

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 determination for individual properties and districts. See instruction in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an 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. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Bonfils Memorial Theater

other names/site number Lowenstein Theater; 5DV4045

2. Location

street & number 1475 Elizabeth [N/A] not for publication

city or town Denver [N/A] vicinity

state Colorado code CO county Denver code 031 zip code 80218

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 nationally statewide locally.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments [X].)

[Signature] State Historic Preservation Officer March 24, 1996
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments [].)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

entered in the National Register
See continuation sheet [].

determined eligible for the
National Register
See continuation sheet [].

determined not eligible for the
National Register.

removed from the
National Register

other, explain
See continuation sheet [].

Signature of the Keeper

Date

5-13-1996

Bonfils Memorial Theater
Name of Property

Denver County, CO
County/State

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

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not count previously listed resources.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
1	0	Total

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register.

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/Theater

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Moderne

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE
walls BRICK
STONE/Sandstone
roof ASPHALT
other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Bonfils Memorial Theater
Name of Property

Denver County, CO
County/State

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.)

Property is:

- 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 of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

PERFORMING ARTS

Periods of Significance

1953 - 1986

Significant Dates

N/A

Significant Person(s)

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above).

Bonfils, Helen

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Monroe, John K.

Mead & Mount Construction

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other:

Name of repository:

Bonfils Memorial Theater
Name of Property

Denver County, CO
County/State

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1. 13 503780 4398680
Zone Easting Northing

3. Zone Easting Northing

2. Zone Easting Northing

4. Zone Easting Northing

[] See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Rodd L. Wheaton, Michael Paglia, and Diane Wray

organization The Modern Architecture Preservation League date March 10, 1995

street & number PO Box 9782 telephone 303-761-8979

city or town Denver state CO zip code 80209

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional Items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Helen G. Bonfils Foundation

street & number 1050 13th Street telephone 303-893-4000

city or town Denver state CO zip code 80204

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications 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. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
Denver County, CO

State Agency Certification

National Register eligibility for the Bonfils Memorial Theater is being claimed under Criteria A, B, and C and Criteria Consideration G in the areas of architecture and performing arts. Exceptional significance in the area of architecture has not been demonstrated. The building is a very late example of the Art Moderne style and better examples exist within the Denver area. The theater does not appear to meet the National Register criteria under Criterion C.

The theater is exceptionally significant in the area of performing arts. This professional caliber facility built exclusively for an amateur civic theater indicates the importance of civic theater within Denver's performing arts community. The theater consistently developed innovative programs in the areas of adult amateur theater, children's theater, cabaret and traveling presentations. The theater was also significant for its willingness, one might even say its insistence that diverse ethnic communities be involved in its performances and its audience.

The primary mover in the development, funding, and creative direction of the theater was Helen Bonfils. More than any other single individual, she raised Denver civic theater to the high standards represented by the Bonfils Memorial Theater. Her successful efforts to bring first class Broadway plays to the stage of this top quality theater gave Denver a class of performing arts typical of larger cities and professional companies. The continued growth of civic theater and the establishment of the professional Denver Center for the Performing Arts springs directly from the Bonfils Memorial Theater and its prime mover, Helen Bonfils.

The Bonfils Memorial Theater appears to meet the National Register criteria under Criteria A and B and Criteria Consideration G in the area of performing arts.

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DOE Only
Owner objection

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SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 91001417

Date Listed: 5/13/96

Bonfils Memorial Theater
Property Name

Denver
County

CO
State

Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Carol D. Shurt

5-13-96

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

The documentation does not justify exceptional significance under Criterion C in the area of Architecture. Bonfils Theater is exceptionally significant under Criteria A and B in the area of Performing Arts.

RECEIVED

MAY 28 1996

021-10-10

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
Denver County, CO

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Description

Located on the southwest corner of Colfax Avenue and Elizabeth Street, Bonfils Memorial Theater (now Lowenstein Theater) is essentially a one-story building with a tall rectangular stage fly loft structure and a canted roof auditorium structure. This "form-follows-function" theater reflects its architect's previous experience in church architecture with clearly expressed spatiality. The theater, constructed of cream colored brick with mottled buff colored terra cotta trim, is sited on the corner property lines with the main entrance facing east onto Elizabeth Street. The primary facade, however, faces north on Colfax Avenue. A public sidewalk extended along Colfax Avenue and is set with large trees at the building's corners. Shrubbery and two medium sized blue spruce trees, symmetrically planted in relationship to the architecture, are located between the sidewalk and the building. At the east, the parking strip extending from the southeast property line is cut away for an off-street pull through drive at the theater entrance, defined with a wide marquee canopy extending to the curb line. To the south of the entrance, the area between the building and the sidewalk is planted with an irregularly laid out landscape of small ornamental trees and low shrubbery. One large street tree remains near the southeast corner. A service sidewalk provides access to the rear, south service doorway and the raised concrete paved, narrow rear area. This space is separated from the south parking lot by a low brick wall enclosing the south service entranceway and the steps up the paved rear area and a concrete retaining wall extending to the west alley. The south parking lot, with access from Elizabeth Street, was carved out of the adjacent neighborhood and has no distinguishing features. This parking lot is connected across the public alley to a similar southwest parking lot to the west which lacks any planting areas. The alley extended along the west elevation of the theater and the east side of the northwest parking lot, which is original to the theater.

The northwest parking lot, bounded by Colfax Avenue and Columbine Street, is enclosed within a low brick wall with an aluminum set on top of a terra cotta cap on the two sides. Along the alleyway and separating the higher elevation of the southwest parking lot are concrete retaining walls topped with chainlink fences. Access is from Columbine Street back from the corner. The wall turns the corner at a right angle and extends to the northeast corner where a diagonal walk provides pedestrian access from the parking lot to the north public sidewalk. Here the Colfax Avenue wall curves in to the low walls of the walk and forms planting beds. Topping the walls, the fence is characterized by a molded top rail carried on widely spaced, round section balusters set on disk bases. Below the hand rail are an intermediate bar rail and two additional bar rails spaced with square "C" scrolls opposing each other while flanking each baluster support. The lower rail is carried directly on disk supports and is spaced, between the balusters, with vertical bars.

Two large trees are planted along Columbine Street, one at the corner of Colfax Avenue and one adjacent the entrance drive to the lot. Three small ornamental trees are located between the public sidewalk along Colfax Avenue and the brick wall. This area and that inside the northwest corner of the parking lot adjacent to the wall are planted with low shrubbery. There is no significant exterior lighting.

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
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The facade facing Colfax is symmetrical with a large center pavilion and lower curved flanking wings. Behind, the north wall of the auditorium rises with a slightly projecting center pavilion in a flat plane with meets the lower pavilion and the curve of the side walls. To the east, at the entrance, the marquee canopy projects from the structure which steps out around the ticket lobby.

The central pavilion is an enframingent of terra cotta in a shallow ovolo profile on all four sides which enclosed three bays of windows separated with mullions. The enframingent is carried on a three-pier terra cotta base. Each pier is centered with a large raised flute block, with guttae drops, set on terra cotta walling sections below each of the three window openings. Fronted by a terra cotta bench with a shallow top course and larger base block, each pier is flanked with molded side bars with two bands of horizontal beading. The foundation walling between the terra cotta piers is infilled with random ashlar red sandstone veneer. The pavilion side walls are veneered in large square terra cotta tiles which extend back to the pavilion of the north auditorium wall. The parapet is capped in narrow matching coping.

The pavilion gazing is set within aluminum frames. The mullions are built up of five extrude aluminum trim pieces with double flute profile. Each of the three bays is divided into 15 large lights with the center row of five lights being taller. Each pane of glass is etched with a double circle motif in the upper and low row of glazing and a triple circle motif in the middle row. Across the middle row, every other center circle is replaced with an octagon shape containing various allegorical designs representing drama, comedy, music and dance. The middle octagonal motif of each of the three window bays is etched with a representation of a ship, an allegorical reference to the logo of the Denver Civic Theater Association founded in the 1920s. The original glass is pink tinted; replacement glass is clear.

The curved side wings, of cream colored oversized 12-1/2 inch long brick, have a terra cotta parapet cap with an ovolo profile and a torus bed mold. The cap is carried on a soldier course of eight inch brick. Four similar soldier courses are equally spaced down the walling. Typically, the soldier courses are contained above and below with a course of elongated brick in running bond and a course of all header bond. At the foundation lever, the wings have projecting planter boxes of red sandstone in random ashlar with terra cotta cap blocks. The planters extend out perpendicularly from the curved wings and overlap the central pavilion foundation.

The north wall of the auditorium rises behind the pavilion and wings. The central auditorium pavilion, corresponding with the lower pavilion width, is flanked with slightly lower curved side walls, The pavilion has a plain block parapet cap, while the side walls have an ovolo cap with a bed mold. The side wings are ornamented with two projecting courses of headers containing a soldier course. The decorative brick detailing is set down from the molded cap five courses and extends at a right angle down a corresponding distance from each corner where stack bond is utilized. At the pavilion a soldier course corresponds to the coursing in the brick detailing; two equidistant soldier courses complete the detailing of the auditorium's north wall.

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The east elevation is characterized by the soaring canted roof structure of the auditorium extending from the center point of the tall stage fly loft block. The auditorium is splayed in plan as it extends from the fly loft. The side walls of the auditorium has a soldier course between two projecting header courses extending parallel up the rake and, matching the north elevation, extends down the corner from an oblique angle. The rake is capped with a ovolo terra cotta coping carried on five raked courses of running bond. The walling is generally laid in horizontal running bond. The large rectangular block of the stage fly loft is capped with a similar coping set on a soldier course. At the ground floor level, the east elevation is characterized by the medium height of the north central pavilion extending to the north wall of the auditorium. The terra cotta tile clad cheeks of the north central pavilion extend over the northeast wing which has an entrance projection set back from the northeast corner. The east walling is at the height of the wing and is capped with a similar ovolo-torus terra cotta coping. This structure extends approximately a third of the way across the elevation and is fronted by the marquee canopy. Extending to the southeast corner is a lower wing with a ovolo terra cotta cap.

The flat roofed marquee canopy defines the theater entrance and extends over the four entrance doors with sidelights and transoms, across two bays with terra cotta framed tripartite windows, and extends in a cantilever to the south and to the east beyond three columns. At the south end of the canopy, the cantilever is accentuated by a quarter circle cut out at the walling. At the northeast corner the canopy is cut away in an elongated curve topped with aluminum letters spelling out "Lowenstein Theater." The fascia is an extruded aluminum multi-ribbed band with a top drip cap. The soffit of the canopy is plaster with a setback outlining the edge. Circular recessed lights are set around the edge, in a row inside the three columns, and at each column. The three columns, like the area under the canopy, are clad in pink travertine marble. The three large columns are square in section and have trapezoidal benches at the based with face into the colonnade. The benches are terra cotta capped around concrete infilling and are set on red sandstone random ashlar bases. Two aluminum banks suggest necking and capitals on each column.

The travertine veneer on the walling is booked with the joints relating to the terra cotta trim around the windows. The trim is canted with a rounded outside corner and extends completely around the openings. The aluminum framed windows have a fixed center pane and sidelights with operable casements. The aluminum entrance doors, sidelights and transoms extend to the height of the marquee canopy ceiling. The flanking sidelights have horizontal muntins extending across to the transom bars and at midway door height. The northeast sidelight is repeated around the corner at the north elevation. The four doors are single-light with extruded aluminum, double flute trim.

The lower southeast section contains two bands of windows with canted terra cotta enframingent. Nearest the entrance structure are four windows with a wide center mullion. The three horizontal sash in each opening are awning type. This band is connected to a ribbon window with two and three-light awning sash spaced with wide mullions. The window heads are at the same height; the sill is stepped.

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
Denver County, CO

The west elevation is generally similar in form. The northwest wing extends around the corner and is stopped by a low section extending approximately the length of the auditorium where it is intersected by a high service structure which encloses the base of the stage fly loft and which extend around the southwest corner in a contiguous, but lower section. The canted auditorium wall is ornamented with the soldier coursing within projecting header bands. The low central section has an exit door alcove and a band of ribbon windows in an unornamented opening with a brick sill. A service door is located at the south end of the section. The heads of all three openings do not align. At the fly loft service wing, there is a large garage-type door with a roll-up door. All parapets are capped with the ovolo terra cotta coping.

The service section continues around the southwest corner and along the south of the theater where the stage fly loft dominates the elevation. A chimney extends up the west corner of the fly loft and projects slightly above the roof parapet. The higher west section of the rear wing has five bays of metal framed 28-light sash with a raised header course extending around the openings and enclosing brick sills. At the east end, the lower section has two horizontal six-light sash openings with all header brick jams and head and brick sills. At the southeast corner is a doorways with a single-light metal door and a flat cantilevered canopy extending over the walkway. The canopy fascia matches the main marquee canopy.

The interior is distinguished by three major public spaces: the lobby, the auditorium, and the lower lobby. Auxiliary spaces of note are the ticket-entrance lobby, and the lower level public restrooms. Other spaces include the stage area with fly loft constructed on exposed concrete block and concrete frame; the east and west dressing rooms and corridors; the shops and the storage rooms under the stage; basement shops, prop and costume storage rooms; non-public restrooms; and service stairways.

Patrons enter the northeast ticket lobby which is terrazzo paved and has pink travertine marble clad walls. The ceiling is plaster and is contiguous with the marquee canopy ceiling. The ticket lobby has two ticket windows with marble flat bank trim around the openings and a similarly trimmed service doorway into the box office from the lobby. The door is a single-light aluminum framed door as are the four doors into the lobby.

The lobby, behind the north central pavilion glazing is a nearly two story space with a freeform false balcony wrapping around the inside walls. The areas at either end are low, one-story spaces to the soffit of the balcony configuration. An interior planter extends in front of the window wall and has a pink travertine marble cap. The outside wall is curved and is accentuated with curved interior corners. The space has a high wood veneer wainscot with a molded chair rail. At the window wall, the wainscot extends up to the marble cap of a planter and is set lower at the sides where the planter curves into window apron. The walls are clad with a textured beige vinyl covering imitating grass cloth. The ceilings are rough textured acoustical surface.

At the west end of the lobby is what was called the "Holy of Holies," a semi-octagonal alcove that included a shrine to the Abbey Theater in London. The display originally included a painting of that

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
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theater and a brick from the ruin. The walls are clad with wood veneer paneling, stained a dark walnut color with a fluted pilaster at each side of the opening. The pilasters have five flutes. A three-flute pilaster is set at each angle of the walls' planes which also have a molded chair rail. An ovolo profile light trough reflects light up on a plastered ceiling cove. A north doorway has wooden bolection trim typical of all public space doorways.

The main element of the lobby is the grand staircase system. A short flight of steps is centered on the north wall of the auditorium and descends to a landing where the staircase splits to the east and west landings and extends on down at right angles to the lower lobby. Over the lower staircase are two runs of steps to a freeform cantilevered landing/balcony which provides access to the two back entrances to the auditorium balcony. The staircases, with curved bottomed steps, are each set behind a round column at the outside corners of the auditorium. The wall above the lower landing has a niche or alcove. The floor is blue carpeted as are the steps of the staircase. Light fixtures are a pair of chandeliers with spherical clear glass globes hung at various levels.

At each side of the auditorium at the lobby level, doorways open onto a cross aisle that provides direct access to the space which has 550 seats. The cross aisle fronts the stepped balcony tier of seats with two center aisles providing access to the rear balcony doorways. The orchestra seating has two side aisles and two center aisles. The floor is raked. Enclosing the cross aisle at the orchestra seating is a low wood veneer wall with an aluminum cap. The balcony is enclosed along the cross aisle with a similar wall with a low aluminum railing set on top of the cap. The theater seats are upholstered in a red mohair which contrasts to the blue carpeted aisles. The seats have molded metal end panels and all are arranged in curved tiers focusing on the stage area. An orchestra pit is located in front of the stage which is approximately two to three feet above the floor.

The stage does not have a proscenium arch, but is defined by the narrowing of the splayed walls, the curve of the raked ceiling cove, and the flanking concave acoustical baffles. The baffles are vertical strips of wood which extend to the height of the cove. The overall decorative scheme of the room is a series of four overlapping plates which extend from the stage and wrap the walls and ceilings forming the cove. The bottom of the plates are staggered up the rake of the floor and overlap the wooden wainscot. The plaster surfaces are finished with rough texture surfaces including the back of the auditorium where curved walls enclose the projection booth.

The lower lobby has the pair of staircases descending down at either side. The bottom steps are curved. Typical of the handrails of the interior, the design reflects with northwest parking lot fence. However, the top handrail at the foot of each staircase sweeps down at a wide angle onto the last tread. The staircases have wood veneer wainscoting that curves in a quarter circle to the floor and contrasts to the textured vinyl wall covering. The lower lobby features a freeform cove at the ceiling with is rough textured plaster. The cover lowered ceiling is over a built-in bar set between two oblong columns. The door jambs are curved with flat heads. The floor is laid in blue "Terra Tile" with cream borders. Opening off the lower lobby are the men's (west) and women's (east) restrooms. The women's

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
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restroom has a large lounge space with a separate toilet room. Typical of the men's which does not have an anteroom, the walls are clad in a light grey structural glass veneer laid in a running bond. The partitions are also grey structural glass and have wooden doors.

In general, the public space interiors invoke an early 1950s feeling with the use of freeform shapes, although usually symmetrically planned. These interiors, as a consequence, have a fluidity. The secondary spaces, primarily arranged down flanking corridors along the auditorium, are strictly utilitarian with minimal institutional finishes.

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
Denver County, CO

Summary of Significance

Criterion "A"

The Bonfils Memorial Theater (now the Lowenstein Theater) has character, interest and value as part of the development, heritage and culture of Denver civic theater during the period of significance.

Criterion "B"

The Bonfils Memorial Theater exemplifies the cultural, social and historic heritage of the City of Denver through its association with Helen Bonfils, owner and publisher of the Denver Post, Denver social leader and philanthropist, and actress and leader in Denver civic theater, all of which combined to make her one of the most prominent, powerful and influential women in Denver from the period of significance.

Criterion "C"

The Bonfils Memorial Theater portrays the environment of the post World War II era of Denver history characterized by the Art Moderne in architecture and city planning, designed as an integral component of the Denver City Landmark City Park Esplanade. It embodies the distinguishing characteristics of the Art Moderne Style. The Bonfils Memorial Theater is the work of John K. Monroe, a local master of architecture.

Criteria Consideration "G"

Because the Bonfils Memorial Theater is less than fifty years old, a Criteria Consideration G is sought. This Exception would be in line with the historical and architectural importance of the building in Denver in the period of significance.

The Bonfils Memorial Theater represents a unique combination of social history, through its connection with the lifetime philanthropy and theater interests of Helen Bonfils, one of the most prominent women in twentieth century Denver; cultural history, through its significance to civic theater in twentieth century Denver, and architectural history, embodying the Art Moderne Style and representing the achievements of John K. Monroe, an acknowledged master of Denver architecture.

Ordinarily, buildings that are less than fifty years old are not eligible for listing on the National Register. The last fifty years, however, represents nearly half the time span of the history of building in a relatively young city such as Denver. Furthermore, the vast majority of the built environment in Denver dates back only to the boom in building of the 1960s to the 1980s.

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In the last fifty years, advances in scholarship among architectural historians have resulted in an abundance of scholarly materials establishing the historic perspective of International Style architecture in the post-war period.

Criterion "A"

The Bonfils Memorial Theater was built in memory of Belle and Frederick G. Bonfils, by their daughter Helen Bonfils to provide a home for the Denver Civic Theater. The Denver Civic Theater was founded in 1929 in cooperation with Denver University. At that time, it was called the University Civic Theater. The group was originally housed in Margery Reed Hall on the University of Denver campus in an auditorium that was the gift of Denver philanthropist Mrs. Vernor Z. Reed. This auditorium was outgrown in the 1940s when membership rose from the original 700 to more than 8,000 subscribers.

Civic theater in Denver began informally in the late nineteenth century when local talent participated in various church and community productions. It was not until the 1930s that more formal, permanent civic theater was established. The Baker Federal Theater came out of the Depression-spawned Works Progress Administration (WPA) and provided unemployed artists and actors with the chance to ply their craft. The theater offered lost priced entertainment to the community. Denver playwright Mary Coyle Cases' first play, Me Third, received its stage debut at the Baker.¹ Various groups of amateur players organized themselves in the Denver area. One of the oldest may well be the Golden Thespians who began in the mid-1930s at a church in Golden. They were followed over the years by such groups as the Columbine Players in Littleton, the Spotlight Theater in Thornton, and the Footlight Theater in Broomfield. Denver has fielded several community groups including the Asta Players, the Gaslight Theater, Metropolitan Players, the Denver Player's Guild and the Denver Civic Theater.² From among this group of players, the Denver Civic Theater stands out for its unique activities, organization, and place in the history of the community and for its unique contribution to Denver theater.

The Denver Civic Theater began in 1929 to give community members with an interest in theatrical work a chance to participate in stage plays. Former high school and college actors as well as interested amateurs built sets, made costumes, provided technical support and appeared in the performances of the Denver Civic Theater. For many years the theater shared quarters with the Denver University theater department in the Margery Reed Hall auditorium. At that time the group operated as the University Civic Theater. Plays had to be staged around college performances and class use of the theater. By 1940 the subscribers to the group's performances had risen from seven hundred to over 8,000. The auditorium at D.U. proved inadequate for the growing Civic Theater's needs.³ The call for a larger, more permanent home was answered by Denver socialite and arts supporter, Helen Bonfils.

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When the Denver Civic Theater outgrew its facilities, long-time supporter Helen Bonfils was prepared to offer the group a tremendous opportunity. As a memorial to her late parents, she paid for the design and construction of a new community theater. The resulting, state-of-the-art facility proved to be superior to many professional theaters around the country. Nationally known theatrical impresario Belvins Davis described it as, "the finest theater of its kind in the United States...There is nothing better in New York. It is remarkable to think that this fine theater has been built in Denver for young students of the drama and amateurs. I think it will become one of the finest training grounds in the country."⁴

Speaking to the Optimist's Club in 1954, the year after the theater opened, Helen Bonfils Said, "The Civic Theater fills a need in the winter with which nothing else can quite cope...All theater is close to my heart -- but especially the Civic Theater."⁵

The gala premier was attended by five hundred Denver civic and society leaders. Hundreds of congratulatory telegrams poured in, including one from then-President Eisenhower.⁶ Helen Bonfils preeminent position among the social elite of the city insured both a high rate of performance subscription sales and a ready group of financial supporters for the theater's financial needs. The secure financial position of the Bonfils Memorial Theater allowed it to provide a unique support system. Like most community theaters, the Denver Civic Theater players received no pay for their performances. However, unlike most other groups, the Bonfils Theater was staffed by a paid, full-time administrative staff as well as a professional director and designer. Helen Bonfils used her significant contacts in Broadway theater to secure some of the most skilled and experienced support personnel for the theater. The paid staff, combined with the state of the art theater and the relative financial security, resulted in a truly first class theater for Denver. The annual seasons featured six productions and regularly played to a subscription audience of 9,000.⁷

The first production of the 1953 season was the Broadway hit "Green Grow the Lilacs." This was followed by a steady stream of Broadway's best drama, comedy, and musical productions. For the next two decades, the Denver Civic Theater presented to Denver audiences such challenging productions as "Gigi," "The Rainmaker," "Father of the Bride," "As You Like It," "Death of a Salesman," "Guys and Dolls," and "Pajama Game."⁸

During its first decade of operation, the opening night of the theater season was the social event for Denver's social elite. In 1957, when "The Solid Gold Cadillac" was the opening feature, the Post noted that, "...no diamond-studded limousine could have outshone the enthusiastic first nighters who packed the theater. Local gentry flocked to the gala opening in mink, ermine, sable and black tie."⁹ Pre-theater parties were common social events.

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The Denver Civic Theater rented the theater at a yearly cost of one dollar. The players were selected mainly from a group of some four hundred Denver area residents who had acting experience. Others worked with the paid designer to create stage settings and provide technical support for each production.¹⁰ Other local amateur groups staged performances in the Bonfils. The first undergraduate musical review produced by the students of the University of Colorado took place at the Bonfils in 1954.¹¹

Occasionally, individual professional actors joined the amateurs for a production. In 1955, Joe E. Brown came to Denver to play the lead in Denverite Mary Chase's Pulitzer Prize winning play, "Harvey." The entire proceeds of the week-long performance went toward the establishment of the Denver Women Alcoholics Rehabilitation Center.¹² In 1964, the Royal Shakespeare Company presented twelve performances of "The Hollow Crown" at the Bonfils Theater.¹³

Henry Lowenstein, stage designer of the Bonfils Theater since 1956, was named producer/designer in 1967. In addition to his responsibilities at the Bonfils, Lowenstein served as designer for the Denver Lyric Theater and the Denver Opera Foundation. In an effort to expand the audience appeal of the theater, he began the production of a series of modern plays patterned after the off-Broadway offerings of New York. In commenting on the new program, entitled the "Contemporary Scene," Lowenstein said, the "Bonfils is a community theater. It belongs to Denver. An because of that, I think we ought to appeal to everyone's taste...by including contemporary work I hope to reach people who've never been inside Bonfils before."¹⁴

The Denver Civic Theater expanded the scope of its activities in other ways at the Bonfils Theater. In the fall of 1954 they launched a new "theater for children" project for the sons and daughters of group members. Junior memberships were offered for four children's plays performed by adults. A paid director was hired for the program. Joanne Healey, a local junior high school teacher, occupied the position in the initial season.¹⁵ The children's theater proved to be an extremely popular addition to the theater's offerings. Performances were regularly sold out and the yearly Christmas performance of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" became a tradition.

In 1976, a former basement rehearsal area was transformed into the "Bo-Bans Cabaret." Its first director, Bev Newcomb, said, "We thought we could do more offbeat things that just don't play well to a commercial 550-seat house. I think Denver's really crying out for something like this show, particularly in our theater, where the tone has been traditional and conservative."¹⁶

The previous year, the theater staged its first production outside the confines of the Bonfils. As part of Colorado's upcoming centennial, the group produced a road show called the "Festival Caravan."

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Its presentation of locally written "Colorado Quest" was prepared at the Bonfils and then taken to seven Colorado cities during July, 1975. The regular Bonfils manager, Henry Lowenstein, produced the show and it was choreographed by Cleo Parker Robinson.¹⁷ In following years the traveling show concept was maintained and the theater presented a series of productions in various Denver parks. Often these performances featured ethnic programs as in 1978 when the professional Chicano theater group and folklore dance company Ballet Folklorico joined the Caravan.¹⁸

In 1972, two events occurred which had a profound impact on the future of the Bonfils Memorial Theater. The first was the death of the guiding spirit of the theater, Helen Bonfils. The loss of her inspiring vision and support can be seen in the drift of the theater from the uses she originally intended. The second event was tied directly to Helen Bonfils death. She willed the Bonfils Theater to the Bonfils Foundation. In an effort to maintain control over all the various assets of the Bonfils estate, the Foundation converted the theater into the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA).¹⁹ What began as a tax maneuver, progressed to the creation of a professional downtown theater and performing arts complex second in size only to New York's Lincoln Center.

The DCPA continued to operate the Bonfils Theater along with its downtown theater center. The downtown performing arts complex devoted itself to professional theater while the Bonfils continued as a community theater. The governing board grew increasingly concerned about the deficit they believed the Bonfils generated. In 1984, it was announced that the main stage of the theater would be closed while the Bo-Banks Cabaret, the Children's Theater, and the park performances would continue. DCPA Board Chairman Seawell stated that during the past fifteen years the Bonfils had become "neither community theater nor quite professional theater and had reached the point where it was in active competition with the Denver Center Theater Company."²⁰ It may be argued that the Bonfils Theater lost its unique ability to serve as a community theater while under the management of the DCPA with its professional theater orientation. Whatever may have been the cause for the theater's declining use, there is little argument about the place the Bonfils Memorial Theater played in the theater life of Denver. It may be credited with bringing quality theatrical performances to the citizens of Denver and paving the way for the success of both other community groups and for the professional productions staged by the DCPA. Unfortunately, the Bonfils Memorial Theater has become an unappreciated asset in the DCPA organization.

With the closing of the main stage, the remainder of the Bonfils Theater operations were unable to meet the costs of maintaining the staff and building. In 1985, the Bo-Bans closed and the Children's Theater put on its last performance the following year. Even the Bonfils name was replaced when, in 1986, the theater was renamed the Henry Lowenstein Theater in honor of the long time designer and producer.²¹

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While the theater has been used irregularly for community and school productions, its long-term place in Denver's theater and social life is currently in doubt.

Criterion "B"

Helen Bonfils occupied a unique and powerful position in Denver society. Born in 1889 she was the daughter of Belle and Frederick G. Bonfils. The elder Bonfils was co-founder of the Denver Post, and upon his death, Helen inherited her father's stock in the newspaper.²² An early advocate of sexual equality, Helen had persuaded her father, Frederick G. Bonfils, to bequeath the paper to her and not to a distant male relative, as he originally intended. For thirty-five years she served as the Secretary Treasurer of the Post. The newspaper provided her a platform from which to champion the many causes in which she believed, including sexual and racial equality. Throughout her life she contributed to many social and religious causes, donating more than a million dollars to the Denver Roman Catholic Archdiocese.²³ It is undoubtedly this close relationship with the Archdiocese which led to her association with, and selection of, John K. Monroe, Archdiocese architect, as the designer of the Bonfils Memorial Theater.

One of Helen's greatest loves was the theater. An interest in the stage was kindled as a child and as an adult she appeared in small roles on Broadway in New York City. Her financial position allowed her produce several Broadway plays and to own and operate the Little Theater (later the Helen Hayes Theater) on Broadway.²⁴ The contacts she made with actors, directors and writers proved invaluable for her efforts to upgrade the level of theatrical life in Denver.

Helen was a lifetime patron of Denver theater which she supported through the Post, her financial contributions, and by direct participation. She was seen regularly in the summer productions at the Elitch Garden's Theater where she was a crowd favorite, particularly in comedy roles.²⁵ It was while performing at the Garden's Theater that she met and fell in love with the theater's director, George Somnes. The two were married in 1936. After her husband's death, Helen produced the summer seasons at the Elitch Theater while continuing her Broadway productions.²⁶

In 1953, she opened the Bonfils Memorial Theater which she operated as a community theater until her death on June 6, 1972.

Helen Bonfils never compromised on her commitment to racial equality. In the 1950s, when most of Denver's cultural facilities were subject to de facto segregation, the Bonfils Memorial Theater was racially integrated. Minority performers were regularly featured beginning with the first season's appearance of African-American Cab Calloway.²⁷

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Following her death, her fortune, in the form of the Bonfils Foundation and under the direction of Donald Seawell, funded the creation of a professional downtown theater and performing arts complex in Denver second in size only to New York's Lincoln Center.

Criterion "C"

Art Moderne architecture is a rare resource in Denver. There are few major examples constructed in the post World War II period in Denver. In comparison to other Denver theaters, the Bonfils Memorial Theater is unique in the post-war Art Moderne Style. However, other Denver buildings, an auditorium and a performing arts center, that were also built to stage public performances are stylistically related to the Bonfils Memorial Theater. The Municipal Auditorium Arena by G. Meredith Musick and F.E. Mountjoy of 1941 at 13th and Curtis, is a pre-war building that related to the Bonfils Theater. Like the Bonfils Memorial Theater, the Auditorium Arena was principally built of buff colored brick with ribbon windows, cast terra cotta trim, additional trim in aluminum, curved corners and a curved entry canopy. The Arena has recently undergone insensitive remodelling, which has already resulted in the loss of the interior as well as some of the terra trim and the canopy.

The May Bonfils Stanton Performing Arts Center by G. Meredith Musick and C.S. Musick of 1963 on the former Loretta Heights College Campus at 3001 South Federal²⁸ is an International Style building that is, nonetheless, also related to the Art Moderne Bonfils Theater. The exterior expression of the Art Center's interior is similar to the same device used in the Bonfils Theater's design. Interestingly, Monroe, Monroe and Dunham was the firm first hired to design the Performing Arts Center, but was replaced by Musick.

The Bonfils Memorial Theater has architectural significance as an example of the Art Moderne Style in mid-twentieth century Denver. It contains twelve of the prominent elements of the Art Moderne Style as outlined by John Blumenson in his book Identifying American Architecture²⁹:

- Soft corners with curved walls;
- Smooth walls without ornamentation;
- Horizontal bands of windows;
- Ornamentation provided by decorative glass panels;
- Ornamentation provided by cast decorative panels;
- Use of aluminum for door trim, window trim, balusters and railings;
- Large panels of glass;
- Circular and angular patterns in the glass and metalworks;
- Flat roofs;
- String courses along the coping of the walls;
- Curved entry canopies.

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The Art Moderne Style in architectural, industrial and domestic design first appeared in the United States in the 1930s. In the decade before the Second World War, Art Moderne became firmly established in the United States and by 1940 it became the dominant trend in American architecture. Art Moderne increasingly fell into disrepute from 1945 onward and by 1950 was in serious decline and was supplanted in the United States by the International Style. The influence of the Art Moderne Style remained, however, in architecture and automotive and industrial design, to a limited extent, until the mid-1950s.³⁰ After a period of neglect, Art Moderne was revived beginning in the 1960s by the Later Modernists, and later, by the Post-Modernists. The style in American architecture describes a wide range of manifestations from simple, streamlined apartments to monumental stripped neo-classical public buildings.

The Art Moderne Style is an indigenous American architectural style. Among its sources is the work of Louis Sullivan. The famous small Midwestern banks by Sullivan, for example, the National Farmer's Bank of Owatonna, Minnesota of 1908,³¹ feature horizontal volumes accented by the spare use of non-historical ornament. These banks provide an immediate American precedent for the Art Moderne Style.

The style is also an American response to European Modernism. Precedents for Art Moderne Architecture can be found in the geometric and linear type of Art Deco Style, as well as in International Style architecture. These styles were fully developed a decade before the earliest appearance of Art Moderne, around 1930.

Art Moderne shares with Art Deco an interest in ornament. Geometric decorations in cast panels and in metalwork are seen and simplified classicism is often used in the ornamental scheme. This ornament is sometimes in the Art Deco Style, which explains why the Art Moderne Style is sometimes seen as the second, later phase of the Art Deco Style. The two styles may be clearly distinguished, however, since Art Deco architecture is vertically oriented, whereas Art Moderne architecture is horizontally oriented.

The Art Moderne Style, closely associated with the International Style, is characterized, in addition to its primary horizontal orientation, by the dramatic conceptions of the buildings' volumes, seen in both styles. Ribbon windows, aluminum trim, light colored walls and flat roofs are other Art Moderne features that have direct precedents in the International Style. The ornament of Art Moderne clearly distinguishes it from the International Style, a style marked by its scrupulous avoidance of ornament. Beginning in the 1940s, some elements of Art Moderne were absorbed by the International Style such as circular patterns used in sun screens, curved entry canopies and rounded corners.

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The Art Moderne is associated with the emergence of the industrial design profession in the 1930s.³² The World's Fair in Chicago of 1933-34, The International Exposition in Paris of 1937 and The World's Fair in New York of 1939-40 provided widespread public exposure for the Art Moderne Style.³³ The Art Moderne Style represented a completely new aesthetic approach which introduced the modernist idiom to the products of American mass production.³⁴ These industrial designers emerged from the fields of advertising, retailing and theatrical set design.³⁵ Their influence was immediately felt by architects in their search for new forms.³⁶ Art Moderne Style architecture is characterized by asymmetry, horizontal banding and rounded edges.

Streamlining, with its evocation of speed, and stripped neo-classicism, were the primary modes of the Art Moderne Style. The streamlined manner may be seen as one pole of a continuum, the opposite pole being the stripped neo-classical. Art Moderne buildings may be positioned at any point on this continuum and many are a hybrid of the two.

A well-known early building important to the development of the Art Moderne Style is McGraw-Hill Building in New York City, by Raymond Hood and J. Andre Fouilhoux of 1930.³⁷ This building features rounded corners, horizontally linked windows and string courses.

An Art Moderne residence that is frequently illustrated in histories of the period is the Butler House in Des Moines, Iowa, by George Kraetsch, of Kraetsch and Kraetsch, of 1936.³⁸ The Butler House features a dramatic arrangement of the building's volumes, rounded corners and the liberal use of triple string courses. Aluminum is used in the door and window trim, and in the railings.

Many examples of Art Moderne architecture can be found in Los Angeles, California, a center for the style. Notable among these are the NBC Studio by Robert Smith, Jr., of the Austin Company of 1938,³⁹ and the Coca-Cola Bottling Plant by Robert Derran, of 1937.⁴⁰ Both buildings feature aluminum trim and rounded corners. The streamlined Bottling Plant takes transportation imagery to its ultimate conclusion. It looks like an ocean liner, complete with portholes. Another famous examples of Art Moderne Style in Los Angeles is the Griffith Park Observatory by John C. Austin and Frederick Ashley of 1934.⁴¹ The Observatory is an example of the neo-classical variant of the Art Modern Style.

Although most Art Moderne Style buildings feature some updated classical elements, often the string course, others are essentially stripped classicism, of an ancient Greek derivation. This manner, known as the Classical Moderne Style, is identifiable as a wholly separate entity of the Art Moderne Style.

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The Cranbrook Museum and Library by Eliel Saarinen, in Cranbrook, Michigan, of 1938⁴² and the Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington, D.C., by Paul Phillipe Cret of 1930,⁴³ are two well-known examples of the Classical Moderne Style. The Texas Centenary Exposition, held in Dallas in 1936, survives as Fair Park, by George Dahl.⁴⁴ Fair Park is a large group of substantial buildings in the Classical Moderne Style.

The work of Frank Lloyd Wright is typically seen by scholars to transcend stylistic categories. However, some of his buildings of the 1930s to the 1950s are related to the Art Moderne Style.⁴⁵ Notable in this regard are several major projects by Wright; the Johnson Wax Building in Racine, Wisconsin, of 1939,⁴⁶ The Guggenheim Museum in New York City, of 1956,⁴⁷ and the Marin County Courthouse in San Rafael, California of 1957.⁴⁸ All feature rounded corners and linear and circular ornament.

In Denver, the high point for the construction of Art Modern buildings was during the boom in construction beginning in 1938⁴⁹ and lasting up until the Second World War caused construction to dwindle in 1942. During this period, the Art Moderne Style became a dominant trend in Denver Architecture. In the decade after World War II, the Art Moderne Style was increasingly supplanted by the International Style, though due to the relative geographic and cultural isolation of Denver, a number of notable buildings were constructed in the style during this later period. The most prominent of these are the Bonfils Memorial Theater and the former Denver Post Building by Temple Buell of 1950 at 15th and California Street, both commissioned by Helen Bonfils. Like the Bonfils Theater, this building features string courses, ribbon windows, aluminum trim, a horizontal orientation, stripped neo-classical elements and flat roofs. The building's formal composition is much simpler than the complex formal arrangement of the Bonfils Theater. The Art Moderne Style in Denver disappeared completely by 1960.

There are a number of noteworthy residences in Denver in the Art Moderne Style. The residence at 1521 Monaco Parkway of 1936⁵⁰ and a similar residence, apparently the work of the same designer, at 1030 Bonnie Brae Boulevard of 1937⁵¹ feature curved, corners, complicated arrangements of the building's masses, horizontality and flat roofs. The Harry Huffman Residence, called "Shangri-La," at 150 South Bellaire of 1937 by Raymond H. Ervin,⁵² an acknowledged master of Denver architecture, is perhaps the best known Art Moderne Style building in the city. There is geometric ornament in a metal panel above the main entrance and in the railings. This ornament is Art Deco in style, which is not inconsistent with the Art Moderne Style. There are stripped neo-classical elements. Eugene Groves, another acknowledged master of Denver architecture, also worked in the Art Moderne Style. He produced highly original examples such as the experimental concrete houses built by him in the 1930s, notable the house at 2340 South Josephine of 1932,⁵³ the house at 2733 West 41st Street

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of 1935⁵⁴ and the house at 330 Birch of 1938.⁵⁵ These all feature rounded corners, circular ornamental details, string courses and other stripped neo-classical elements.

The greater Capitol Hill Area, including Cheeseman Park and City Park neighborhoods, is a local center of Art Moderne Style Architecture. In this area, there are dozens of apartment buildings dating from the 1920s to the 1960s. In addition to the Art Moderne Style, these buildings are also in Art Deco Style and International Style. Buildings in all three of these modernist styles are typically executed in buff colored brick with aluminum and cream colored terra cotta trim. This combination of materials is a dominant theme in Denver's mid-century architecture. The Dorset Apartments at 10th and Logan, circa 1938,⁵⁶ and the similar 940 Penn Apartments are apparently the work of the same designer and are good examples of the Art Moderne Style. Both buildings feature curved entry canopies, aluminum trim, horizontally linked windows, string courses, curved corners and flat roofs. The Bonfils Memorial Theater is thus related not only in date and style but also in terms of its materials, to these greater Capitol Hill area apartment buildings.

Scholarly Evaluation

The Art Moderne Style is a topic of the history of 20th century architecture. It is typically discussed in its relation to the Art Deco Style. In the 1930s through the 1950s, the style that is today known as the Art Moderne Style was known simply as "Modern" or "Ultra-Modern."

Art Moderne became a topic in the history of American architecture and design in the late 1960s. In 1969, architecture and design historian David Gebhard coined the term "Art Moderne."⁵⁷ The term was used to differentiate the horizontal, streamlined modernism of the Art Moderne from the vertical, hieratic Art Deco Style with which it was associated.

In its relation to the Art Deco Style, The Art Moderne Style has been studied by historians such as Alistair Duncan⁵⁸ and Eva Weber.⁵⁹ Richard Guy Wilson, et al, have treated Art Moderne in the context of other modernist styles in the exhibition and accompanying catalogue for the Brooklyn Museum "The Machine Age in America."⁶⁰ John Blumenson's Identifying American Architecture⁶¹ and A Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia and Lee McAlester⁶² discuss the Art Moderne Style as an established historical category in American architecture. Locally, Denver Going Modern by Don Etter⁶³ illustrated a number of Art Moderne Style residences. Denver The City Beautiful by Thomas Noel and Barbara Norgren⁶⁴, includes a discussion in historical terms of Denver's examples of Art Moderne architecture.

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The Bonfils Memorial Theater

The Bonfils Memorial Theater was designed in 1949 and completed in 1953. It was originally conceived as an integral component of the older City Park Esplanade, a Denver City Landmark. The Bonfils Memorial Theater relates to the Sullivan Gateway and East High School, also a Denver City Landmark, which are directly north across Colfax Avenue. The theater is a sight stop which screens the City Park Esplanade from the City Park residential and commercial neighborhood directly south. Helen Bonfils, who chose the site, said, at the time of the theater's completion, "It's a beautiful spot - like Paris when you look down the Esplanade."⁶⁵

The architect of the Bonfils Memorial theater was John K. Monroe. born in Denver on April 7, 1893, Monroe attended Washington University in St. Louis where he received a Bachelors in Architecture. He returned to Denver and joined the office of Denver notable J.J.B. Benedict where he became his chief assistant. Monroe was a member of the American Institute of Architects. While in Benedict's office, he is credited with the 1943 completion of Holy Ghost Catholic Church at 633 19th Street, Denver.⁶⁶ Though still associated with Benedict, he established his own practice in 1932. Through his association with Benedict, Monroe became principal architect for the Catholic Archdiocese of Denver. In this capacity, Monroe designed hundreds of churches, schools and other archdiocesan structures throughout northern Colorado for Archbishop Urban John Vehr.⁶⁷ Among the Denver examples are Christ the King of 1947 at 845 Fairfax,⁶⁸ St. Catherine of Sienna of 1952 at 4200 Federal Boulevard,⁶⁹ St. Vincent DePaul of 1953 at 2375 East Arizona,⁷⁰ Good Shepherd, also of 1953, at 2626 East 7th Avenue Parkway.⁷¹ All of these churches are designed in stripped historical revivalism, featuring modern materials, with dependencies (schools, convents and rectories) in the International Style. These buildings, like Bonfils Memorial Theater, are typically constructed of buff colored brick with cream colored terra cotta trim, which is virtually a John K. Monroe signature.

The 1953 Bonfils Memorial Theater is a rare example of Monroe's work in the secular world. The on-site supervisor for the Bonfils Memorial Theater was Robert G. Dunham, an assistant in Monroe's office.⁷² In 1959, Dunham and fellow assistant Robert G. Irwin were made partners, resulting in the firm of Monroe, Irwin and Dunham.⁷³ This firm was responsible for the International Style designs for the Student Union Building and the Cafeteria at the Loretto Heights College Campus at 3001 South Federal of 1960. The preliminary design in 1960 of St. Joseph's Hospital at 1800 Humbolt was also the work of this firm. In 1961, Irwin left the firm. At that time, Monroe and Dunham were joined by Monroe's son, John K. Monroe, Jr., resulting the firm of Monroe, Monroe and Dunham.⁷⁴ The senior Monroe retired in 1963. St. Joseph's Hospital was completed in 1963 by Irwin. John K. Monroe died November 16, 1974.

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The design of the Bonfils Memorial Theater well illustrated John K. Monroe's design philosophy. At the time of the ground-breaking in 1950, John K. Monroe pointed out that "The modern design of the theater is aimed at combining dignity and simplicity of appearance with all utilitarian considerations of a multi-purpose theater which can be used for legitimate plays, opera, moving pictures, concerts, lectures and television."⁷⁵

The Bonfils Memorial Theater is thought to be the oldest Denver building to be designed with the capacity for television production, the stage doubling as a television studio. Television was a new technology at the time (Since 1989 and until the death of actor/producer Raymond Burr, the theater was used by Viacom for the production of the "Perry Mason" television show.)⁷⁶

The Bonfils Memorial Theater has architectural significance, the materials and methods of construction exemplifying an Art Moderne building. The contractor for the theater was Mead and Mount construction. The mortar joints in the travertine cladding are precisely executed and nearly invisible. This stone is native Salida travertine. Native Lyons red sandstone is also used. Decorative elements in cream colored terra cotta were custom executed by Denver Terra Cotta. The pink glass panels, which are etched, were custom made by Gump Glass, which retains the original etching templates. The custom aluminum, used extensively in railings and the parking lot's perimeter fence, is finely done. All of these ornamental details were designed in the office of John K. Monroe. The variety and type of materials used in the details and the ornament of the Bonfils Memorial Theater are consistent with the philosophy of the Art Moderne Style.

The symbol of the Denver Civic Theater, a sailing schooner, is part of the decorative scheme, appearing in the windows and carpeting. The original interior, the colors of which were conceived by George Somnes, features Prussian blue lobby carpeting, natural wood and pumpkin gold vinyl wall covering. The immense picture window is tinted pink. Originally, there was a wide proscenium arch, now gone. The original mulberry colored curtain survives. The theater seats are upholstered in cherry red wool mohair. The lower lobby floor features the first national use of Terra-Tile, one of the few flooring materials that could be successfully laid below grade. A honeycomb suction back holds it in place without the use of adhesive. This experimental floor was laid by Reeves-Ryan and Company. This floor is midnight blue with cream at the base of the pillars, the walls and in the cloakroom. This lower level also features a coffee bar.

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47. Ibid., pages 92-93.

48. Ibid., pages 94-95.

49. Rocky Mountain News, June 14, 1939, page 7.

50. Don Etter, Denver Going Modern (Denver: Graphic Impressions, 1977), pages 76-77.

51. Ibid., pages 80-81.

52. Ibid., page 85.

53. Ibid., page 42-43.

54. Ibid., page 41.

55. Ibid., page 40.

56. Thomas Noel and Barbara Norgren, Denver The City Beautiful (Denver: Historic Denver, 1987), page 89.

57. Gebhard and Von Breton.

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58.Duncan, pages 79, 180-181, 200-201.

59.Weber, pages 46-47, 62-63, 65-66, 69.

60.Robert Judson Clark, pages 174-183.

61.Blumenson, pages 78-79.

62.Virginia and Lee McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), pages 464-467.

63.Etter, pages 40-43, 76-77, 80-85, 99, 101, 112.

64.Noel and Norgren, page 77.

65.Francis Melrose, "Gala Premiere to Open New Bonfils Memorial Theater," Rocky Mountain News, October 14, 1953, page 53.

66.Thomas J. Noel, Colorado Catholicism and the Archdiocese of Denver 1851-1989 (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1989), page 325.

67.Ibid., page 127.

68.Ibid., page 317.

69.Ibid., page 347.

70.Ibid., page 366.

71.Ibid., page 320.

72.Diane Wray, Interview with Robert G. Dunham, January 28, 1991.

73.Ibid.

74.Ibid.

75.Alan Murphree, "Ultra-Modern Theater Construction Ready for Start," The Denver Post, March 19, 1950, page 14A.

76.Michael Paglia, Interview with Gully Stanford, January 31, 1991.

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Original program, Bonfils Memorial Theater, Grand Opening, 13 October 1953.

Elitch Garden's Story

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
Denver County, CO

Geographic data

Verbal Boundary Description

Lots 1 to 8 including the strip 70 feet by 125 feet North of and adjacent to Lot 1, Block 3, Rohlfings Subdivision.

Boundary Justification

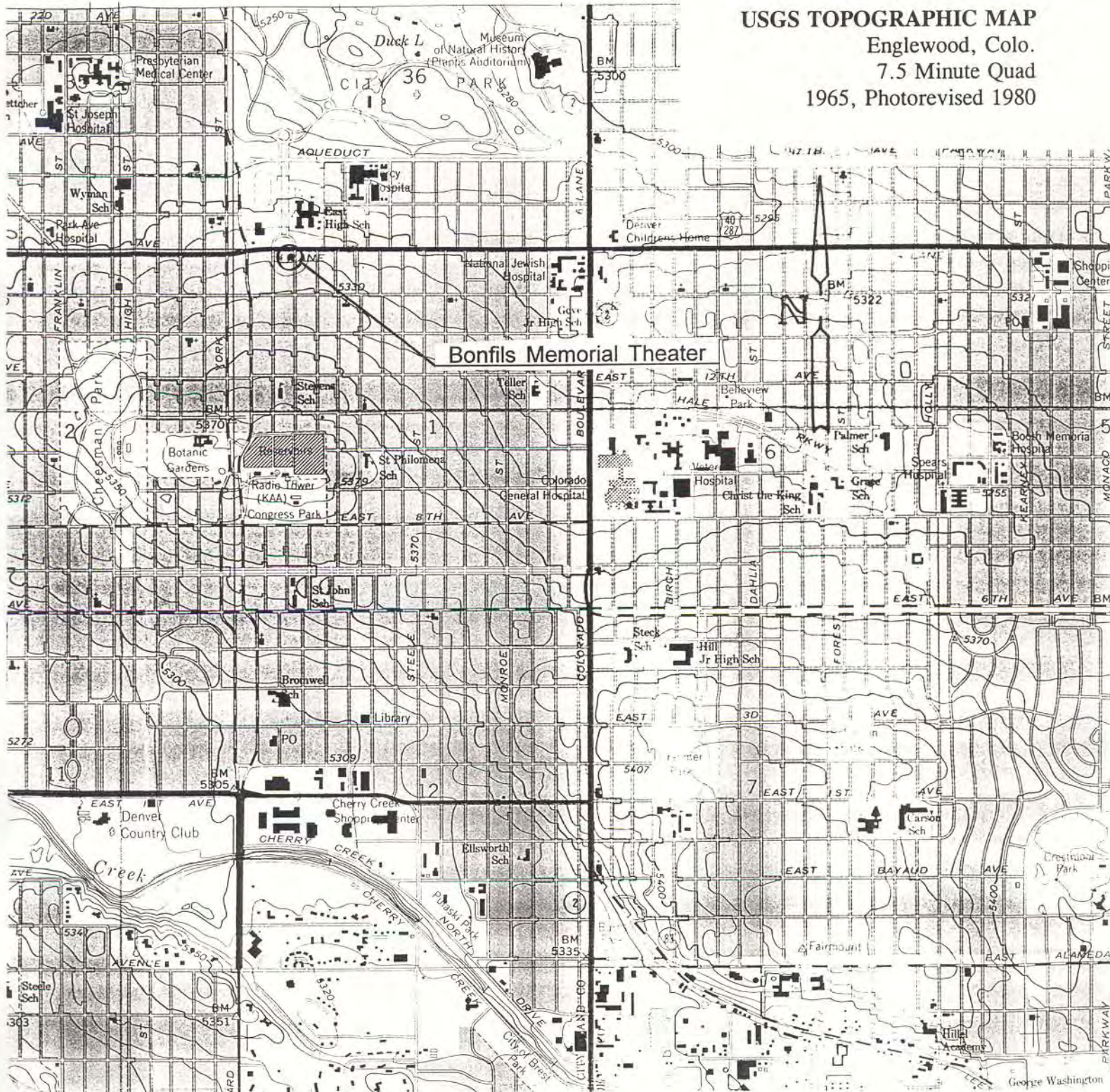
The boundary includes the property historically associated with the Bonfils Memorial Theater.

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Bonfils Memorial Theater
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USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP
Englewood, Colo.
7.5 Minute Quad
1965, Photorevised 1980

Bonfils Memorial Theater







LOWENSTEIN THEATRE

NO
PARKING
ANY
TIME
← →

NO
PARKING
ANY
TIME
← →

