

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 determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions 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 any 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: BMA Tower

Other name/site number: n/a

### 2. Location

700 Karnes Boulevard  not for publication  
Kansas City  vicinity  
state Missouri code MO county Jackson code 095 zip code 64111

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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.)

Claire C. Blackwell/Deputy SHPO 25 July 2002  
Date

Missouri Department of Natural Resources  
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 commenting or other official Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

### 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this 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:)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

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County and State Jackson County, Missouri

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	No. of Resources within Property	
		contributing	noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u> structures
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u> objects
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u> Total

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

n/a

No. of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register:

0

6. Functions or Use

Historic Functions  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE/TRADE: Business  
TRANSPORTATION: Road-related

Current Functions  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE: Professional Offices  
TRANSPORTATION: Road-related

7. Description

Architectural Classification  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT:International Style

Materials  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Foundation CONCRETE  
Walls GLASS  
Roof ASPHALT  
Other SYNTHETICS -- Neoparium

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

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**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.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a 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.

**Areas of Significance**

Enter categories from instructions.)

ARCHITECTURE

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance

1961-63

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates

1961-63

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder

Skidmore Owings & Merrill/Bruce Graham (Chicago)

Tanner & Linscott (Kansas City)

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

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

(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 # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:  
BMA Company Archives

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property 7.5

UTM References

1	<u>1/5</u>	<u>3/6/2/2/0/0</u>	<u>4/3/2/5/9/8/0</u>	3	<u>/</u>	<u>/ / / / /</u>	<u>/ / / / / /</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>/</u>	<u>/ / / / /</u>	<u>/ / / / / /</u>	4	<u>/</u>	<u>/ / / / /</u>	<u>/ / / / / /</u>

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 Elizabeth Rosin, Partner  
 organization Historic Preservation Services, LLC date May 20, 2002  
 street & number 818 Grand Boulevard, Suite 1150 telephone (816) 221-5133  
 city or town Kansas City state Missouri zip code 64106

**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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name Business Men's Assurance Company of America (Contact Person: William B. Riddle, Vice President)  
 street & number PO Box 419458 telephone (816) 751-5373  
 city or town Kansas City state MO zip code 64141-6458

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BMA Tower  
Jackson County, Missouri

**SUMMARY**

The BMA Tower is a 19-story Modern Movement office building located at the northeast corner of Karnes Boulevard (31<sup>st</sup> Street) and Summit Street (Southwest Trafficway) on seven and one-half acres. Situated on one of the highest points in Kansas City, Missouri, the building is located three miles south of Kansas City's central business district. Parkland surrounds the property on the north and east. A four-story parking garage replaced an existing surface lot immediately east of the building in 1970. Due to its age and lack of exceptional significance, the garage is a non-contributing element to the historic property. The building's rectangular footprint, measuring 108 feet by 180 feet, is set slightly north of center on the 254-foot by 306-foot plaza. The welded steel-frame building contains 383,630 square feet of office space organized on a six-foot square module. White neoparium glass panels clad the perimeter structural members that project beyond the building's glass walls. The resulting dramatic grid of white and black, absent additional architectural ornament or embellishments, exemplifies the Modernist philosophy of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe that "less is more." The first story lobby is further recessed from the perimeter, enhancing the effect of the building floating above its plaza. The original design included the landscaping around the building, which embodies the Miesian relationship between the natural and the manmade. Failure of the original white marble panels that clad the external structure resulted in replacement of the panels with new panels that match the original appearance of the marble. Water seepage into the underground garage also resulted in the replacement of the original dark brick pavers. These changes have not impacted the ability of the building to convey its original design, setting, feeling, or associations. The interior of the building retains all of its significant, character defining features, materials, fixtures and furnishings. From any vantage, the pure Modernism of the original design remains unmistakable.

**ELABORATION**

**Structural System and Exterior Design**

The BMA Tower has a welded steel structure. Eight 36-inch beams, set on a 36-foot grid, frame the building's core. Extending the grid beyond this core, sixteen 24-inch beams create the perimeter structure. On the perimeter the grid becomes three-dimensional, including both vertical elements spaced 36 feet on center and horizontal spandrels connecting the vertical elements at the top of each story. The grid is five bays wide on the long (north and south) elevations and three bays wide on the short (east and west) elevations. White neoparium glass panels, measuring approximately three feet by three-and-a-half feet, clad the perimeter structure, affecting an external skeleton.

Dark gray, glass panels set in black aluminum frames form the building walls. These walls are recessed six feet from the perimeter structural grid. The 3/8-inch thick glass panels each measure six feet by eight feet. The dark gray color of the glass makes the panels heat absorbent. Coupled with the six-foot

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set back, these features reduce the building's energy needs and facilitate the exterior cleaning of the glazing.

**Building Interior**

The building's first story, measuring roughly 72 feet by 72 feet, is recessed toward the center of the structure. Two marble-walled elevator and mechanical cores dominate the east and west ends of the first story. To the north and south of the core, glass-walled lobbies, each 18-feet wide, span the full width of this level. An elevator lobby, approximately 12-feet wide, bisects the mechanical cores, connecting the north and south lobbies to create an "H"-shaped plan. Pairs of entrance doors roughly flank the short arm of the "H" on the north and south walls and provide access to the building from the north and south plazas. The south elevation has stainless steel revolving doors, while those on the north are plate glass swinging doors. Given the small footprint and transparency of the first story, the building appears to float above the plaza supported on 20 thin white legs of the external structure.

The public spaces of the first floor reflect the minimalist Miesian character of the building. The lobbies have polished brick floors and suspended plaster ceilings with recessed, can light fixtures. The north and south perimeter walls are clear plate glass. Polished, white Italian Travertine marble clads the interior and exterior walls of the elevator/mechanical cores. The lobbies are open with the exception of the east corner of the north lobby, which has been partitioned with clear glass walls to create office space. Centered in the south wall of the lobby between the revolving doors is a security station. Eight stainless steel elevators, four each on the east and west, flank the elevator lobby.

In addition to the elevators, the first story of the building's core also contains two stair towers, the switch board room, the mail conveyor, and a small restroom. On the upper floors larger restrooms dominate the core, along with mechanical service rooms, mail conveyor rooms and the elevator and stair towers.

Below the main lobby, the lower level of the BMA Tower has an expanded footprint that extends below the south plaza in order to accommodate an interior parking garage, which occupies just over half of this level. The remainder of the lower level houses property management offices, mechanical rooms, the mail room, and food preparation and serving areas as well as the employee dining room.

The dining room is a large open space centered at the north end of the building. It has direct access to an outdoor terrace immediately north of the building and views of Penn Valley Park, which borders the BMA property on the north and east. The dining room has a carpeted floor and suspended acoustical tile ceilings. The east and west walls are painted plaster. The south wall, which has laminate veneer, contains a series of coat closets.

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The upper floors of the office tower feature an open floor plan surrounding the central core. The perimeter walls are fully glazed. Forced air heating/cooling registers pierce ductwork that lines the perimeter walls at the base of the glazing. Carpet covers the floors and acoustical tile hangs from ceiling grids. Plenums above the ceiling grid carry additional mechanical ducts. Full and partial-height movable partitions create office cubicles, meeting and storage rooms. Each floor has a limited number of spaces defined by painted sheetrock walls. The modular floor plan was designed to provide flexibility to the office tenants to adapt the space configuration to specific needs. While the existing offices may have been added over times, they are compatible with the building's original interior character and the intended functionality of the space. Among floors there is no consistency to the number or placement of these offices, although they often occupy the building's corners.

In the upper stories, the central mechanical core includes the elevator lobby, two sets of exit stairs, men and women's restrooms, a mailroom, a janitor's closet and mechanical chases. The plaster perimeter walls of the core are painted white. The wall and ceiling treatments of the various internal spaces vary from concrete floors and concrete block walls in the service areas to ceramic tile in the restrooms and vinyl flooring and plaster walls in the lobby. The elevators have black laminate doors and white laminate interior walls.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> floors were designed to accommodate executive needs, and they continue to serve this function. On both floors the executive suites occupy the area north of the elevator lobby. The 18<sup>th</sup> floor elevator lobby has a ceramic tile floor and white laminate elevator doors. South of the elevator lobby typical office space is separated from the executive suite by a wall of opaque glass. A matching pair of swinging doors centered in the glass wall provides access to the office area. The north half of this floor is divided into two large office suites for company executives and their assistants. A reception area is centered along the north wall on axis with the elevator lobby. A wide, curved staircase with a brass and Lucite railing connects the executive floors. The 18<sup>th</sup> floor corner offices have wood parquet floors; the other spaces have carpet. All rooms on these floors have plaster ceilings.

Two smaller, private meeting/dining rooms and a kitchen separate the large meeting rooms (Boardroom and Skyline Room) that occupy the west and east ends of the 19<sup>th</sup> floor, respectively. The 19<sup>th</sup> floor Boardroom and Skyline Room retain their original sliding doors with opaque glazing and silk and teakwood paneled walls. The west Boardroom has a projection booth at the east end, while the east Skyline Room has a fireplace with brass frame at the west end.

The south half of the 19<sup>th</sup> floor houses the building's mechanical room. From outside the building the mechanical room is indistinguishable from the office spaces.

At the center of the building's flat roof, set back one bay from each side of the building, is the penthouse containing elevator equipment as well as the building's cooling towers. The penthouse is three bays

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wide and one bay deep. White neoparium panels, matching those on the body of the building, clad the structural members of the penthouse. Black louvers fill the voids between the structural elements.

**Parking Garage**

East of the building and the adjacent access road, a four-story parking garage was added to the property in 1970 on the site of an existing employee surface parking lot. Linscott-McArthur & Associates, architects designed the garage with assistance from Bob D. Campbell & Co., structural engineer, and Arthur R. Scott, mechanical and electrical engineer. Two levels are below grade, and two are above grade, although the steep hillside minimizes its massing and its visual impact on the BMA building. Pre-cast concrete walls with a large aggregate form the garage's walls. The top level of the structure has a striped, asphalt surface with a pipe railing lining the edge at the southeast corner. Dry-laid limestone slabs cover portions of the garage walls on the south and west. Wide overhead doors pierce the garage in two locations on the west side. Louvered openings also pierce the walls to provide ventilation. A tinted glass vestibule with a barrel-shaped roof caps a stair tower at the northeast corner of the structure.

Due to its age and its lack of exceptional significance, the garage is a non-contributing resource to the historic property.

**Setting**

Landscaping and setting were critical elements of the original design for the BMA Tower. The building rises from a plaza of dark gray and white concrete pavers. The grid design features 17-foot squares of dark pavers set in one-foot wide frames of white pavers. The result mimics the structure of the tower, affecting a reflection of the building in a pool of water.

Raised concrete planters surround the upper Plaza and flank the lower level Terrace. Additional planting beds are found within the paver grid in three locations on the main Plaza (two south of the building and one north of the building).<sup>1</sup> Plantings include deciduous and evergreen shrubs, ornamental trees, and flowers. Evergreen shrubs line the foundation of the Plaza along Karnes Boulevard.

A set of concrete steps, 88 feet wide, centered at the south end of the Plaza, leads down to Karnes Boulevard. A second set of concrete steps, 56 feet wide, on axis with the first story leads down to the east visitor parking area. A metal handrail bisects the east stairs and leads the visitor to the main entrance. The railing was installed in response to the extremely windy conditions often encountered upon approaching the building. Two flagpoles rise above the plaza near the front (south) steps.

The building and its plaza crown a large grassy hilltop. The formal landscape elements become increasingly natural as one moves away from the building until the landscape of the BMA Tower blends with the natural park environment surrounding the property on the north and east.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the integrated planters on the south plaza was originally a fountain.

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Two large signs identify the building. Original to the building's construction, both are composed of marble panels set in thin black metal frames and supported on thin black metal legs. Black letters applied to the marble panels read "BMA" and "Business Men's Assurance Company of America." One sign is located at the corner of Karnes Boulevard (31<sup>st</sup> Street) and Southwest Trafficway; the other sign is northwest of the building also facing the Trafficway. The corner sign is installed at the back of a retaining wall constructed of dry laid limestone slabs. Shrubs and trees obscure the second sign.

An access drive, with an asphalt surface and low concrete curb, runs adjacent to the east side of the building and curves behind it to the north to access the service dock and internal parking garage. North of the building pole lights with large white glass globes line the drive, and mortared limestone retaining walls form the east and west sides of the terrace area.

**ALTERATIONS**

Very little of the BMA Tower's original design has changed. With two exceptions, discussed below, no significant, character-defining features of the building have been altered on either the interior or the exterior. The distinctive Modern simplicity of the original design remains unmistakable.

**Plaza**

The current plaza was installed in 1986 when waterproofing repairs were made to the roof of the garage. The plaza originally featured dark brick within the grid of light concrete pavers. At the time of the garage repairs the original plaza materials were replaced while maintaining the original design. The new white precast pavers matched both the design and materials of the original paver grid. Dark precast pavers replaced the original bricks to recreate the pattern of light and dark elements. It was also at this time that plantings replaced the original plaza fountains to prevent further problems with water seepage into the garage. None of the changes to the plaza altered the architect's original design, and the plaza continues to create a reflection of the building's structure.

**Marble Cladding**

The second and most notable alteration involved the replacement of the white marble panels that originally clad the external structure. This occurred in 1986 after the fasteners holding three of the marble panels failed, and the panels fell from the building in May 1985. One panel from the penthouse landed on the building roof. Two other panels, dislodged from the seventh floor on the west side of the building, fell to the plaza.

An extensive investigation was performed into the cause of the panel failure. Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. (WJE), forensic structural engineers from Chicago, and the local engineering firm Black

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and Veatch completed the investigation.<sup>2</sup> Testing of the failed panels was completed by the Illinois Institute for Technology Research Institute (IITRI), Chicago, and the Kansas City Testing Laboratory. Their studies concluded that several factors contributed to the failure of the panels<sup>3</sup>:

- 1) There was no quality control for the strength of the marble prior to shipment. The strength of the stone varies depending on whether it is quarried with the veining versus against the veining and on where within the quarry it originates. Testing revealed that the strength of the panels cladding the BMA Tower varied significantly and that some of the panels fell far short of recommended standards.
- 2) The thinness (1 ¼") and size<sup>4</sup> of the panels contributed to panel warpage, and the thinness did not allow an adequate attachment to the building structure.
- 3) The panels experienced bowing, cracking and spalling, which reduced the effectiveness of the anchors and their connections to the building.
- 4) Roughly half of the column panel attachments were blind, meaning that it was not possible for the installer to verify that an adequate attachment had been made. This method of installation was not considered acceptable for exterior locations.
- 5) The methods of anchoring the panels to the building did not conform with the requirements in the shop drawings provided by the marble supplier, and at the time of the investigation this method of fastening panels was no longer recommended.
- 6) The wind loads experienced by the building are significant given its location on one of the highest points in the city. This increased the stress experienced by the panels and fasteners.

The WJE report concluded that "the façade marble [is] structurally unsafe at this time."<sup>5</sup> Testing of marble samples by the IITRI also determined that "the marble on the building has lost enough of its strength due to normal exposure that failures should begin to show up, and they will occur with increasing frequency under continued exposure."<sup>6</sup> Given these findings, the engineers explored a variety of options for repairing the existing cladding or replacing it with new cladding.

<sup>2</sup> The BMA Company contacted the building architect, Skidmore Owings & Merrill (SOM), following the initial failure of the panels. SOM determined that the failure was the result of improper installation and repair. Following the completion of the forensic investigation, which determined that there were inherent flaws in the building design, BMA sued SOM and won a \$5.8 million judgement from the Missouri Court of Appeals in 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Dutton Biggs. "Report to file 'B.M.A. Building Marble [sic] Facing, Problems with the Exterior Facing' " 23 October 1985. In "BMA Marble Report" (Black & Veatch Engineers-Architects, January 31, 1986), Appendix II. In the personal collection of Dutton Biggs.

<sup>4</sup> Panels ranged in size from 2' 6" to 3' in width and from 3' 6" to 6' in length.

<sup>5</sup> C.B. Monk, Jr. (Senior Consultant, Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc., Chicago), letter to Dutton Biggs, Black & Veatch Engineers-Architects, Kansas City, Missouri, 26 November 1985. In "BMA Marble Report" (Black & Veatch Engineers-Architects, January 31, 1986), Appendix III. In the personal collection of Dutton Biggs.

<sup>6</sup> S.A. Bortz (Manager, Nonmetallic Materials and Composites, Materials and Processing Technology, IIT Research Institute, Chicago), letter to Dutton Biggs, Black & Veatch Engineers -Architects, 30 December 1985. In "BMA Marble Report" (Black & Veatch Engineers-Architects, January 31, 1986), Appendix IV. In the personal collection of Dutton Biggs.

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There were two options for repairing the existing marble cladding. The first option placed urethane foam between the marble and concrete to seal out moisture and to bond the marble to the building. This option was eliminated because the long-term reliability of the urethane foam was unknown, and it would be impossible to inspect it subsequently to determine its condition. The second option would bolt the panels to the concrete using stainless steel bolts. However, the engineers determined that drilling holes for the bolts could cause additional damage to the already weak panels, and this option was eliminated.

Options for replacement cladding included new marble and neoparium, a synthetic glass product. The deficiencies (warping and spalling) encountered with the original marble cladding necessitated that new marble panels be significantly thicker than the original panels (2 1/2" – 3" versus 1 1/4"). However, the building's steel structure was not designed to support this additional weight.

The owners and engineers then focused on neoparium as a replacement material. These crystallized glass panels, manufactured by the Nippon Electrical Glass Company of Japan, were extensively evaluated for both strength and dimensional stability, and were determined to be significantly superior to the marble with zero-percent loss in either area. However, using the neoparium would result in two notable differences from the original marble. First, the relative thinness (5/8") of the neoparium required a smaller panel width than the original six-foot marble panels. Second, the neoparium has a uniform white color unlike the grey/gold veining of the marble. However, the building owner and the engineers determined the neoparium was an acceptable replacement option because when viewed at a distance of 100 feet or more the color and texture of the two materials were indistinguishable.<sup>7</sup> Distances between the building and the public right-of-way exceed 100 feet in all directions. In 1986, the marble panels were removed and the neoparium panels were installed with no significant visual impacts to the original building design.

### Interior Fixtures

The circular Lucite staircase connecting the two upper floors was added in the 1970s.

### **INTEGRITY ASSESSMENT:**

As described in *National Register Bulletin 15*, an assessment of integrity requires a clear understanding of three things: the ways in which a property is significant; those physical elements that define its significance; and the integrity retained by these elements. The BMA Tower is significant for its clear expression of the tenets of architectural Modernism expressed by Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, and as a rare example of Modern Movement architecture in Kansas City. Therefore, in evaluating the integrity of the BMA Tower emphasis must be placed on the areas of **Design, Setting, Feeling and Association**.

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<sup>7</sup> Wade Walker, interviews with Dutton Biggs, retired Structural Engineer, Black & Veatch Engineers-Architects, and Keith Herrin, Architect, Burns & McDonnell, April 2001.

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The following discussion examines the BMA Tower for the seven areas of integrity required for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

**Location:** The BMA Tower occupies the high hilltop at the corner of Karnes Boulevard (31<sup>st</sup> Street) and Southwest Trafficway (Summit Street) on which it was built. The BMA Tower fully retains its integrity of Location.

**Design:** The design of the BMA Tower is a unique expression of architectural Modernism in Kansas City. Mies Van der Rohe's influence on architects of the 1950s and 1960s resulted in designs described by Vincent Scully as "...simplified, pure, clean, generalized, reasonable, abstract."<sup>8</sup> Distinctive features include the projecting 36-foot structural grid, supplemented by a six-foot modular grid that defines internal divisions of space. Notably, the design melds the sparse simplicity of Modernism with highly restrained elements of Classical architecture. Devices, such as the white marble-clad structure rather than the exposed steel most common on contemporary skyscrapers; the formal symmetry and odd number of bays on each elevation; and the formal plaza from which the building rises, all allude to Classical design motifs. None of the changes to the building's materials, described above, impede the viewer's understanding of the original design.

The BMA Tower fully retains its integrity of Design through the retention of its original form, plan, spaces, structure and style.

**Setting:** Setting refers to the physical environment surrounding a historic property. In the Miesian tradition, the placement of the BMA Tower is nearly symmetrical on its plaza and incorporates a balance between urban and natural spaces. It can be said that the BMA Tower has two settings: the setting visible in close proximity to the building and its setting when viewed from a distance. At close range, the BMA Tower is located near the center of a paved plaza surrounded by a parking garage (east), a grassy lawn (south and west) and park land (north and northeast). As devised by the building's architects, the formal hard plaza faces the public right-of-way (Karnes Boulevard), while the more private rear (north) elevation of the building merges with the surrounding natural park environment. Interrupting the formal symmetry of the plaza are integrated beds planted with trees, shrubs and grass. Additional raised planters surround the plaza and ease its transition to the more natural, surrounding environment. Replacement of the original brick pavers with concrete pavers does not alter the original paving pattern of the plaza, which mimics the building's exoskeleton in a manner reminiscent of a reflection in a pool of water.

The lower-level employee dining room also opens on to a small paved terrace surrounded by planters. From here the views are dominated by the landscape of the park. Although a multi-story parking garage

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<sup>8</sup> Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 282.

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replaced the original, employee surface parking lot east of the building in 1970, the new structure took advantage of the steeply sloping terrain so that only two stories rise above grade. Only the rooftop parking level of the garage is visible from the building and the south plaza.

From a distance the dramatic presence of the BMA Tower in the Kansas City skyline remains undiminished. BMA officials selected this location in part for its prominence, and before construction was complete, the tower had become a new landmark on the Kansas City skyline. Not only is the tower visible for many miles, particularly from the north and west, but the views in all directions from the tower are among of the most breathtaking in the city. Unlike other corporate office buildings of similar vintage and design, the BMA Tower was constructed outside of the central business district. Its location adjacent to city parkland has protected its setting from the encroachment of new buildings on adjoining parcels. It remains a visual landmark from many miles away.

The BMA Tower fully retains its integrity of Setting through the retention of original, manmade landscape features as well as original topographic features, native vegetation, and, most significantly, the relationship between the building and the surrounding open space.

**Materials:** Very few alterations of materials have been made to the BMA Tower. Its original materials and original Modernist character are fully intact on the interior of the building. Especially notable is the treatment of the main lobby, the elevator lobbies and the executive floors.

On the exterior, the replacement of the marble that originally clad the external structural elements constitutes a significant alteration of materials. Flaws inherent in the original design necessitated this replacement. The building owners considered all viable options before selecting the replacement material and chose one that was structurally acceptable and that most closely matched the appearance of the original. Structurally, the crystallized glass replacement panels are significantly superior to the original or to a replacement marble. The smooth surface and white color of the skin, defining elements of the exterior visual appearance, remained constant despite the alteration. It is only upon entering the building that the change of materials is noticeable. The full significance of the building's design can only be understood from a much grater distance, and the change in materials in no way effected this understanding.

The type of significant material failure experienced by the BMA Tower was unfortunately common to buildings of this era. Innovative design and construction techniques pushed traditional building materials to their physical limits. Even among buildings designed by Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM), the problems experienced by the BMA Tower were not unique. The National Life and Accident Insurance Company Building in Nashville (1970), now the Tennessee Tower, received new marble panels when its original structural cladding failed in the late 1980s. As with the BMA Tower, the source

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of the problem was attributed to failed fasteners.<sup>9</sup> When the fasteners failed on the SOM-designed First City National Bank in Houston the building owners added external straps to reinforce the existing cladding.<sup>10</sup> While this solution retained the original building material, it weakened the integrity of its original design. In 1998 demolition of the original one-story banking pavilion and construction of a new multi-story parking garage further impacted the integrity of this property.<sup>11</sup>

The other notable material alteration at the BMA property was the replacement of the original dark brick pavers on the Plaza. This change also resulted from failure of the original installation and water seepage into the below-grade garage. The new concrete pavers follow the original design that reflects the structure of the tower on a two-dimensional surface.

The BMA tower retains partial integrity in the area of Materials. All of the original welded steel structure, which is crucial to the execution of the design, the original aluminum-framed glass curtainwall, and the original, interior finish materials and treatments remain intact.

**Workmanship:** It is difficult to evaluate the integrity of Workmanship for a building such as the BMA Tower whose design consciously eliminated architectural ornament and whose construction emphasized machine-age technology. As a result there is little evidence of artisans' labor and skill other than in the construction of the building's welded steel structure (the first in Kansas City) and the installation of various building materials. Workmanship is evident in the quality of building construction and interior finishes that yielded the refined simplicity of the lobbies and executive floors. The BMA Tower retains integrity of Workmanship.

**Feeling:** The BMA Tower is unique among Kansas City buildings in its strong expression of Miesian Modern Movement architecture. The Tower embodies Mies' expression "Less is More" by stripping all ornament from the structure to become a "fleshless skeleton."<sup>12</sup> The BMA Tower also achieves a Miesian balance between the man-made and the natural, with the spartan slab building becoming a sculptural element highlighted by the surrounding plaza and greenspace. The significant interior spaces, specifically the main lobby, upper story elevator lobbies, and the executive suites, are fully intact and retain their original Modern character.

The BMA Tower fully retains its integrity of Feeling, reflecting the post-World War II period of American architectural design when the Modern Movement in general and the Miesian style in particular became established. This period ended by the late 1960s, when corporate design began to

<sup>9</sup> Mike Fitz, Tennessee State Architect, personal communication, 10 March 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Randy Pace, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston, personal communication, 11 March 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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shift away from pure interpretations of Miesian theory to more textured explorations of architectural brutalism.

**Association:** As described above, the strength of its design creates a strong link between the BMA Tower, Modern design theory as it was applied to office buildings in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, and the work of architects who followed the teachings of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe during that period. A 1965 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York heralded the BMA Tower as the ultimate expression of Miesian design in the United States at that time.<sup>13</sup> The BMA Tower fully retains its integrity of Association.

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur Drexler, curator, *Modern Architecture U.S.A.*, an exhibit presented by the Museum of Modern Art and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), notes for exhibit Item 67.

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**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The BMA Tower located in Kansas City, Missouri is locally significant under National Register CRITERION C for the area of Architecture. It also complies with CRITERIA CONSIDERATION G for properties that have achieved significance within the last 50 years. Its period of significance, 1961-63, reflects the period of construction. The building is significant in the area of Architecture for its associations with the period in American architectural history defined by Miesian interpretations of Modern Movement design. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe espoused designs that were abstract, geometric, highly structural forms that rejected the veneer of historic eclecticism characteristic of earlier eras of architecture. The National Park Service has recognized the post-World War II era of Miesian-influenced design, during which the BMA Tower was constructed, and has determined that sufficient time has passed to be able to evaluate the significance of these architectural works.<sup>14</sup> In Kansas City no building better expresses the Miesian theory of design than does the BMA Tower. The building is a complete abstraction of its structure. Its architects, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), innovatively brought the structure outside the box, creating a grid-like exo-skeleton. This opened up the interior floor plans as well as created a dramatic visual image. By contrasting the white structure with the deeply recessed, dark glass curtainwall, the designers created sculpture. Enhancing the building's singular expression of Miesian design philosophy is its location outside Kansas City's central business district. The surrounding green space emphasizes the contrast between the natural and the manmade environments. SOM is regarded as the premiere corporate design firm of the post-war era, and its association with SOM enhances the significance of the BMA Tower. Emphasizing its significance under Criteria Consideration G, numerous scholarly publications have recognized the importance of the BMA Tower within the realm of Modern Movement architecture in the United States and within the body of work produced by SOM during this period. Comparison to contemporary corporate architecture in Kansas City and to other SOM designs in Kansas City further highlights the uniqueness of the design and setting of the BMA Tower and its importance to the architectural heritage of the community. Furthermore, the building was "quickly recognized as historically significant by the architectural... profession."<sup>15</sup> It received a High Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects in 1964, one of only two Missouri buildings ever so honored, and it was among 69 buildings included in a 1965 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, that chronicled the history of American Modern architecture. That exhibit heralded the BMA Tower as the culmination of Modern design in America at that time.

<sup>14</sup> Marcella Sherfy and W. Ray Luce, *National Register Bulletin 22: Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, Revised 1996), 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

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**ELABORATION**

To understand the architectural significance of the BMA Tower it is important to understand its design and construction in context with the growth of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America and in the context of Modern Movement architecture, nationally and locally, in the decades immediately following World War II.

**History of the BMA Company**

The Business Men's Assurance Company of America (BMA) was founded in 1908 by W.T. Grant.<sup>16</sup> The young insurance salesman recognized that the increasing mobility of Americans brought an increased risk of personal injury, and he decided to form an association to insure business and professional men. Missouri insurance law required that insurance companies retain liquid assets equal to the maximum benefits offered. To raise the necessary \$5,000 Grant sold 500 applications for membership in the yet-to-be-formed company. Recruiting prominent businessmen to serve on the new company's board gave Grant the clout to achieve his goal. By June 1909, 531 applications were on file with the Business Men's Accident Association (BMAA), and the company received its charter.

The life of the company was almost cut short three months later when one of the policyholders was killed in a railroad accident in Texas. Paying the death claim of \$5,000 would have depleted the company's assets. Not paying the claim would have sacrificed all public confidence in the new company. The Board of Directors signed a bank loan to cover the death benefit, which was paid promptly. The company used the incident to its advantage. By direct mailings and word of mouth news spread about the claim paid by BMAA.

The company grew rapidly under the leadership of W.T. Grant. A staff of field sales people was added in 1912. In 1920, the BMAA reorganized as Business Men's Assurance Company of America (BMA). J.C. Higdon joined the company as a sales director during the Great Depression. He rose to the position of president in 1945 and succeeded W.T. Grant as Chairman of the company upon Grant's death in 1954. In 1960, William D. Grant, son of W.T., became president and CEO of BMA. At this time, BMA ranked among the top four-percent of life insurance companies in America, and was also a prominent provider of health insurance.<sup>17</sup> The family tradition of the company continued into the 1980s, when J. Kenneth Higdon and subsequently W. Thomas Grant II served as company presidents. In 1990, Generali Corporation, a worldwide provider of financial services, purchased the company.

<sup>16</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the history of the BMA Company is from the company profile in *At the River's Bend* by Sherry Lamb Schirmer and Richard D. McKinzie (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications, Inc., published in association with the Jackson County Historical Society, 1982), 282.

<sup>17</sup> Business Men's Assurance Company of America, "BMA Tower," [October 1963], 1. Booklet from opening of new office tower. In the collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

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**Design and Construction of the BMA Tower**

In 1930, the BMA moved its offices into the Union Station Plaza building on Pershing Boulevard in Kansas City, Missouri. Originally occupying only two floors, the company grew over the next decades to occupy the entire building. By the 1950s it was ready for a new facility. Company executives preferred not to add on to an existing older building and needed additional off-street parking for its employees. When the company began planning for a new office building late in 1957, it had an existing staff of 700 with anticipated staff growth to reach 850 persons within five years and 1,000 persons within ten years. Anticipated space needs were 125,000 to 150,000 square feet. In addition to basic infrastructure requirements, BMA sought a location that offered views to and from the site, had existing trees, and provided "general attractiveness of location as a place to work."<sup>18</sup>

BMA considered four sites before selecting the St. Joseph's Orphanage property at the northeast corner of Southwest Trafficway and Karnes Boulevard (31<sup>st</sup> Street) for the new headquarters building. Among these were Signboard Hill, at the southeast corner of Main Street and Pershing Boulevard, redeveloped later in the decade as part of Crown Center, and the site of the E.C. White School, which was located near the Country Club Plaza, the Nelson Art Gallery and the University of Kansas City (now the University of Missouri – Kansas City). The St. Joseph's Orphanage site offered more possibilities for building and landscape design and had plenty of space to meet City parking requirements. It was also notable for its stunning views, mature trees, and access to public transportation.<sup>19</sup>

The orphanage and approximately nine existing houses were demolished for the construction of the Tower. A portion of the property, bordering the Penn Valley Park on the north and east, was deeded to the Kansas City Parks Department, leaving seven-and-a-half acres for the corporate headquarters. The site occupies one of the highest points in Kansas City, affording dramatic views north to the developed downtown as well as of the residential neighborhoods to the south.

In their selection of Skidmore Owings & Merrill, Chicago, as architects for the project, BMA officials made a conscious decision to involve the nation's leading designers of Modern corporate architecture. "Our proposed new landmark," W.D. Grant stated, "represents the company's permanency, stability and growth through a structure which will enhance the area in which it will be located and will maintain better service to the ... person protected by B.M.A.'s... insurance." On July 15, 1961 the Board of Directors broke ground for the new building.<sup>20</sup> After excavation for the lower level and parking garage, the first steel beams were erected in November 1961.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Fred W. Kraft (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Chicago), letter to William D. Grant, 21 Nov 1957.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> "BMA Board of Directors Breaks Ground for New 19-Story Home Office," *BMA Beacon*, July 1961. In the collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>21</sup> "Topping Out: BMA Tower – Signal Hill, May 9, 1962." Program from Topping Out Ceremony. In the collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

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The new BMA building was the first high-rise construction in Kansas City since the erection of City Hall in 1936. It was also the first building in Kansas City to incorporate a welded, rather than riveted, steel frame. In this construction method the massive steel beams are first bolted into place. A welder subsequently welds a bead along each seam to fuse the steel together, increasing the strength of the structure.<sup>22</sup> Because this was the first building with this structural system in Kansas City, BMA brought in a construction supervisor from Texas with experience in welded steel construction.<sup>23</sup> Of the over 6,600 tons of steel in the building, 1,200 tons were a specially developed alloy that provided increased strength with reduced weight.<sup>24</sup> During construction the *Kansas City Star* noted, "Because of its unusual, contemporary appearance, as well as its mid-town location on one of the highest points in the area, the BMA tower already has become a landmark to Kansas Citians and visitors."<sup>25</sup>

Ten months after starting work, the construction crew celebrated the "topping out" when the last steel beam was set into position.<sup>26</sup> The ceremony included placement of an evergreen tree at the top southeast corner of the structure, symbolizing the completion of the steel frame, and a gold-painted broom lashed to the final beam, symbolizing a "clean sweep" with no fatal accidents during the steel erection. Closed-circuit television enabled attendees on the building's plaza to view the installation of the final beam. After the installation, an American flag was raised on the southwest corner of the building indicating that the "topping out" was complete.<sup>27</sup>

The nine million dollar, 384,000 square foot building opened for business on October 7, 1963. The complex plan for moving equipment and files involved hoisting large equipment out through the windows of the old building and in through the windows of the new building.<sup>28</sup> Eighteen hundred people attended the dedication two weeks later. Speaking at the ceremony, Kansas City Mayor Ilus Davis remarked that the new building was "... a symbol of real enterprise and good business.... It has real meaning to this community and to the Middle West."<sup>29</sup> The excitement surrounding the opening of the building led the *Kansas City Star* to issue a special section of the paper dedicated to the new building on Sunday, October 20, 1963. Wrote Real Estate Editor Fred Fitzsimmons, "Quite possibly the most exciting building, in many respects to be created in Kansas City is the striking emotionally inspiring,

<sup>22</sup> "Steady Hands Build a Skyscraper," *Kansas City Star*, May 8, 1962. In the Collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>23</sup> "Start on New BMA Building," *Kansas City Times*, 23 November 1961. In the collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>24</sup> "B.M.A. Tower Will Be "Home" For Risk Firm, By Sept. 3," *The Kansas City Star*, 30 June 1963. In the collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Topping Out...."

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> "B.M.A. Moves This Weekend To Its Gleaming New Tower," *The Kansas City Times*, 4 October 1963. In the collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>29</sup> "B.M.A. Dedication Attracts 1,800," *The Kansas City Star*, 21 October 1963. In the collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

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deceivingly (and deliberately) simple-profiled B.M.A. Tower.” “The view from the top floors is electric,” Fitzsimmons continued, “... It is a vista no downtown building can possibly provide.”<sup>30</sup>

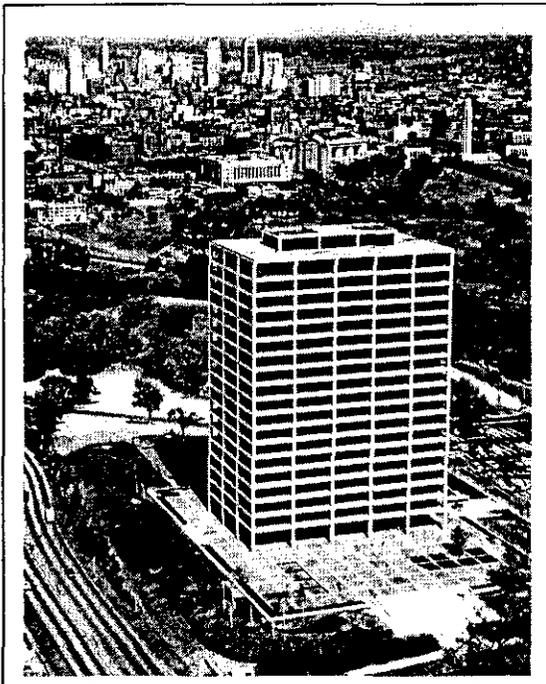


Image of BMA Tower from building dedication program.

The new BMA building included another distinctive feature. The 11<sup>th</sup> floor was dedicated as a computer room for the machines that processed the company’s billings, statistics, sales reports and payroll. The room housed three computers including an IBM 7070, which could “add or subtract a million 6-digit numbers in a minute, read or write (in its own language) at the rate of 41,700 characters per second, or review the company files of ½ million insured persons in 80 minutes.” This was reportedly one of five such installations in Kansas City at the time.<sup>31</sup> Building designers included special air conditioning and humidity control equipment to accommodate the needs of the computers, as well as a raised floor under which cables could be run.<sup>32</sup>

The design of the BMA Tower was widely lauded. Following its completion it won three awards of particular note. The first was an Urban Design Award from the Kansas City Municipal Arts Commission. Second, the building received an Architectural Award of Excellence from the American Institute of Steel Construction. The third award was a First Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA).<sup>33</sup>

The BMA Tower is the only Kansas City building and one of only two buildings in Missouri ever so honored by the AIA.<sup>34</sup> Four buildings received this highest AIA award in 1964. In addition to the BMA Tower, the other three Honor Award recipients were the Thomas M. Evans Science Building and an Arts

<sup>30</sup> Fred Fitzsimmons, “A Simple Spire, The B.M.A. Tower Offers Electrifying View of the City,” *The Kansas City Star*, 20 October 1963, section F. In the collection of the Business Men’s Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>31</sup> “B.M.A. Tower,” *The Kansas City Star*, Sunday, 20 October 1963, Section F. In the collection of the Business Men’s Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>32</sup> *The Kansas City Star*, 30 June 1963.

<sup>33</sup> Jack E. Bernet, Internal Memorandum to J.C. Wittlake, 3 Feb 1965. In the collection of the Business Men’s Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>34</sup> The other Missouri AIA Honor Award winner was Lambert Airport Terminal, St. Louis, designed by Hellmuth, Yamasaki & Leinweber in 1956. “High Honor to B.M.A. Tower,” *The Kansas City Times*, [June 1964]. In the collection of the Business Men’s Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

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and Communication Center at Philips Andover Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, designed by The Architects Collaborative; The School of Art and Architecture at Yale University, designed by Paul Rudolph; and the Headquarters for the Emhart Manufacturing Company, Bloomfield, Connecticut, also designed by SOM. Remarking on the awards given by the AIA, the *New York Times* wrote, "The awards jury found that the buildings unmistakably reflected the function for which they were designed, each avoiding architectural cliches, complicated and tortured structural effects and the use of too many different structural materials."<sup>35</sup>

The following year the BMA Tower received additional recognition through inclusion in an exhibit entitled "Modern Architecture U.S.A." curated by Arthur Drexler at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. Highlighting 56 years of American modern architecture, the exhibit selected 69 buildings because "some ... are unique masterpieces; others are primarily of historical significance. Some buildings are shown because they launched an idea; others because they carried it to its conclusion." Inclusion in the exhibit placed the BMA Tower within the pantheon of American Modern design. Other office buildings in the exhibit included the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society (Howe and Lascaze, 1932), the S.C. Johnson & Son Administrative Building (Frank Lloyd Wright, 1936-39), the United Nations (Wallace K. Harrison, 1950), Lever House (SOM, New York, 1952), the Seagrams Building (Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, New York, 1958), Deere and Company Administrative Center (Eero Saarinen, Moline, Illinois, 1964), an IBM Office Building (Curtis and Davis, Pittsburgh, 1964), and the Chicago Civic Center (C.F. Murphy Associates, 1963).<sup>36</sup> Within this collection of textbook examples of Modern architecture, the BMA Tower was heralded as a pure example of the design philosophy carried to its ultimate form. As Drexler's entry for the building in the exhibit catalog stated, "It is difficult to imagine any further clarification of the system."<sup>37</sup> The BMA Tower expressed, as the introduction stated, the conclusion of Modern architectural philosophy.

A four-story parking structure was erected on the site of the existing surface parking lot in 1970. The parking structure was designed to be compatible with the setting and design of the associated building. Taking advantage of the steep change in grade at the east side of the site, only the roof-top parking level of the garage is visible from the BMA Tower. However, due to its age and lack of exceptional design, the parking structure does not contribute to the significance of the nominated property.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas W. Ennis, "Architects Institute Selects Award Winning Buildings," *New York Times*, 14 June 1964, 1. In the collection of the Business Men's Assurance Company of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>36</sup> The exhibit included a total of five projects attributed to SOM. In addition to the BMA Tower, these included: Lever House (New York, 1952); U.S. Airforce Academy and Academy Chapel (Colorado Springs, both 1956-62); Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1963); and Chicago Civic Center (with C. F. Murphy Associates, supervising architects, 1963).

<sup>37</sup> Drexler, notes for Item 67.

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**Skidmore Owings & Merrill and Modern Movement Architecture**

The distinctive design of the BMA Tower was the work of the Chicago architectural firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. Founding partners, Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings met while both were involved with the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exhibition. They formed the company in 1936, maintaining offices in both New York and Chicago. The third partner, John Merrill, joined Skidmore and Owings in 1939. In the early 1950s a series of young architects, who would define the firm's style over the next three decades, joined the company and quickly rose to the rank of partner. Significantly, this group included structural engineers, who as integral members of the design team, enabled the development of SOM's many visionary designs.<sup>38</sup> As Henry Russell Hitchcock noted, the SOM organization from its earliest years emphasized "...anonymous production by teams of co-workers."<sup>39</sup> The results of this collaboration were "...original, but trend-setting and formally brilliant solutions..." to design problems.<sup>40</sup> Among the many notable SOM commissions are the town of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a community of 75,000 designed for the employees of the Manhattan project (early 1940's); the landmark Lever House in New York; the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs; and the Sears Tower and the John Hancock Building in Chicago.

The design for Lever House in 1952 catapulted the firm to the forefront of American architecture. As a writer for the *Kansas City Star* described, Lever House "...set the pace for post-war, prestige office buildings by demonstrating how much public attention a business can draw from elegant architecture."<sup>41</sup> SOM buildings reflected the tenets of Modernist leaders, such as Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe. The firm's work also exemplified the American interpretation of the International Style defined by Phillip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock, which included an understanding of architecture as volume rather than mass; a design ordered by regularity rather than axial symmetry; and the absence of "arbitrary applied decoration."<sup>42</sup> The *Star* further described the work of SOM as having "Clean, clear designs with meticulous attention to detail and a weightless, almost floating appearance..."<sup>43</sup> SOM redefined the American office tower as a distinct vertical slab, often enhanced by a secondary, low horizontal slab, both with a transparent outer skin that emphasized the building's structural elements. The architects' adaptation of this basic formula was described as "...undoctrinaire, but formally brilliant and ... well-adapted to each client's functional requirements."<sup>44</sup> One version of

<sup>38</sup> Oswald W. Grube, "Skidmore, Owings & Merrill," in *Encyclopedia of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Architecture*, gen. ed. Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986), 306.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Russell Hitchcock, *Introduction to Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1950-1962*, by Ernst Danz (New York: Frederick Praeger, Publisher, 1963), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Grube, 307.

<sup>41</sup> William Graves, "'S.O.M.' Is a Titan in U.S. Architecture," *The Kansas City Star*, [n.d.]. In the collection of the BMA Company.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher Woodward, *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill*, Library of Contemporary Architects (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 12.

<sup>43</sup> Graves.

<sup>44</sup> Grube, 306.

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the SOM formula for corporate designs, described as “masterful perfection,” placed the building complex in a park-like setting.<sup>45</sup> Cranston Jones, a contemporary architecture editor of *Time* magazine, described the firm as “...pre-eminently the Big Firm for Big Business, one that can deliver the whole package that architecture has become today.”<sup>46</sup> That complete package might include architecture, engineering, interior design, landscaping and cost estimating.

Bruce Graham, SOM project designer for the BMA Tower, was born in Bogota, Colombia to American parents. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Graham entered the University of Pennsylvania to study architecture. He graduated in 1948 and joined SOM the following year. He soon became a leader at the firm, and in 1960, Graham became a partner in charge of design. Among his most famous works are the Inland Steel Building, the Sears Tower and the John Hancock Building, all in Chicago. His designs can be found worldwide – in Central America, Europe and the Middle East. Graham received Honor Awards from the American Institute of Architects for the Banco di Occidente in Guatemala City, Guatemala, as well as for the BMA Tower. Following his retirement from SOM in 1989, Graham entered into partnership with his wife Jane in Hobe Sound, Florida.<sup>47</sup> An inveterate urban designer, Graham held a great love for the “...unexplainable spatial solutions which make up beautiful cities.”<sup>48</sup> He summarized his philosophy of design in a 1989 monograph. “Architecture is at the outset functional,” he wrote, “but that function must extend beyond the mundane to matters of the spirit.”<sup>49</sup>

As a general rule the National Register of Historic Places does not include buildings designed by architects who are still living at the time of nomination. However, there are exceptions to this rule. While Bruce Graham has been identified as the lead project designer for the BMA Tower, the collaborative nature of the design process within the SOM company suggests that this building does not express the vision of a single architect. In fact, the building’s near twin, the First City National Bank Building in Houston, is attributed to another SOM partner, Gordon Bunshaft, who worked out of the firm’s New York office. Instead of the work of a specific individual, it would be more accurate to view the BMA Tower as the work of a team of architects, engineers, planners and landscape architects working in collaboration under the leadership of Mr. Graham. Therefore, while this nomination makes specific references to Mr. Graham and discusses the role he held on this project, the building is more accurately viewed as the work of the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill firm during the years in which Mr. Graham was a Partner.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in William Graves, “‘S.O.M.’ is a Titan in U.S. Architecture,” *The Kansas City Star*, [n.d.]. In the collection of the BMA Company.

<sup>47</sup> Betty J. Blum, Interviewer, “Bruce John Graham,” *Chicago Architects Oral History Project* [report on-line] (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1997), available from [http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/dept\\_architecture/graham.html](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/dept_architecture/graham.html); Internet, accessed 1 March 2002.

<sup>48</sup> Bruce Graham, *Bruce Graham of SOM*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), Introduction.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

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**Influence of Mies van der Rohe on SOM and on the Modern Movement in America**

The first generation of SOM partners, including Bruce Graham, were disciples of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and of the International Style of architecture popularized in Europe before World War II and in America during the post-war period. Mies championed architecture that was described by architectural historian Vincent Scully as "...simplified, pure, clean, generalized, reasonable, abstract."<sup>50</sup> In stripping the frills from architecture, the building frame in the late 1950s and early 1960s became "a fleshless skeleton of ringing steel."<sup>51</sup> Scully writes, "Indeed, one of the obvious phenomena of the 1950s and 1960s was the superior work done by bureaucratic firms when they followed Mies closely and ... the weakness of their pretensions to originality."<sup>52</sup>

In Mies' view, buildings should rise from a symmetrical central space, creating a balance between the building(s) and the surrounding open space. As American architects embraced this philosophy, office building designs began to include increasingly expansive plazas, and the density in American cities decreased. The result is an urban scale described by Scully as "barely urban."<sup>53</sup> As followers of Mies, SOM designers were especially noted for their sensitivity to context. By the 1950s the firm regularly addressed landscaping and setting in designs for exurban corporate campuses, such as Connecticut General in Bloomfield, Connecticut and the Upjohn Company outside Kalamazoo, Michigan.<sup>54</sup> The BMA Tower also exemplified this design philosophy. Its site, located on the fringe of the urban core beyond the dense central city, bordered natural, park land to the north and east. In keeping with the SOM design philosophy, the BMA Tower includes two distinct landscapes. There is the formal treatment of spaces near the building on the front (south) and rear (north) plazas, and the less-formal treatment as the site melds with the adjacent park. In a setting such as this the designers clearly established a balance between the man-made and the natural environments that highlights and enhances the simplicity of the building mass.

Among other precedents, the design for the BMA Tower draws directly from Mies' work, including the Lake Shore Apartments (Chicago, 1949-51) and the Seagram's Building (Mies and Phillip Johnson, New York, 1956-58). All three buildings are simple slab forms. The horizontal and vertical structural elements are equally dominant on both the apartments and the BMA Tower. The floating body of the BMA Tower, resting on the recessed first story lobby/core and a series of structural piers, echoes both Mies designs.<sup>55</sup> But, where Mies encompassed his structural members within the building skin to create smooth vertical slabs, SOM emphasized structure over curtainwall, creating an exo-skeleton that became

<sup>50</sup> Scully, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>54</sup> Hitchcock, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Scully, 186-7.

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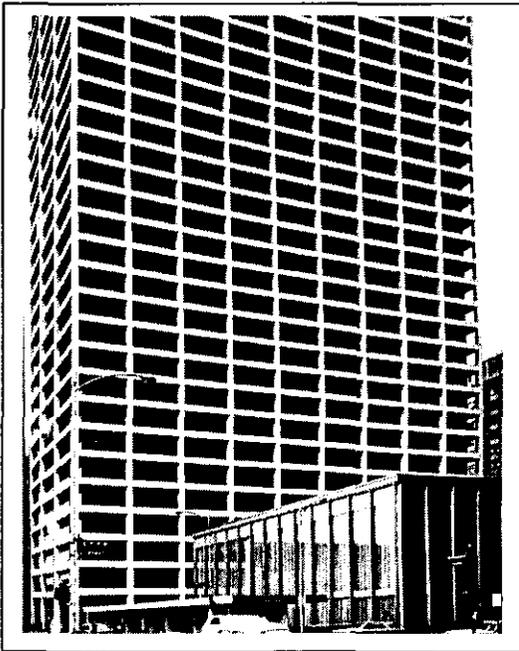
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the defining building element. The *Encyclopedia of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Architecture* describes the BMA Tower as “the archetype of [SOM’s]... skeleton construction” that emerged in the late 1950s.<sup>56</sup>

Graham and the SOM team emphasized the structural grid of the BMA Tower by cladding it with white marble and recessing the curtainwall windows behind the exoskeleton. The structure became the key element of the design with horizontal and vertical elements carrying equal weight. Architectural historian Carole Rifkind noted that when compared with other buildings of the same era and genre, this “...add[ed] drama to the articulation” of the steel frame structure.<sup>57</sup>

Like Mies, Graham’s team did not entirely abandon classical architecture. Elements of classicism are evident in the “symmetry, proportion, the clear expression of load and support and a certain honorific mood.”<sup>58</sup> In many ways the BMA Tower includes more classical references than most Modern Movement office buildings. The wide stairs leading to Karnes Boulevard, the large ceremonial plaza in



Above: First City National Bank Building, Houston, SOM, 1959-61 (Woodward).

front of building, the white cladding and the odd number of bays (5x3) all allude to and reflect classical proportions, materials, and design. The design clearly expresses Mies’ philosophy of “less is more,” as the building has become sculpture.

**The Significance of the BMA Tower as an SOM Design**

The basic design of the BMA Tower is not unique in the canon of SOM buildings. The 1961 First City National Bank in Houston, Texas preceded it by two years and set a formula for a group of SOM office buildings constructed in the early 1960s. That formula typically featured a grouping of buildings (office tower, single-story commercial building and adjacent parking structure), with glass skin recessed from an external structure faced with white marble.<sup>59</sup> The BMA Tower is nearly identical to the main slab of the First City National Bank complex, but is distinguished from its Houston sibling by its relatively small volume (five bays wide rather than nine and 19 stories tall rather than 32) and the absence of an associated single-story block. Likewise, the BMA building incorporated parking in its lower level and on an adjacent

<sup>56</sup> Grube, 306-07.

<sup>57</sup> Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to Contemporary American Architecture* (New York: Dutton, 1998), 279.

<sup>58</sup> William J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987), 262.

<sup>59</sup> Woodward, 17.

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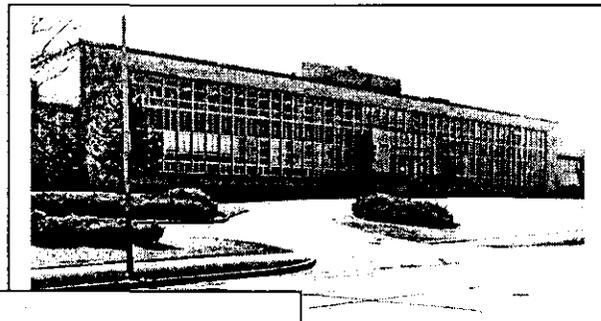
surface lot. When a parking structure was built, it utilized the natural change in grade to locate the bulk of the facility below ground. Additionally, the First City National Bank occupies a block in the heart of downtown Houston, while the BMA Tower stands alone on land outside the urban core. Unlike the BMA building, this location precludes the First City National Bank from clearly conveying the Miesian sense of balance and relationship to open space, while the BMA Tower, set back on its plaza, is a clear expression of the building's structure becoming its form.<sup>60</sup> The location of the BMA Tower, beyond the limits of Kansas City's established business district, allowed the SOM team to use their talents as planners as well as architects to create a building-specific setting. In this regard, the tower fulfilled the wish of Henry Russell Hitchcock, who wrote of SOM the year before the BMA Tower was completed,

*Although their most conspicuous works have perforce been fitted into the inherited urban scene, with only some slight amelioration of the immediate neighborhood by the introduction of open plazas at the base and crisper outlines at the top, they have provided many of the most important and useful architectural ingredients of the later 20<sup>th</sup>-century city that we may hope ... will gradually come into existence.<sup>61</sup>*

**Modern Movement Architecture in Kansas City**

Heralded nationally as an outstanding example of Modern architecture, the BMA Tower becomes even more significant when viewed within the context of Modern architecture in Kansas City. Locally the building is without rival for its expression of classically Modern design. It was the first new steel-framed high rise constructed in Kansas City after the Depression and certainly remains one of the most visually distinctive.<sup>62</sup>

In the years following the end of World War II the nation had a latent need for constructing new things that symbolized the prosperity and modernity of the new era. New construction



**Above:** Midwest Research Institute, Neville, Sharp & Simon, 1953. (Ehrlich, 124).



**Left:** Hallmark Cards, Welton Becket, 1950-55. (Ehrlich, 125).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 44-45, 127.

<sup>61</sup> Hitchcock, 13.

<sup>62</sup> The 29-story Kansas City City Hall (Wight & Wight, 1936) was the last high rise construction in Kansas City prior to World War II. Although the BMA Tower and Traders Bank were both completed in 1963, construction on the BMA Tower started first.

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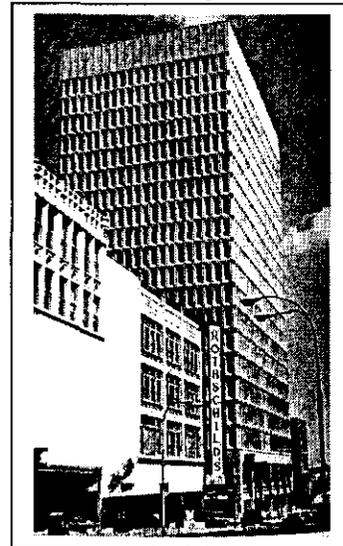
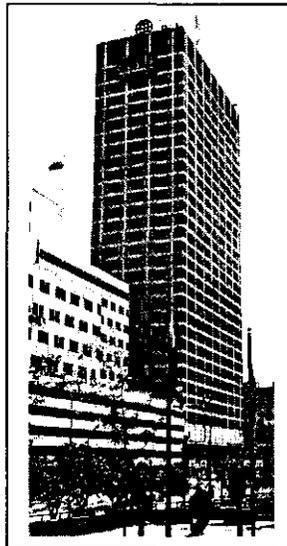
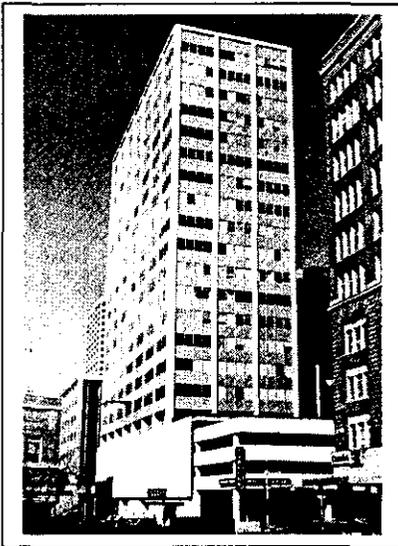
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in Kansas City in the decade following World War II moved cautiously toward the Modernism that was taking hold of urban centers nationwide. In the 1950s, limited redevelopment occurred, generally outside the city's established central business district. For example, in 1953 local architects Neville, Sharp & Simon designed a new facility for the Midwest Research Institute near the Country Club Plaza. The building's low, symmetrical façade includes a heavy masonry frame surrounding a glass curtainwall. By 1955, the completion of the new headquarters for Hallmark Cards began the redevelopment of "Signboard Hill" as "Crown Center." This sizeable complex, designed by Los Angeles architect Welton Becket, again incorporated glass curtainwall technology in its design, this time without the conservative masonry frame.<sup>63</sup> For the BMA Tower these two examples of corporate and institutional development set the stage not only for the use of Modern design but also for corporate construction well outside Kansas City's established central business district.

Through the early 1960s, the importance of a modern building façade, especially to a corporate entity, cannot be underestimated. A high-rise Modern office tower was the ultimate expression of progress in the post-war era. With a limited number of major business entities headquartered locally, it was the early 1960s before these symbols arrived in Kansas City. Between 1963 and 1968 five commercial office buildings were added to the Kansas City skyline. In addition to the BMA Tower, they included: the Traders Bank Tower (1963; northeast corner 12<sup>th</sup> & Grand; Thomas E. Stanley, Inc., architect); the Commerce Tower (1965; 911 Main; Keene, Simpson & Murphy, architects); and Ten Main Center (1968; northwest corner of 10<sup>th</sup> and Main; Charles Lucian, architect).<sup>64</sup> All of these designs distinctly



From left: Traders Bank Building, 1963; Commerce Tower, 1965; Ten Main Center, 1968 (Ehrlich 130, 140).

<sup>63</sup> George Ehrlich, *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History, 1826-1990*, rev. ed. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 121, 125-6.

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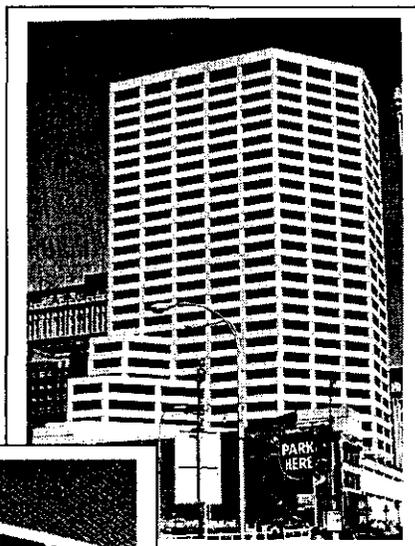
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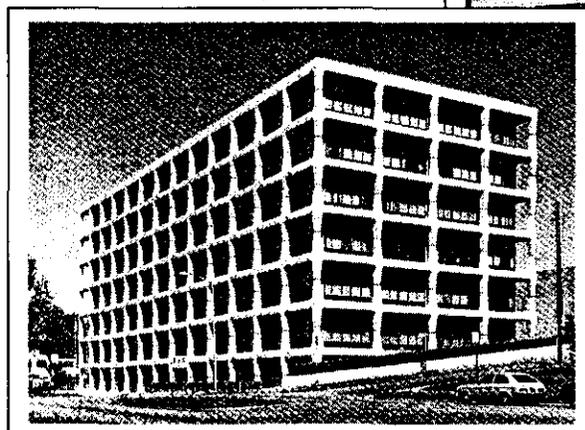
expressed Modern Movement philosophy utilizing steel, glass and concrete in ways that broke with the historical eclecticism that characterized Kansas City's existing pre-World War II skyline. Contemporary newspaper reports described the BMA Tower as Kansas City's first all-welded steel structure.<sup>65</sup> Other than Ten Main Center, which has an exterior clad with precast panels that each contains a beveled window opening, this group of buildings has very flat, highly geometric facades. Among this group of buildings, the starkly contrasting, white external skeleton and dark recessed curtainwall makes the BMA Tower a uniquely elegant design.

The BMA Tower is one of three SOM designs in Kansas City. City Center Square, the newest of the three, was erected at the heart of the central business district in 1977. Similar to the BMA Tower, the 30-story building has a dominant exterior concrete structure and a slightly recessed glass curtainwall. The lower levels of the irregular hexagonal building mass occupy an entire city block, leaving space only for nominal plazas at the east and west entrances. The footprint of the building shaft shrinks slightly in the upper floors.<sup>66</sup> In contrast to the BMA Tower, the heavy concrete structure overwhelms the building form, weighing it down visually. It is an expression of Modernism that has evolved considerably beyond the Miesian simplicity of the BMA building.

The New York office of SOM completed the firm's first building in Kansas City just one year before the BMA Tower. Located at the west end of the Country Club Plaza, approximately five miles south of the central business district, the John Hancock Building also has an external structure projecting beyond a recessed glass curtainwall. In this case, precast concrete cruciform-shaped elements form the structural grid.<sup>67</sup> The vertical arms of the structure taper at each joint giving the building visual interest. SOM had used this structural concept previously for the Banque Lambert in Brussels, Belgium as well as the Beinecke Rare Book and



Above: City Center Square, SOM, 1977  
(Ehrlich, 167).



Left: John Hancock Building, SOM,  
1963 (Ehrlich, 139).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 130, 140-42.

<sup>65</sup> "B.M.A. Job On as a Georgia Strike Ends," *The Kansas City Star*, 6 January 1963, 15G.

<sup>66</sup> Ehrlich, 167-68.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 139.

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Manuscript Library at Yale University.<sup>68</sup> Comparing this design to the BMA Tower, a local architectural historian noted that the structural grid of the BMA Tower creates “a crisp elegantly rectangular pattern set off by the dark glass that lies behind it.” The ability to glimpse the sky inside the corner columns, he continues, is “a subtle touch that animates what otherwise would be a uniform exterior treatment.”<sup>69</sup> By comparison, the design of the Hancock Building is neither as unique nor as distinctive as that of the BMA Tower, and it lacks the impact of the BMA Tower’s dramatic setting.

**SUMMARY**

The BMA Tower is by far the best example of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Modern Movement architecture in Kansas City. It is unique for its geometric exo-skeleton and for its setting that sharply contrasts the natural and the manmade. No other building in Kansas City comes close to achieving the Miesian ideal of abstract design and geometric form standing in direct contrast to a natural setting. Local and national experts have lauded the design as a quintessential expression of this 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural philosophy. It embodies the hope, optimism and idealism of the post-war era, a spirit that had passed by the late 1960s. Architectural historian George Ehrlich wrote, “...some commercial buildings [built in Kansas City] in the sixties were noteworthy for their design, others for the way they also modified the cityscape. Possibly the most striking example of this is the [BMA Tower].”<sup>70</sup> His discussion of the BMA building concludes, “Situated by a park, poised on its rise of ground, set off by a simple plaza, the prize-winning building is one of the finest high-rise office towers ever erected in the city.”<sup>71</sup> In a monograph published shortly before his retirement, SOM project designer Bruce Graham included the BMA Tower as one of the 30 most significant projects constructed over the course of his career. Describing the tower, Graham wrote, “Situated at the top of a hill, around which the wind and birds travel, the BMA [Tower] sacrifices everything for the purity of its frames and the expression of its delicacy.”<sup>72</sup> While the building was still under construction, the *Kansas City Star* noted, “Because of its unusual, contemporary appearance, as well as its mid-town location on one of the highest points in the area, the B.M.A. Tower already has become a landmark to Kansas Citians and visitors.”<sup>73</sup> The BMA Tower was a distinct new landmark on the Kansas City skyline before construction was complete, and it remains so today.

<sup>68</sup> Danz, 191, 203.

<sup>69</sup> Ehrlich, 139-40.

<sup>70</sup> Ehrlich, 139.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>72</sup> Graham, 32.

<sup>73</sup> “B.M.A. Tower Will Be ‘Home’ for Risk Firm, By Sept. 3,” *The Kansas City Star*, 30 June 1963.

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**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

The Southwest Quarter of the Southeast Quarter of the Northeast Quarter of Section 18, Township 49, Range 33 in Kansas City, Jackson County, Missouri.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

The boundary includes the parcel of land that contains the BMA Tower and the associated parking structure.

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**PHOTOGRAPHS**

Photographer: Brad Finch

Date: March 2002

Location of Original Negatives: BMA Company, Kansas City, Missouri

<u>Photo Number</u>	<u>View</u>
1	South and west elevations. View looking northeast.
2	South and east elevations. View looking northwest.
3	South elevation. View looking north.
4	South plaza and lobby. View looking northwest.
5	South plaza. View looking southeast.
6	South plaza and lobby. View looking northeast.
7	Lobby level detail. View looking west.
8	North and east elevations. View looking southwest.
9	Top level of parking garage, north building elevation, and lower level terrace. View looking southwest.
10	North terrace. View looking south.
11	Employee dining room (lower level). View looking southeast.
12	Internal, lower level parking garage. View looking southeast.
13	Main lobby (1 <sup>st</sup> floor). View looking west.
14	Elevator lobby (1 <sup>st</sup> floor). View looking south.
15	Elevator lobby (1 <sup>st</sup> floor). View looking southeast.
16	Elevator lobby (typical floor). View looking southeast.
17	Typical office floor. View looking east.
18	Typical office floor. View looking west.
19	Typical office floor. View looking northeast.
20	Typical office floor. View looking south.
21	18 <sup>th</sup> floor elevator lobby. View looking south.
22	18 <sup>th</sup> floor reception area. View looking north.
23	Chairman's office (18 <sup>th</sup> floor). View looking northwest.
24	Chairman's office (18 <sup>th</sup> floor). View looking southwest.
25	Chairman's office anteroom (18 <sup>th</sup> floor). View looking southeast.
26	Typical drinking fountain. View looking south.
27	Skyline Room (19 <sup>th</sup> floor). View looking northeast.
28	Skyline Room (19 <sup>th</sup> floor). View looking northwest.
29	Boardroom (19 <sup>th</sup> floor). View looking north.
30	Bathroom (19 <sup>th</sup> floor Boardroom). View looking southeast.
31	Private dining/meeting room (19 <sup>th</sup> floor). View looking north.

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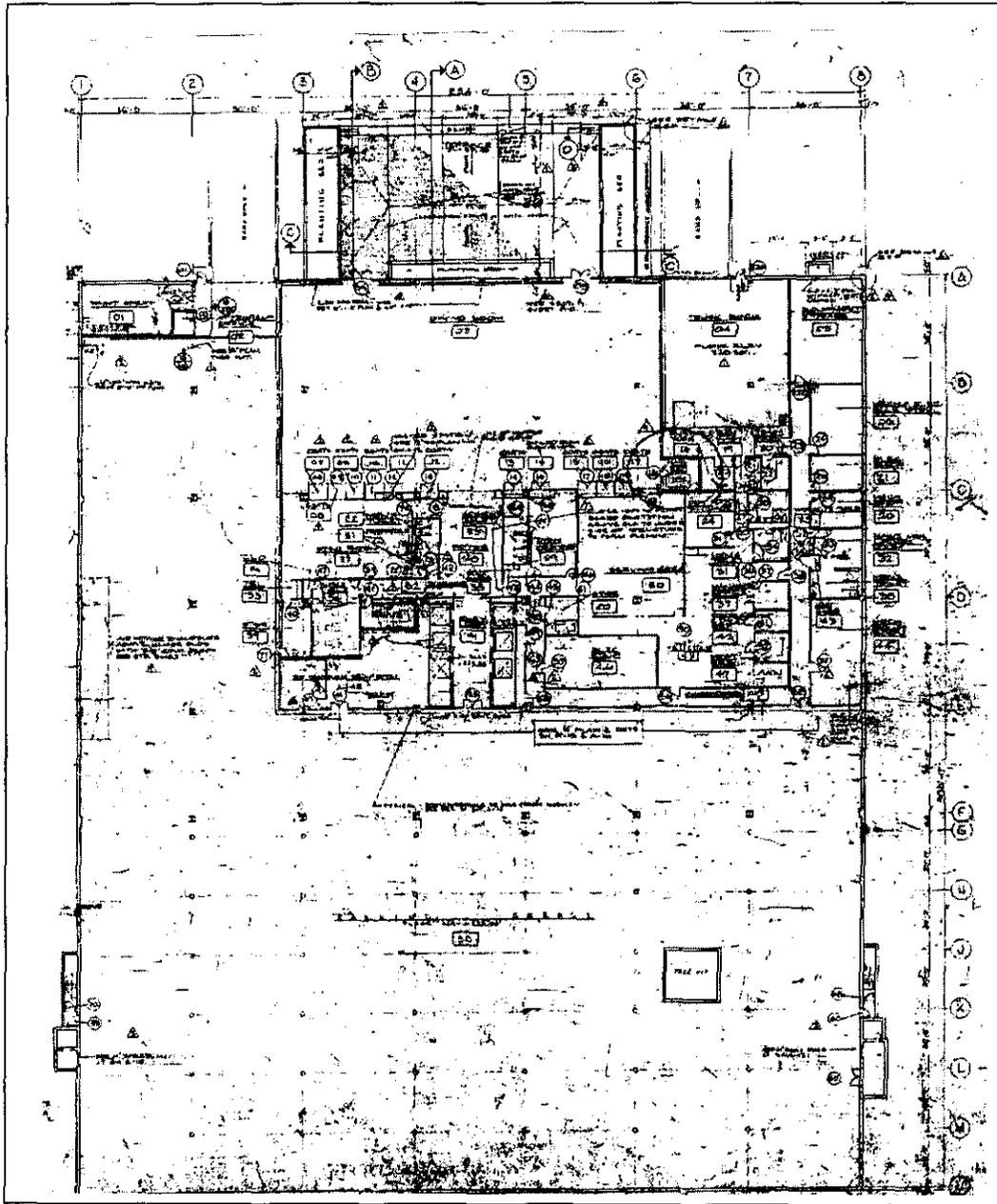
- 32 Mechanical room (19<sup>th</sup> floor). View looking southeast.
- 33 South and east elevations of building and parking garage. View looking northwest.
- 34 East and north elevations of building and parking garage. View looking southwest.
- 35 View of building from Penn Valley Park. Looking southwest.
- 36 View of building from 18<sup>th</sup> and Summit streets. Looking south.

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Lower Level



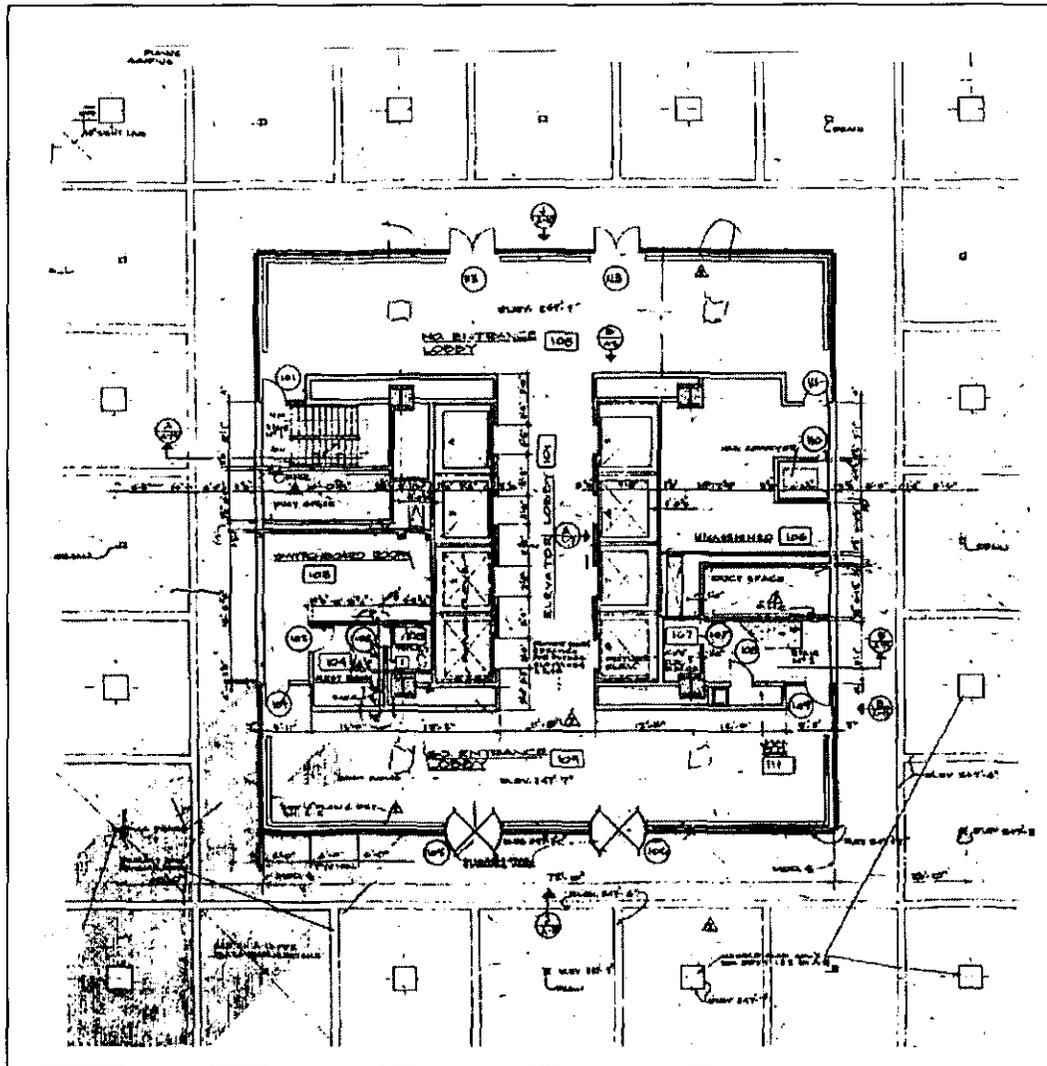


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**Main Lobby**

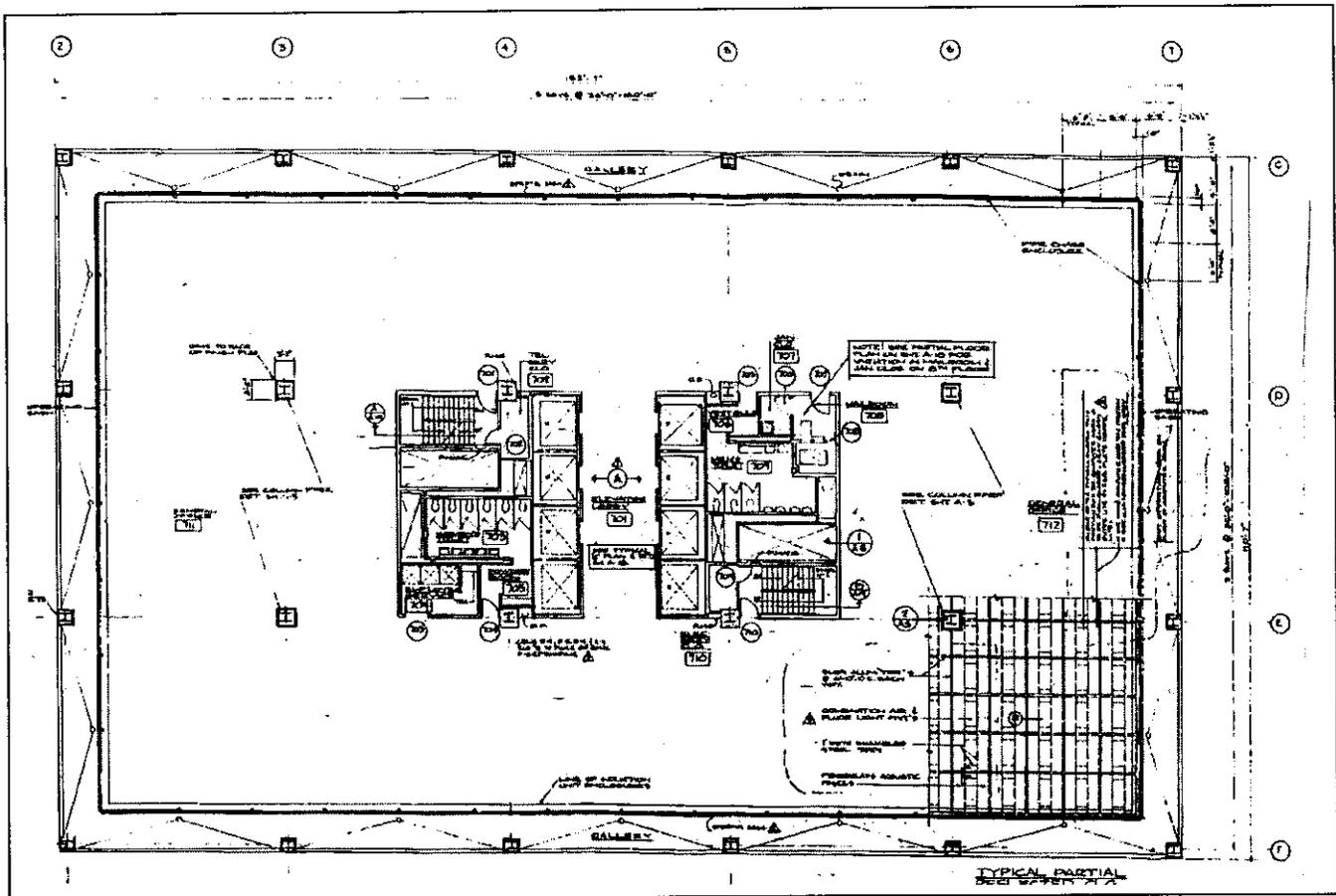


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BMA Tower  
Jackson County, Missouri



Typical Office Floor

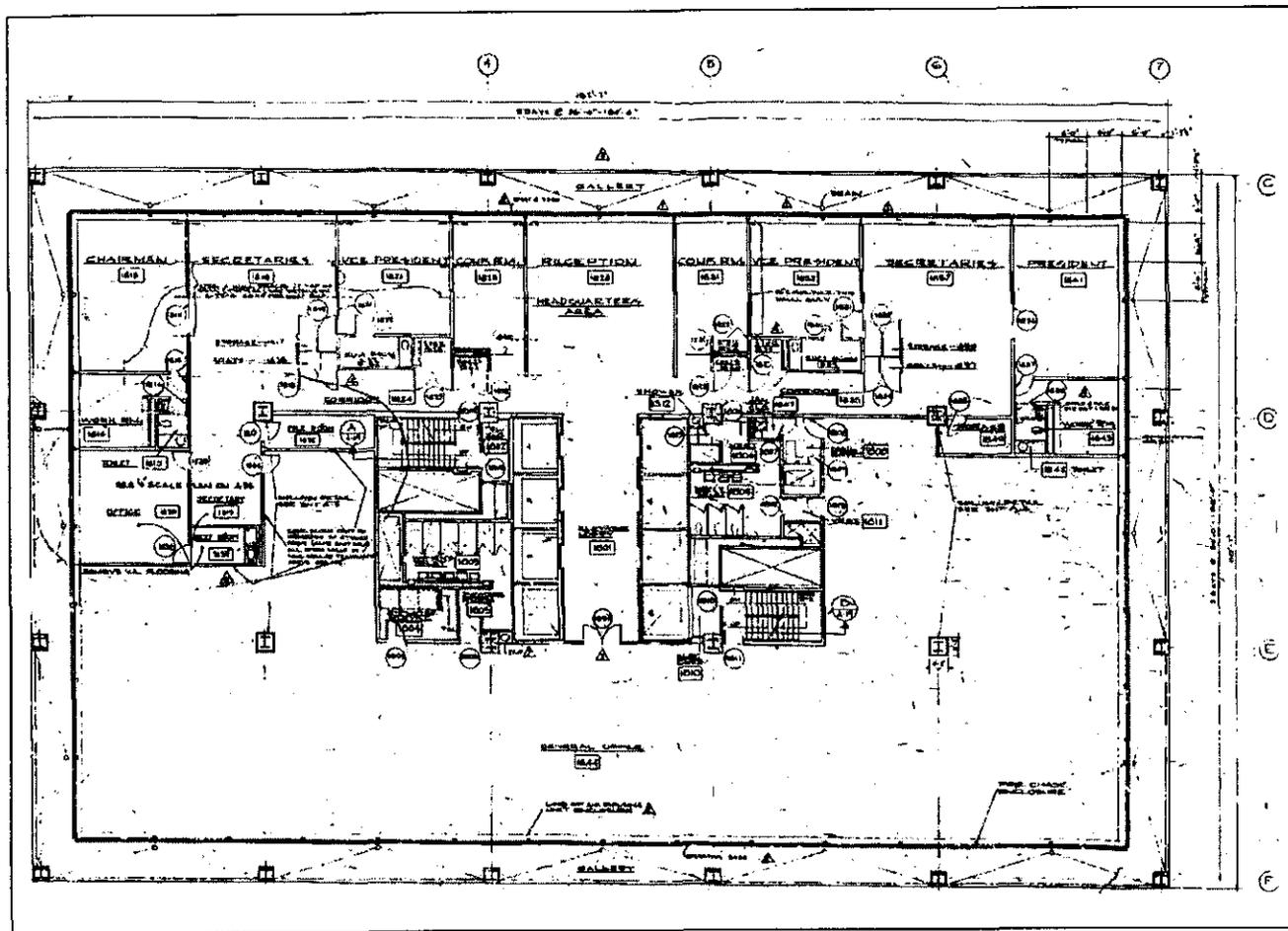


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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BMA Tower  
Jackson County, Missouri



18th Floor

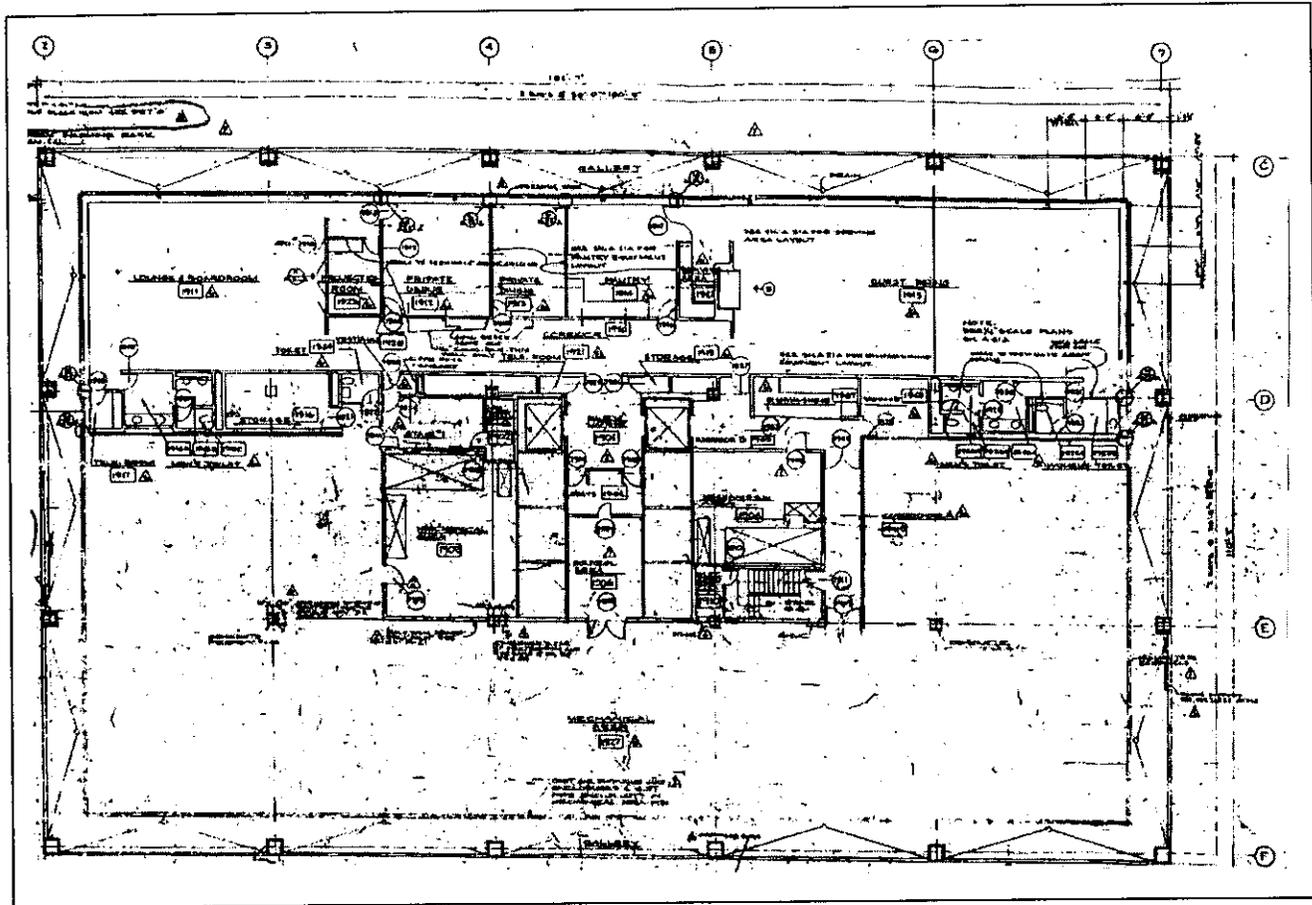


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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BMA Tower  
Jackson County, Missouri



19th Floor







