

More than an office building — a work of art

By Douglas Engh
Staff Reporter

When the Nebraska State Capitol Building was completed in 1932, in the midst of the Depression, the legislature was able to stand back and boast, "paid in full."

At a cost of about \$10 million, the construction of the statehouse was financed through a "pay as you go" plan. A mill levy was assessed from 1919, when construction was first considered, until its completion 12 years

later, and provided all the needed funds for construction.

Designed by Bertram G. Goodhue, whose entry beat nine other proposals, it was considered a radical departure from the standard large central dome designs common at the time. He substituted instead a 400-foot tower using Gothic, Egyptian, and American Indian designs, among others. He incorporated more than 40 varieties of limestone, granite, marble, and slate.

Goodhue also provided leadership in creating a cooperative design effort

between painters, sculptors and stone masons and the poets commissioned to write the carved inscriptions found throughout the building. His intent was to create an integrated look rather than ornamentation that appeared to be simply applied to the finished walls and ceilings.

The present statehouse is Nebraska's third. The first, built in 1867, needed renovation after only six years because of the use of inferior materials. It was used until 1881, when the second capitol was completed on the site of

the present building. The second capitol was used for 40 years before the state government outgrew it.

The capitol building was constructed encircling the previous one, which remained in use until 1925 when it was razed to make way for the tower. By then, the wings of the new building were completed and occupied.

In 1912, a memorial to Abraham Lincoln was added to the west of the Capitol Building. It was designed by Daniel French, a sculptor who went on to design the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Over the years as Lincoln grew, downtown development was regulated to limit building size so as not to compete with the statehouse in prominence. In addition, Lincoln has tried to achieve an "axial development" which was suggested by Goodhue. He proposed that his design be central to the city's growth and that viewing vistas be created and accounted for as the city grew. These vistas are as near the capitol as Centennial Mall which links the capitol to the university campus, and as far as Pioneers Park which has three tree-lined vistas of the capitol. At the park's entrance, a life-size bronze buffalo points towards the capitol. In east Lincoln, Holmes Lake golf course has been designed to provide another scenic view.

Aside from the capitol building being a sculptural monument, it is also the seat of state government. After its completion, it housed all state agencies until the size and number of these agencies became so great that downtown office space was rented to accommodate the overflow.

Bob Ripley, manager of Capitol Restoration and Promotion, said this went on until the summer of 1976 when

the new State Office Building was opened. These agencies, including the Department of Revenue, moved from the capitol and consolidated in the State Office Building. The remaining agencies in the capitol have been given more space to handle their own expansion needs.

"Most of the floor space has been taken up for legislative needs," said Ripley, "such as senators' offices."

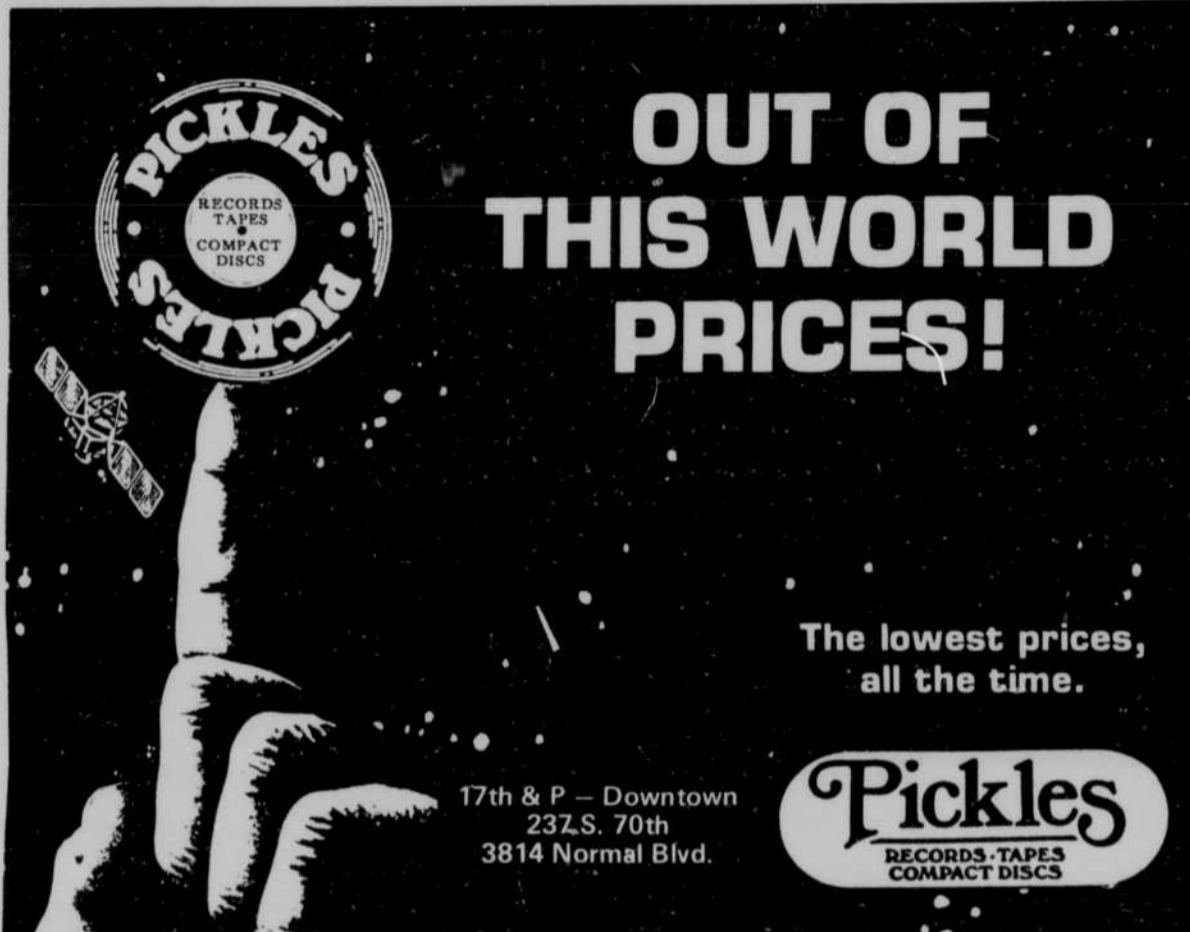
The tower was originally designed to house the state's legal library. "But with the advent of microfilm and microfiche, the space has never been fully needed, so the floors house a variety of newer state agencies," Ripley said.

Office space is still shuffled around in order to accommodate expansions, but Ripley said, "There's been a slow down in the past 10 years with the arranging."

Restoration work on the capitol has been completed on the large bronze doors on the east side. Work will soon be completed on matching doors on the west side.

Ripley said a photo survey is being planned to photograph all aspects of the capitol building. The photographs will be kept in an inventory for use on postcards, brochures and an updated historical booklet which is to be produced soon.

Free tours of the building are conducted every half hour Monday through Friday beginning at 9 a.m. with the last one starting at 4 p.m. No tours are given at 11:30 and noon. Saturday tours are at 10 and 11 a.m. and 1, 2, 3 and 4 p.m. and Sundays at 1, 2, 3 and 4 p.m. The 25 minute tour meets at the north entrance and covers the history of the building, its mosaics, original artwork and sculptures. During non-summer months, tours run hourly.



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