

25N 4E 31

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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DATE ENTERED	

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

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

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC Northern Life Tower [preferred]  
AND/OR COMMON  
Seattle Tower

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER 1212 - 3rd Avenue  
CITY, TOWN Seattle VICINITY OF #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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY
			<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
			<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
			<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
			<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
			<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
			<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
			<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  
DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS Department of Community Development  
CITY, TOWN Arctic Building, 306 Cherry Street, Seattle, Washington

# DESCRIPTION

## CONDITION

EXCELLENT  
 GOOD  
 FAIR

DETERIORATED  
 RUINS  
 UNEXPOSED

## CHECK ONE

UNALTERED  
 ALTERED

## CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE  
 MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_

### 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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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 2

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)

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 2

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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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

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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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 2

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.

Form No. 10-301a  
(Rev. 10-74)

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
PROPERTY PHOTOGRAPH FORM**

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SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- ENCLOSE WITH PHOTOGRAPH

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Northern Life Tower

AND/OR COMMON

Seattle Tower

**2 LOCATION**

CITY, TOWN

Seattle

\_\_\_VICINITY OF

COUNTY

King

STATE

Washington

**3 PHOTO REFERENCE**

PHOTO CREDIT

Jacob E. Thomas

DATE OF PHOTO

January, 1975

NEGATIVE FILED AT

Washington State Parks and Recreation

**4 IDENTIFICATION**

DESCRIBE VIEW, DIRECTION, ETC. IF DISTRICT, GIVE BUILDING NAME & STREET

PHOTO NO.

View of the main lobby



DOUGLAS  
NORWESTER  
DOUGLAS

DOUGLAS

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

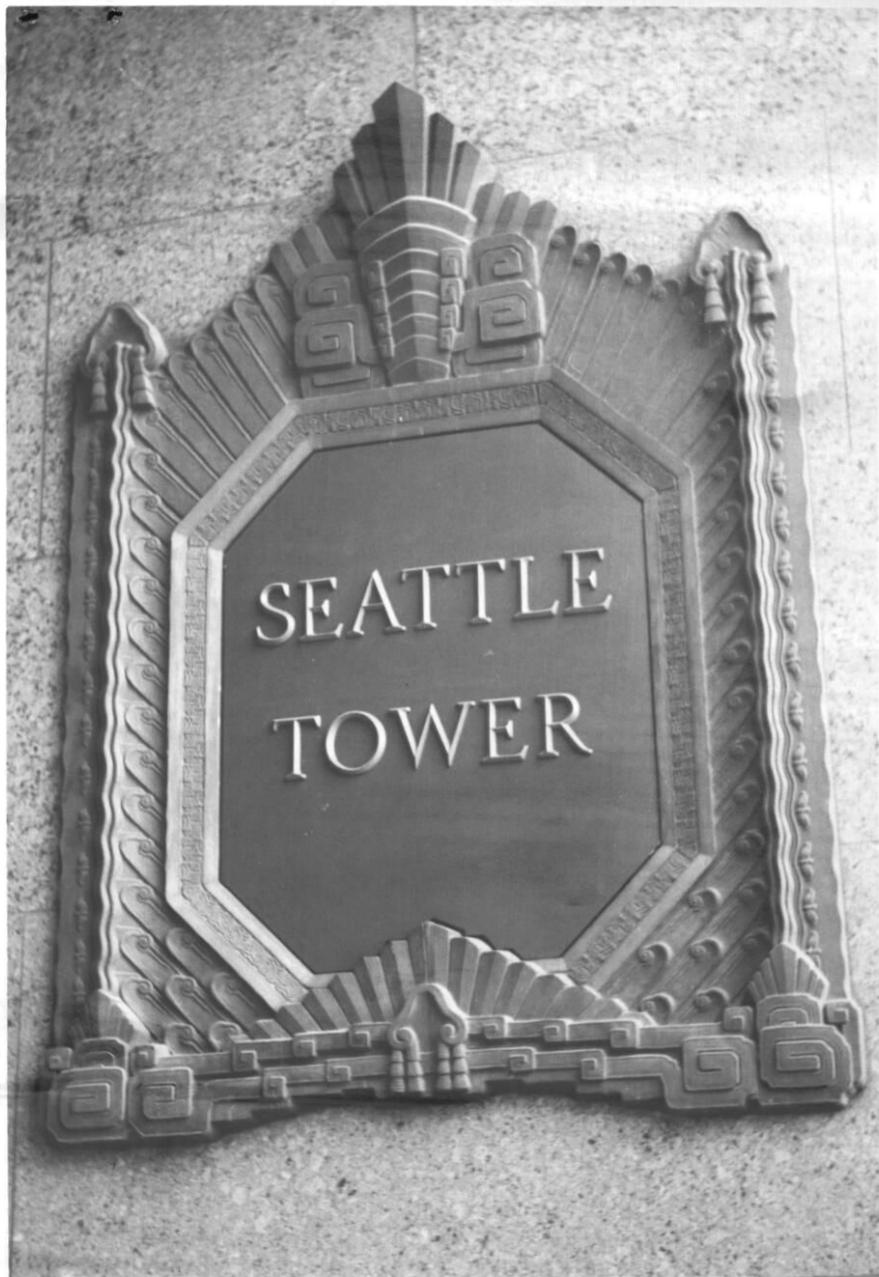
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
PROPERTY PHOTOGRAPH FORM

(Type all entries - attach to or enclose with photograph)

STATE Washington	
COUNTY King	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

<b>1. NAME</b>			
COMMON: Seattle Tower			
AND/OR HISTORIC: Northern Life Tower			
<b>2. LOCATION</b>			
STREET AND NUMBER: 1212 - 3rd Avenue			
CITY OR TOWN: Seattle			
STATE: Washington	CODE	COUNTY: King	CODE
<b>3. PHOTO REFERENCE</b>			
PHOTO CREDIT: Eileen Miller			
DATE OF PHOTO: April 1974			
NEGATIVE FILED AT: Pioneer Square District Manager's Office			
<b>4. IDENTIFICATION</b>			
DESCRIBE VIEW, DIRECTION, ETC. Decorative bronzework, plaque at building entrance on Third Ave.			



SEATTLE  
TOWER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
PROPERTY PHOTOGRAPH FORM

(Type all entries - attach to or enclose with photograph)

STATE Washington	
COUNTY King	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

<b>1. NAME</b>			
COMMON:		Seattle Tower	
AND/OR HISTORIC:		Northern Life Tower	
<b>2. LOCATION</b>			
STREET AND NUMBER:			
1212 - 3rd Avenue			
CITY OR TOWN:			
Seattle			
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
Washington		King	
<b>3. PHOTO REFERENCE</b>			
PHOTO CREDIT:		Eileen Miller	
DATE OF PHOTO:		April 1974	
NEGATIVE FILED AT:		Pioneer Square District Manager's Office	
<b>4. IDENTIFICATION</b>			
DESCRIBE VIEW, DIRECTION, ETC.			
View looking south, showing setbacks and tower .			







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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
PROPERTY MAP FORM**

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TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- ENCLOSE WITH MAP

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Northern Life Tower [preferred]

AND/OR COMMON

Seattle Tower

**2 LOCATION**

CITY, TOWN

Seattle

\_\_\_VICINITY OF

COUNTY

King

STATE

Washington

**3 MAP REFERENCE**

SOURCE

U.S.G.S. - Seattle South Quad.

SCALE

1:24000

DATE

1949

**4 REQUIREMENTS**

TO BE INCLUDED ON ALL MAPS

1. PROPERTY BOUNDARIES
2. NORTH ARROW
3. UTM REFERENCES

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

550,055

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE  
CORPS OF ENGINEERS

1579 III NW  
(SHILSHOLE BAY)

122°22'30"  
47°37'30"

548000m E. R. 3 E. R. 4 E.

EVERETT 27 MI.  
EDMONDS 14 MI.

MOUNT LAKE  
EVERETT 27 MI.  
ISSACI 15 MI.

1579  
(SEATTLE)

Seattle South  
7.5 min.  
Photorevised 1968

5274000m N.

5,272,735

5273

T. 25 N.

T. 24 N.

5272

SEATTLE-PORT ANGELES-VICTORIA FERRY  
SEATTLE-WINSLOW FERRY  
SEATTLE-BREMERTON FERRY

ELLIOTT BAY

