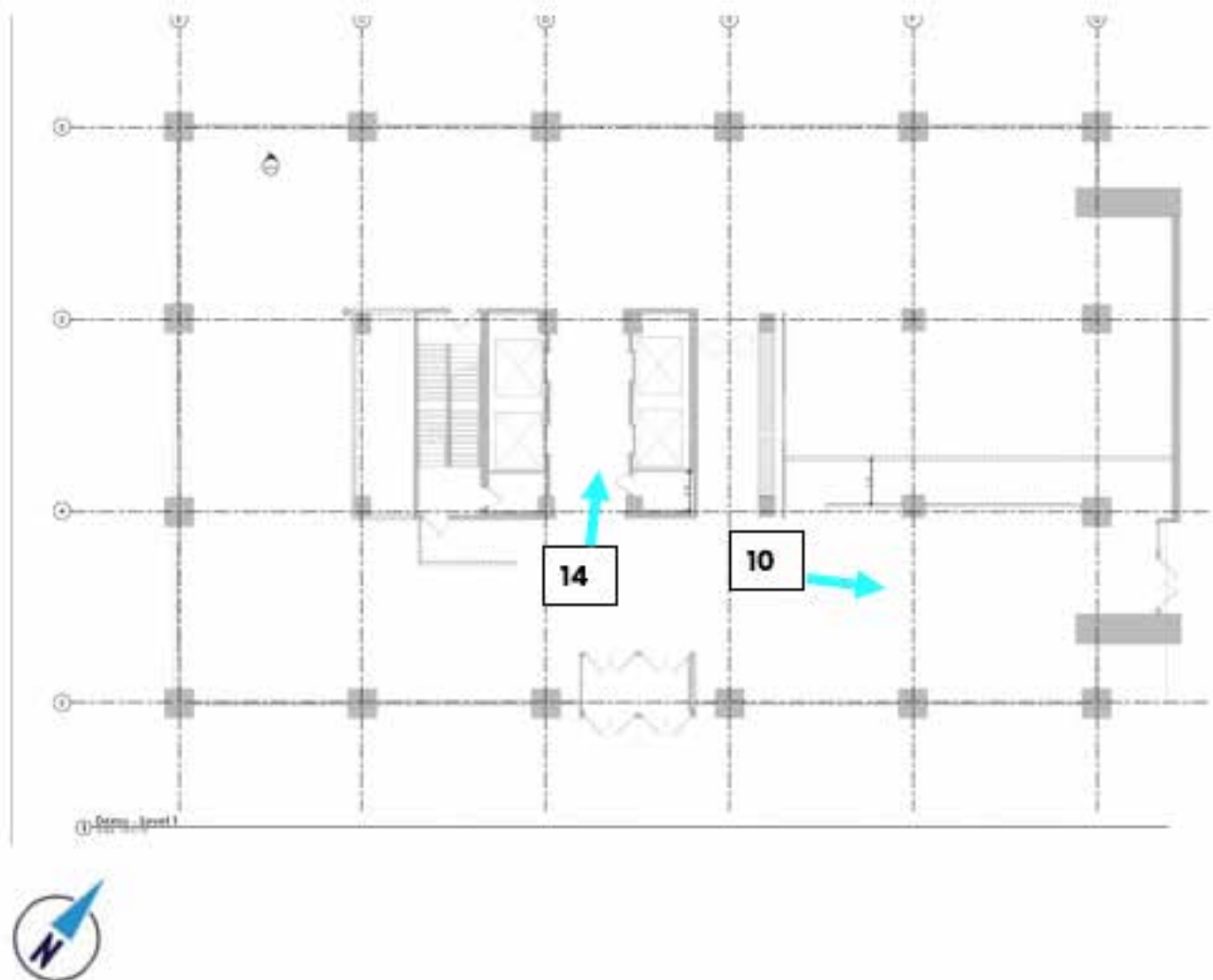
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Northern Federal Building – Level 1 Photo Key

Architectural Plan Courtesy Tushie Montgomery Architects

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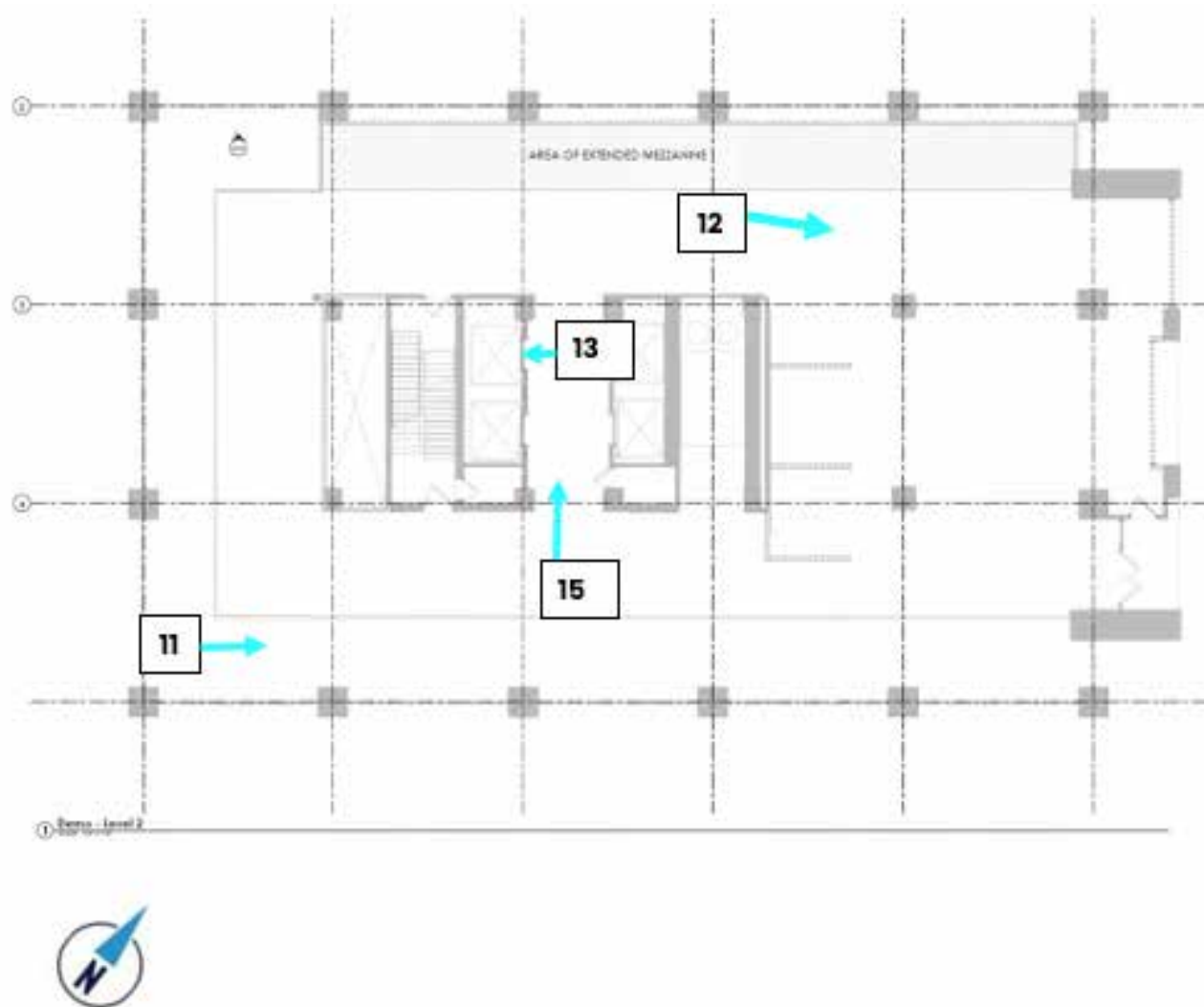
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Northern Federal Building – Level 2 (Mezzanine) Photo Key

Architectural Plan Courtesy Tushie Montgomery Architects

Figure 14.

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Northern Federal Building – Levels 3 through 5 (Typical) Photo Key

Architectural Plan Courtesy Tushie Montgomery Architects

Figure 15.

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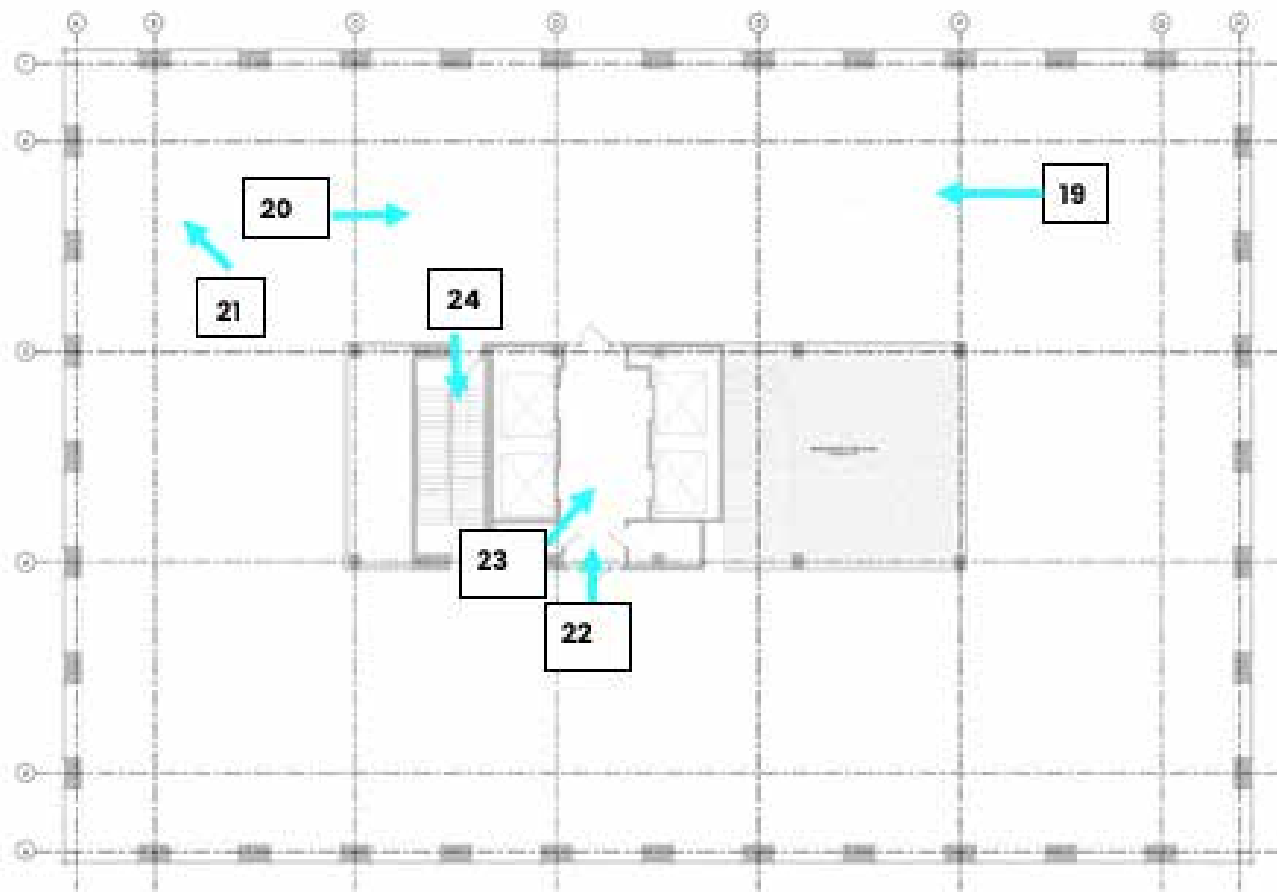
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Northern Federal Building – Levels 6-15 (Typical) Photo Key

Architectural Plan Courtesy Tushie Montgomery Architects

Figure 16.