

Northwestern National Life Insurance Company Building 1965

The Northwestern National Life Building, on the corners of both Hennepin and Washington Avenues, was completed in 1965. The structure is an example of the New Formalism school of architecture and was designed by famed architect Minoru Yamasaki. One of the first buildings constructed during urban renewal in the Gateway District of Minneapolis, the Yamasaki building is seen as a high point of architecture in Minneapolis and is frequently the site of photos for visitors.



The building is situated on one of the oldest sites in Minneapolis, just a block from where the original Minneapolis City Hall was constructed in



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1873 (current site of the adjacent Gateway Park). The building and the surrounding park and fountain were once occupied by older, primarily two to three story business or residential buildings. The block was the heart of Skid Row in Minneapolis in the first half of the twentieth century, housing at least eight bars and three liquor stores. Skid Row had become a hotspot for crime and was considered blighted and overrun by seedy hotels, bars, and drunks. Thus, the entire block became one of the more than two hundred buildings razed during urban

renewal in the city in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The building was initially designed as the headquarters for the Northwestern National Life Insurance Company (NWNL), which, in 1962, had eyed one of the newly available plots within the urban renewal district for its new headquarters. NWNL picked Minoru Yamasaki as the architect, who is more widely known as the architect for the World Trade Center Towers in New York. Completed in 1965, the building contained 220,000 square feet over six stories and was completed at a cost of six million dollars.

Yamasaki tried to design the building as a “park with a building in it,” with the building being set back from Hennepin and Washington Avenues and surrounded by water features, grass, and trees. The defining feature of the building itself



is the portico in the front facing Hennepin Avenue. It was designed to keep the visual line of sight from Nicollet Mall to Hennepin Avenue Bridge. Until the 1950s, Nicollet Mall would have continued through where the building currently sits until it met up with Hennepin Avenue.

The building's portico features fifteen columns of white-quartz concrete that rise eighty-five feet and end in Gothic-Style arches. The columns are also practical, as they function as support and continue around the building. Between these columns are panels of Vermont Verde-antique marble, in a book-leaf pattern, filling the interstices along with narrow vertical fenestration.

From the portico, one can enter the building through a two-story glass screen. The lobby is sheathed in white marble. The



lobby initially had a sculpture by the Italian-born American artist Harry Bertoia, called "Sunlit Straw." This sculpture is comprised of thousands of brass coated steel rods, which are meant to give the appearance of the gold grain of harvest time. While the sculpture is no longer in the building, it recently sold at auction for several hundred thousand dollars.



By 1978, Northwestern National Life Insurance Company had outgrown the 20 Washington Avenue South building and again contracted with Yamasaki to design a new office tower. That tower is the 100 Washington Avenue South building, located across Marquette Avenue. Northwestern National Life, eventually acquired by ING, continued to operate out of the buildings for years but in different capacities.