

MINNEAPOLIS FEDERAL RESERVE BANK  
250 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis  
Hennepin County  
Minnesota

HABS NO. MN-162

HABS  
MINN  
27-MINAP,  
32-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
Great Plains Systems Office  
1709 Jackson Street  
Omaha, Nebraska 68102-2571

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MINNEAPOLIS FEDERAL RESERVE BANK HABS No. MN-162

Location: 250 Marquette Avenue  
Auditor's Subdivision No. 137  
Lots 128-149, 151-155  
Minneapolis

Present Owner: Petrie Development Corporation

Present Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank building is significant for its singular design qualities within the Modern Movement in American architecture since 1945. It is the first and thought to be the only example of an occupied-suspension building in the United States. Gunnar Birkerts, a master architect in his own right, developed the distinctive design in 1968 by and the building was completed in 1973.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Date of Erection: Completed in 1973

Architect: Gunnar Birkerts

Biographical Information: Gunnar Birkerts designed the bank building. Birkerts was born in Latvia in 1925 and studied at the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart, Germany. In 1949 he immigrated to the United States, and after working for the influential Modernist architects Eero Saarinen and Minoru Yamasaki, Birkerts established his own architectural practice near Detroit in 1959.

Original and subsequent owners: The building was built for and owned by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis (Bank). In 1997 the property was sold to Petrie Development Corporation.

Builder, Contractor: The building's structural engineers were Skilling, Helle, Christiansen, Robertson of Seattle, Washington. The mechanical and electrical engineers were Jaros, Baum and Bolles of New York, New York.

Original Plans and Construction: The original plan and elevation drawings are voluminous, and, in addition to floor plans and elevations, many illustrate the electrical, plumbing, heat/air conditioning, and other mechanical systems. The Bank maintains microfiche copies of the plans, and a representative sample has been photographically reproduced for the HABS documentation. There are numerous photographs dating to the period of construction and immediately following. The photographs, also on file with the Bank, indicate that the building was constructed as originally planned.

Historical Context:

A number of factors influenced Gunnar Birkerts' design for the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis: the proposed location of the bank building in the Gateway District, developments within the Modernist Style of architecture, and the desires of the client.

By utilizing the suspended catenary arch in an unprecedented manner, Birkerts' design epitomizes the ideals of the Modernist school of architecture. Unlike Traditionalists, who practiced in Beaux Arts and Period Revival styles before World War II, Modernists sought architectural forms that were without historic precedent. The Postwar Neo-Expressionists in particular sought forms that were unique products of the architect's interpretation of the program. By the 1950s, the leading practitioner of Neo-Expressionism was Eero Saarinen.

Termed "personal" in style, "Saarinen's expressive designs rarely shared imagery or even a consistent vocabulary with one another; this was typically even true for projects under design at the same time. Some were boxy in massing...while others...were free-form. He would utilize new technologies of [cor-ten] steel...while at the same time employing highly textured stone."<sup>1</sup>

The personal style of Saarinen directly influenced Birkerts. In particular, Saarinen's influence can be seen in the area of structural expression. While many of his designs express their structure, including the Ingalls Hockey Rink at Yale, the Transworld Airlines Terminal at the Kennedy Airport, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Martinson, *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis: Evaluation of Significance*, Unpublished manuscript on file at the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, St. Paul, 1994, 23.

Dulles Airport, the St. Louis Gateway Arch most directly influenced Birkerts' design for the Minneapolis Bank. Completed in 1967, the year before Birkerts was commissioned to design the Bank, the Gateway Arch takes its shape from the catenary curve.

Not only was Birkerts influenced by the work of Saarinen, he incorporated the intentions of the Federal Reserve into the design of the building. Hugh D. Galusha, Jr., president of the Minneapolis branch was "eager to have a building which made a dramatic statement of an untraditional character."<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Minneapolis bank building was the first new regional building constructed since the 1920s, and the Minneapolis officers wanted the new facility to be a model for subsequent new regional banks.

As per the wishes of his client, Birkerts' design was dramatic and expressive. According to Birkerts, the building is expressive on three levels. First, the building is expressive of its function, visually separating the secure areas, which were located underground, from the office areas, which were located in the tower. Second, the building is expressive of the region, a "bold gesture towards the scale of the Northwest." Finally, in an expression of the characteristics of the people, it is a conceptually straightforward building as "no-nonsense" as the typical Minnesotan.<sup>3</sup> In addition to its expressiveness, Birkerts' design held to three guiding principles. The first was the separation of function, as described above. The second was to provide an open office scheme that would bring people out of their cubicles. The third was an accommodation to the severe massing restrictions of the 1959 *Central Minneapolis Plan*, which stated that the building must be constructed along the back of the site.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement

1. Architectural Character: The Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank Building is significant as an outstanding example of the Modern Movement in American architecture since 1945. It is the first and thought to be the only example of an occupied-suspension building in the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> Martinson, *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Martinson, *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis*, 24.

2. Condition of the Fabric: Good, though the current owner may make alterations.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: The building and plaza occupy an entire city block. A three-level, one-square-block underground portion of the building was designed for secure operations and parking. The 11-story tower building has external dimensions of 210 feet in height, 330 feet in length, and 66 feet in width. There is a mechanical equipment area above the top floor.

2. Walls: The east and west elevations are dominated by the exposed catenary arches, which give the building its most dramatic design element. The curtain wall is primarily made up of glass windows held in place by horizontal and vertical steel pressure bars. The windows are fixed grey insulated glass, flush with the face of the building below the catenaries and set back three feet above the catenaries to emphasize the curve. The support end towers and the elevator tower are sheathed in granite, while the mechanical area atop the building is finished with plated steel. The plaza is surfaced with granite.

3. Foundation: The foundation and the three-level subterranean building consist of reinforced concrete.

4. Structural System: The tower building is suspended upon two catenary arches. The catenaries enclose eight cables constructed of 108 strands of galvanized steel wire. Two 28-foot deep trusses brace the catenaries, spanning the top of the tower and providing necessary stiffness to the building. The trusses are tied into support end towers by four steel weldments, each measuring 37 feet in height and able to support 14 million tons. The weldments connect to the vertical structural members, which are in compression above the catenary and in tension below it. The end towers and the elevator tower are framed with concrete. The floors consist of steel framing.

5. Openings, Doorways, and Windows: The main entrance is located on Marquette Avenue immediately south of the elevator tower. The recessed entry is set back with dark, granite-sheathed walls, intended to give a "secure" feel to the space. The windows make up almost the entire facade and rear wall. They consist of fixed grey insulated glass, flush with the face of the building below the catenary and set back three feet above it.

6. Roof: The roof is flat, with low, flat parapets on the east and west sides.

C. Description of the Interior

1. Floor Plans

a. Underground Building: The three-level underground building is nearly square in plan with the vault in the center. The two lower levels occupy the entire block, measuring approximately 330' by 345'. The Parking Level is the bottom floor. It provides parking for 175 vehicles, has entrance ramps on Washington Avenue and Third Street South, and it is the bottom level of the vault, offices, and storage. The Security Level contains general delivery docks, the middle level of the vault, production areas, mechanical areas, and 58 parking stalls. It has the same dimensions as the Parking Level. The Lobby Level is actually above ground and provides the only public access to the underground building and the office tower. Measuring roughly 175' by 250', this level provides a public lobby, offices, the top level of the vault, and storage and maintenance areas.

b. Office Tower: The 11-story tower is rectangular in plan, measuring 330' by 66'. The layout of each level is essentially open, which was part of Birkerts' desire to bring people "out of the dungeon" of the then-existing office cubicles.<sup>4</sup> The ninth floor contains an executive suite and directors meeting room. The eleventh floor includes the general cafeteria, employee lounge, and an executive meeting/dining area. Above the eleventh floor, in an area enclosed by the roof trusses, there is the mechanical area, which houses the two main air handling units, two chillers and boilers, a locker room, offices, and a firing range.

2. Stairways: General access to the upper and lower levels is provided through the elevators. However, there are two sets of stairways on all levels.

3. Wall and Ceiling Finishes: The ceiling is finished with suspended acoustic tiles. For the most part, the walls are finished with plaster.

4. Doorways and Doors: See Hardware - Security Measures.

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<sup>4</sup> Martinson, *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis*, 24.

5. Decorative Features and Trim: The lobby/mezzanine level is finished with a granite veneer on the walls and floors, which extends through the main entrance and continues on the plaza floor. The floors and walls of the elevator core are also finished with granite. The lobby level and the ninth floor originally had decorative wood finishing. Some of the wood finishes remain on the ninth floor/executive level, such as the paneling and some of the consoles.

6. Hardware

a. Elevators: There are a total of eight elevators. Six Otis gearless passenger elevators service the Parking Level through the Eleventh Floor, while one Otis gearless freight elevator services the Parking Level through the Twelfth Floor, and one Otis plunger electric freight elevator services the Parking Level through the Lobby.

b. Security Measures: The vault is constructed with reinforced concrete and is accessed through an entrance secured by a welded-steel door. The secure truck ramp has a set of two vertical drop doors of welded steel construction. Other areas in the secure level are partitioned and secured with rolling steel doors and grills.

7. Mechanical and Electrical Equipment: Climate control in the bank building is provided by a number of heating, ventilating, and air conditioning units: two 600-horsepower fire tube boilers; two 291-ton absorption chillers; three 200-horsepower wells with speed control; one 20-horsepower well; seventeen constant volume air handling units; three steam to water heat exchangers; three transfer fan units for ventilation to all vault levels; and twenty-one DX heating and cooling units for computer sites.

D. Site

1. General Setting and Orientation: The building is bounded by Washington Avenue on the north side, Marquette Avenue on the east side, Third Street on the south side, and Nicollet Avenue on the west side. The building is situated on the eastern one-third of the parcel, while a public plaza encompasses the western two-thirds. To the north, across Washington Avenue, stands the Northwestern National Life Insurance Building, a fine example of Minoru Yamasaki's work in New Formalism.

2. Landscaping: The 2-1/2-acre plaza is landscaped symmetrically along an east-west axis, and it rises from grade along Nicollet Avenue to 20 feet above grade along Marquette Avenue. The plaza is surfaced with Cold Spring granite. Plantings consist of a formal pattern of 40 Redmond Lindens, which are ringed by smooth round benches. In addition to plantings, three sculptures and a fountain adorn the plaza. The fountain is a memorial to Hugh Galusha designed by Gunnar Birkerts. The three sculptures are: *Arcturus* by Dimitri Hadzi, *Time Being* by Paul Granlund, and *Thrice* by Charles O. Perry.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original Architectural Drawings: Microfiche copies of the drawings are curated in the Bank's corporate archives in Minneapolis. The collection includes siteplans, sections, floor plans, elevations, and diagrams of mechanical systems.

B. Early Views: The Bank has a collection of photographs taken during construction and immediately following completion, dating to circa 1970 to 1974. Those photographs are also curated in the Bank's archives.

C. Bibliography: An extensive determination of eligibility was completed for the Bank building in 1994, and therefore, little additional research was necessary for this documentation. For an extensive list of sources, a bibliographical essay, and a discussion of future possible research see:

Tom Martinson, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Determination of Eligibility, manuscript on file at the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, 1994.

Prepared by: Andrew J. Schmidt  
Sr. Historian  
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