

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. 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.

**DRAFT**

### 1. Name of Property

Historic name: N/A

Other names/site number: The Hollywood Western Building, The Mayer Building

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

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

### 2. Location

Street & number: 5500 Hollywood Boulevard

City or town: Los Angeles State: California County: Los Angeles

Not For Publication:  Vicinity:

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

\_\_\_ national      \_\_\_ statewide      \_\_\_ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

\_\_\_ A      \_\_\_ B      \_\_\_ C      \_\_\_ D

<p>_____  <b>Signature of certifying official/Title:</b></p>	<p>_____  <b>Date</b></p>
<p>_____  <b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></p>	

<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>_____  <b>Signature of commenting official:</b></p>	<p>_____  <b>Date</b></p>
<p>_____  <b>Title :</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></span></p>	

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#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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#### 5. Classification

##### Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

##### Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>                    </u>	buildings
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	sites
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	structures
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE/TRADE: Business, office building

COMMERCE/TRADE: Department store, general store

COMMERCE/TRADE: Organizational, professional association

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE/TRADE: Business, office building

COMMERCE/TRADE: Department store, general store

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Deco

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**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: CONCRETE, STUCCO, BRICK, ASPHALT, WOOD, GLASS, METAL: bronze

### Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

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### Summary Paragraph

The Hollywood Western Building is located at 5500 Hollywood Boulevard in Hollywood, California. The four-story commercial structure includes retail and office spaces, as it has since it was constructed in 1928. Designed in the Art Deco style, the building retains a high degree of integrity, with a mostly intact exterior in fair to good condition and significant character-defining features and materials on the interior.

Historically the Hotel Rector (c.1920—since demolished) stood at the northeast corner of the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue, while the historic St. Frances Hotel (c.1920) stands just west of the northwest corner of the intersection. The historic Bricker Building (1924) is located at the southwest corner of the intersection, just south of The Hollywood Western Building, and is currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places with historic preservation certification of a federal tax credit. The Hollywood Western Building is designated as Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Landmark #336. At the southeast corner of the intersection a new mixed-use (commercial/residential) development was built that includes a Red Line subway terminal.

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### Narrative Description

Built in 1928, The Hollywood Western Building has a smooth stucco finish that clads the exterior walls of a steel frame basement and ground floor and wood framing on the upper floors

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on a concrete foundation. The structure is 54 feet high and extends along the majority of the 111-foot wide by 114-foot long property.

The Hollywood Western Building is rectangular in plan and is a four-story commercial structure with a large basement. The building consists of two retail unit spaces on the ground floor, with a total of approximately 10,500 square feet of retail space, and office units on floors two through four. The basement space is currently vacant. The total office space square footage of the building is 48,629 square feet, including individual office units, lobby, and circulation areas.

The first floor retail spaces flank the lobby entrance on the primary (north) elevation, beyond which is the primary staircase leading to the upper floor office units. The east and west ends of the rear (south) elevation are the rear portions of the retail spaces that front the primary elevations. The east elevation displays the commercial space that is accessed through the entrance at the northeast corner. The west elevation adjoins the neighboring commercial building that is currently vacant.

### **Exterior**

The Hollywood Western Building is designed in the Art Deco style, in which the most prominent features present in the building are its symmetrical composition, stucco cladding, flat roof with a stepped parapet highlighted by molding detailed with carved reliefs of casting figures, rectangular windows, and pilasters emphasizing verticality.

The construction of The Hollywood Western Building is typical of its time with era-unique features, including its emphasis on verticality with bands of windows separated by pilasters in late 1920's style with painted detailed reliefs. The fenestration consists of rectangular openings with original double-hung windows on the primary elevations and two-over-two double-hung wood-frame windows on the rear elevations. The building is highlighted by a prominent arched entrance with large original bronze and glass doors decorated with metal filigree. The composition of the primary elevation is also accented with a band of clerestory windows above the ground floor store fronts, and a recessed primary entrance that is detailed with a relief keystone and bronze doors with a large lunette transom.

The Hollywood Western Building was strategically located on one of the busiest intersections in the growing community of Hollywood when it was built in 1928. The building incorporated an elegant, showy design, was designed in the most modernistic architectural vein of the time, and was considered the most modern and high-class office building in Hollywood when completed.<sup>1</sup> Embellished with carvings and figures expressing "the spirit of Hollywood", the building celebrated the union of art and commerce, two themes widely used by its renowned architect S. Charles Lee throughout his career.<sup>2</sup>

When construction of the Hollywood Western Building began during the last week of July 1928, numerous articles were published touting the expensive materials and glamorous designs that would be incorporated in its construction. The four-story Class C store and office building was

<sup>1</sup> "Hollywood Structure Underway," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1928.

<sup>2</sup> "Structure Opened with Golden Key," *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1928.

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described as unique for its use of the “ultra modern style,” an aesthetic that at the time had been reserved for the design of many high office buildings of the East.<sup>3</sup> One article in particular, “Hollywood Structure Underway,” which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on August 5, 1928, stated that the forces in both the architect’s and contractor’s offices were working in collaboration to set a record in building of the one of the most modern and high-class office buildings in Hollywood.

While S. Charles Lee designed the Hollywood Western Building, the Herbert M. Baruch Corporation was awarded the general contract for the building and Carlo Garrone is named in various accounts as the sculptor of the cast-stone figures gracing the building’s street elevations.<sup>4</sup> A cast of other unnamed sculptors and artists, however, are also believed to have worked on the building during its construction.

The Hollywood Western Building incorporates a dramatic Art Deco motif with finish materials of stucco, cast stone, and granite on its two street elevations, including the north (primary) and east (side) elevations which front Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue. The south (rear) and west (side) elevations of the building are clad in unpainted red brick and have a more industrial and utilitarian aesthetic. While all of the elevations are symmetrically composed, and fenestration on each elevation consists of double-hung, wood-sash and metal windows, the aesthetic of the street elevations is completely separate from that used on the less visible elevations. Whereas stone, stucco, and granite are used in decorative fashion on both street elevations, the only articulation on the rear and side elevations of the building is the articulation of the fenestration with simple raised surrounds of red brick that match the cladding of the elevations.

The arched main entry to the structure, located in the center of the primary elevation along Hollywood Boulevard, is signaled by a high rusticated arch opening punctuated by a monumental cast stone face keystone and quoins. Above simple ground floor piers and non-original plate glass storefronts, the second through fourth floors on the north and east elevations are highlighted by an even rhythm of alternating piers which separate the vertically stacked fenestration consisting of double-hung, single-light wood-sash windows.

Abstracted mythological figures, reminiscent of Greco-Roman gods, cap the top of each pier.<sup>5</sup> These cast stone busts are several feet in height and were sculpted to depict the various crafts associated with the motion picture industry. Whereas the stone figures above the primary entrance depict directors, producers, and architects, the stone figures along the cornice line of the street elevations represent drama, music, and literature.<sup>6</sup> The full-sized figures are integrated into the materials and shapes of the building, creating an entirely cohesive and powerful aesthetic. Due to the extraordinary design of the figures, the Hollywood Western Building was listed among the best American examples of figural sculpture in architectural form in buildings built from 1890 to 1934, in Agard’s *The New Architectural Sculpture*, published in 1935.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “Hollywood Structure Underway,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1928.

<sup>4</sup> “Hollywood Structure Underway,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1928.

<sup>5</sup> “Bodies in Stone,” Walt Lockley, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Valentine, 49.

<sup>7</sup> “Bodies in Stone,” 2007.

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Smaller human nudes ornament the base of each pier, and are also sculpted of cast-stone. The repetition of the busts, which loom over the two street elevations, is interrupted at the corners and over the entrance of the building by sculpted arches and piers ornamented with Atlas, eagles, and stylized capitals. Larger piers framing layered pilasters further distinguish the corner and entry bays. Square embossed panels cap the piers at the corner and entry bays, while delicate leafy capitals cap the pilasters. A pointed arch tympanum area tops both of these systems at the fourth floor. The system of piers along the street elevations rise slightly above the roof parapet line, lending the building a gentle crenellation.

The motion picture industry's influence on the Hollywood Western Building is further noted in S. Charles Lee's design of its six fire escape balconies, three on each of the top three floors on both street elevations. Made of cast stone, the fire escapes are decorated with carved bas-relief sculptures depicting a narrative of motion picture filming activities. The sculpted depictions include 1920s-era film crews, complete with megaphone-wielding directors in canvas chairs, the cameraman, the property man, the script girl, and actors being photographed, going about their various duties.<sup>8</sup> The underside of the balconies is trimmed with cast-stone bas-relief figures of winged Mercury, god of commerce, holding a movie camera.

While articles published in 1928 in *Hollywood News* described in great detail the building's bas-relief carvings, the fact that the figures depicted were realized as semi-nude, stylized Classical gods and goddesses was not mentioned. Other figures are clad in diaphanous Roman costumes, and yet it is the nudity of some of Lee's figures that drew the most attention. While the use of nude figures is found throughout classical Greek tradition, Lee credited himself in various articles throughout his career as introducing the nude form to Los Angeles through his design of The Hollywood Western Building. The reason for Lee's design and his referencing the work in interviews was that on the fourth floor, just above the racy sculptures, the "Czar of All the Rushes," Will Hays, was censoring film titles and story lines as head of the Motion Picture Producers Association (MPPA). The Hays Office, as MPPA was commonly referred to at the time, was charged with enforcing the censorship rules, or "Don'ts and Be Carefuls," officially referred to as Rule 21 of the Code of the Motion Picture Industry, adopted in 1927 to ensure that Hollywood movies were of unquestionable and uncompromising morality. Lee's bold designs, therefore, were a reference to the growing anxiety in the motion picture industry to conform to new regulations, which evolved as the industry itself grew and matured.

### **Interior**

In keeping with the modern architectural vein created on the exterior of the Hollywood Western Building by architect S. Charles Lee, the interior of the structure was also touted as having had incorporated all of the most modern improvements of the time, including a vacuum cleaning plant, compressed air, and steam heat, each carefully incorporated in the work by the architect himself.<sup>9</sup> Architectural historians often note Lee's penchant for designing structures that satisfy aesthetically while supporting the commerce occurring within, as well as his predilection for

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<sup>8</sup> Valentine, 49.

<sup>9</sup> "Hollywood Structure Underway," August 5, 1928.

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utilizing modern advancements and tastes to fully meet the needs of his clients. This tendency was noted throughout the building's construction on both its exterior and interior.

While the exterior of The Hollywood Western Building has retained very high integrity, the interior has undergone some modifications over the years as the tenants of the ground floor spaces in particular as well as those in the upper office floors have changed. The structure consists of load-bearing masonry walls framed in steel at the basement and ground floor levels, while floor-spans on the upper floors are bridged with wood joists. Seismic work performed after the building was damaged by the Northridge Earthquake, which resulted in a Section 106 review of the property and work involved, is visible on the interior of the building both within the open floor plan basement, where the steel framing can best be seen, as well as in certain office units along the west and east wings of the buildings on the upper office floors.

The interior of The Hollywood Western Building includes a basement, a ground floor consisting of two adjoining commercial spaces and a main elevator lobby in the center of the primary elevation, and upper floors with narrow elevator corridors and sixty regularly spaced offices. The original hallway configurations within the building are all intact, and most of the walls between office units are also intact. Original ceilings are intact in the hallways, as are most of the original ceilings within office spaces. Other original features that are predominately intact include flooring throughout the building, wood trim throughout the corridors and offices, and the doors and transom openings above along each corridor. The doors leading into the offices are new wood doors with a single pane of frosted glass, as are the materials within the transom openings. New doors were installed due to the deteriorated state of the original doors, and yet were built to reflect the original doors and are of solid wood construction with reproduction hardware. Storage closets and bathrooms off of the corridors on each of the upper floors have original wood single-panel doors and original hardware. The bathroom spaces and most features within, including tile flooring and wainscoting, marble wall dividers, and some of the fixtures, are original. All bathrooms within the building are matching in their original aesthetic and materials used.

The main stair of the building (Stair 1) is entirely original, including features of the stair and stairwell such as fenestration, wood steps and risers, and the metal balustrades. Though the original utilitarian stair (Stair 2) has been carpeted all other features of the stair and stairwell, including fenestration, wood steps and risers, and metal balustrades are all original. A third stair, which is at the east end of the west wing of the building and connects the third and fourth floor office corridors, is also completely original though its steps have also been carpeted.

Originally the basement of the building, which extends under the entire structure, contained a large billiard parlor and bowling alley, as well as the more utilitarian in function boiler room and mechanical department. Currently the basement continues to have its original open floor plan, and is still accessed internally from a steep stairway of concrete steps directly off of the rear (south) elevation of the lobby, just beyond and west of the elevators. The only known significant alteration to the basement is the 1994 seismic addition made in the form of a steel structure of posts and beams which augment the original structural framing that is extant in the form of posts rising from the cement floor to the ceiling. The billiards described in articles published during



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the building's construction in 1928 remained in the building until the 1990s. Considered to be the oldest billiards in Hollywood, the Hollywood Billiards began by serving the thousands who came through the Central Casting Bureau each month. The casting agents upstairs were known to clear out the billiards looking for extras. With studios like Columbia, Paramount, and Warner Brothers nearby, actors and others in the business comprised a large part of the clientele in the early years. The business survived in the building until the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue had become crime-ridden and empty. Perhaps due to the single-tenant use of the basement for over seventy years, the space remains largely unaltered.

Unpainted brick walls separate the basement spaces, which include the original two "parlors", two adjoining spaces that run north to south, dividing the basement into an eastern and western half. A large metal elephant door painted black with its original sliding mechanism intact runs between the two spaces. Small rooms off of these two spaces include the original and now outdated mechanical room with outdated mechanical services, and a short corridor near the rear (south) end of the basement leads to a stair providing access to the rear elevation of the building. A second stair in the space leads off of the eastern room of the main space to the ground level of the side (east) elevation.

The ground floor of the Hollywood Western Building originally housed ten stores, nearly all of which were leased within one month of the start of construction, and an elevator lobby built almost entirely of imported marbles with a high vaulted ceiling and rich ornamental plaster work. The lobby was further decorated in oils and gold leaf by artists in the style of the tradition of the early Italian masters. Both the doors leading into the lobby from the exterior of the building and the elevators within the lobby were constructed of beautifully decorated heavy wrought bronze, inlaid with white metal in filigree. Two high-speed elevators were installed to provide access to the three upper floors.

The upper floors of the building consist of office spaces, with the building containing sixty office units when it first opened. Originally the second floor was filled by "professional men," including doctors, dentists, and chemists.<sup>10</sup> The entire third and fourth floors consisted of elaborate suites prepared for the MPPA and the Central Casting Bureau, the two tenants who in particular drove the construction of the building by Louis B. Mayer and architect S. Charles Lee. Both the MPPA and the Central Casting Bureau were referred to as some of the most important organizations within the motion picture industry. The building's success at being fully leased prior to its completion was in large part due to the fact that it was so strategically located in the heart of the burgeoning Hollywood community as well as in close proximity to the studios of the motion picture industry it was built to serve.

The entire third floor was leased to the Central Casting Bureau, which, with its extensive staff and direct connection with practically every producer of pictures, handled the casting for all studios of any importance—it was reported in 1928 that through the organization there were more than 330,000 placements of stars, actors, and extras during the year 1927.<sup>11</sup> The fourth floor was entirely occupied by the office of the MPPA, including a handsome suite for its

<sup>10</sup> "Structure Opened with Golden Key," *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1928.

<sup>11</sup> "Western Avenue Intersection Draws Attention," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1928.

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directing head, Will H. Hays, and his local representative, Col. Fred W. Beetson—a most powerful and far-reaching organization within the motion picture business.

### **Alterations**

Though the roof of The Hollywood Western Building has always been flat, the piers below providing a gentle crenellation at the parapet, historic photographs of the building show it originally had a raised half story portion in keeping with the design aesthetic below, positioned directly above the central bay of the primary (north) elevation. The portion extended the central bay upwards, past the roofline of the building, allowing the dramatic piers of the floors below to rise in a final statement above the main massing of the building. Though it is unclear when and why this half-story portion was removed, as well as why it was originally built if not to house the original elevator apparatus, no original materials remain to indicate its exact position or use. The feature originally contributed to the building by continuing its verticality and by lending it a certain monumentality that raised the vertical portions below beyond the large life-size cast stone figures. Despite the loss of this feature, however, the building continues to have a strong verticality and monumental presence.

Hollywood and the entertainment business have both undergone significant remodeling in the last 60 years, changes that are mirrored by the occupants of The Hollywood Western Building. The Central Casting Bureau had offices in the building into the 1960s, and until the early 1990s Hollywood Billiards and many of the shops on the ground floor, including a couple of rock music studios, a video store, and a discount store, remained tenants. The glamour of Hollywood had been relocated away from Hollywood Boulevard, leaving the building's interior largely empty and its exterior in need of rehabilitation. Despite the changes the building had undergone, however, the significant spaces, features, and materials of both its exterior and interior remained largely intact.

By the 1990s plywood sheathing filled many window and storefront openings, and the once dynamic intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue became crime-ridden and largely empty. While some original signage remained into the 1990s, it was mixed with later signage and fixtures on both street elevations. The building also sustained substantial damage in the Northridge Earthquake, with seismic damage estimated in 1994 to be \$4million.<sup>12</sup> Within a few years all remaining original signage had been removed from the building, and each of its spaces had been abandoned. While it is unclear when the original storefronts of the building were first altered, it is clear that the extant altered materials and features within the openings are not contributors to the building's architectural significance.

### ***Integrity***

The Hollywood Western Building retains a very high level of integrity, with all key character-defining features intact and preserved. Despite alterations that have occurred, the structure continues to have a strong historic association with its original construction, architect, owners, and tenants, as well as its architectural significance within the continuum of Hollywood's

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<sup>12</sup> "Surveys Reveal Heavy Damage to Landmarks," February 6, 1994.

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development in the 1920s and that of the motion picture industry continues to be dramatic and strong.

When the building came under the new ownership of Hollytree Village Partners in the 1990s it was necessary to seismically strengthen the structure after it sustained damage due to the Northridge Earthquake. Whereas the owners next began a more comprehensive rehabilitation of the structure in 2004, the majority of rehabilitation work started in 2005 under ABS, LLC and its principal, Samir Srivastava, which held the ground lease on the building. On February 21, 2007 ABS Mayer Bricker, LLC, also led by Principal Samir Srivastava, acquired the building.

ABS Mayer Bricker, LLC, acquired The Hollywood Western Building with the intention of continuing the ongoing rehabilitation and preservation of the structure. Within months the ground floor commercial spaces, which are adjoined, were being leased by the Department of Motor Vehicles, and the fourth floor office spaces became occupied, with ABS, LLC occupying the west wing of the building and the east wing filled with the current office of Mitch O'Farrell; it was the former offices of Eric Garcetti, President of the City Council of the City of Los Angeles, Council District 13, who is currently the mayor. Community and neighborhood meetings are held on the weekends in the commercial space of the building, and new tenants are being sought to fill the remainder of the offices, which ABS Mayer Bricker, LLC continues to rehabilitate and preserve.

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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 grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Architecture

Community Planning and Development

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**Period of Significance**

1928  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1928  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

S. Charles Lee  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Hollywood Western Building is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C at the local level of significance. The period of significance is 1928, when the building was constructed. Built as a commercial structure with retail at the ground level and office units above, The Hollywood Western Building was built during the most intense period of development of commercial and residential buildings in Hollywood, which lasted from 1924-1929. Designed by architect S. Charles Lee, The Hollywood Western Building employs an Art Deco design idiom and serves as an excellent example of the style. Both because of its architectural style as well as its embodiment of the architectural evolution of Hollywood in the 1920s, The Hollywood Western Building is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C.

The Hollywood Western Building is a significant example of a building type that is highly characteristic of Hollywood in the 1920s. The architectural evolution that occurred in

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Hollywood in the 1920s is fully reflected in this structure, constructed in 1928, as it documents the changing demographics and the evolving physical form of Hollywood during an intense period of development, 1924 to 1929. Although The Hollywood Western Building was once an excellent example of a relatively common property type in the 1920s, currently it is truly unique in Hollywood today. Such resources are becoming increasingly rare in Hollywood and the greater Los Angeles area due to the demolition and alterations. Therefore, few properties remain to represent the era of transforming a once rural area of town into a main commercial corridor surrounded by residential neighborhoods. Furthermore, commercial buildings representing the Art Deco style are also increasingly rare in Hollywood, particularly those with direct associations to the entertainment industry. The Hollywood Western Building played a critical role in the Hollywood motion picture industry and for its association with prominent theater architect S. Charles Lee.

Aside from interior and few exterior alterations, The Hollywood Western Building's historic setting, design, materials, workmanship are intact. The building has been in continuous use as a commercial building, and a strong sense of historic feeling is evident at the property.

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**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Art Deco style was a popular architectural style throughout the 1920s. This popularity has been attributed to several factors, including the influence of Hollywood projecting fanciful and exotic images. Designed with a smooth stucco finish and decorative details displayed in relief figures throughout the main elevations, The Hollywood Western Building includes characteristics that are hallmarks of the style, including its symmetrical composition, flat roof with parapet, rectangular windows, elaborate door opening, and pilasters emphasizing verticality are all hallmarks of the style. With the exception of the ground floor storefronts that have been heavily altered, The Hollywood Western Building retains a high degree of integrity and quality of design.

The application of a building's style onto the primary elevations consistently occurred in the design of commercial buildings in Hollywood in the 1920s. The trend to decorate public elevations while leaving other elevations largely unadorned is expressed on this building. While the Art Deco motif applied to The Hollywood Western Building appears only on its visible elevations, the elaborate design of the decorated elevations served to distinguish The Hollywood Western Building from other commercial buildings constructed along Hollywood Boulevard during Hollywood's rapid expansion. Furthermore, The Hollywood Western Building embodies the profound changes that occurred to the built environment of Hollywood in the 1920s due to the rapid growth of the region and in particular of the film industry. The Hollywood Western Building represents a critical role it played in the Hollywood motion picture industry and for its association with prominent theater architect S. Charles Lee.

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**Early Hollywood**<sup>13</sup>

The Hollywood Western Building embodies the profound changes that occurred to the built environment of Hollywood in the 1920s due to the rapid growth of the region and in particular of the film industry. The area of Los Angeles known as Hollywood was first subdivided in 1887 by Harvey Wilcox. In the early years the area was composed mainly of a few settlers' houses and farms that had been established on the land along the base of the Santa Monica Mountains near the Cahuenga Pass.

Hobart Johnstone Whitley moved to Los Angeles in 1893, having previously participated in land development in the Oklahoma Territory. Whitley's first business venture was to establish H.J. Whitley's in 1894, a business that soon became the premier jewelry store in Los Angeles. Soon, however, the booming growth of Los Angeles renewed his interest in land development. In 1900, Whitley and his partners acquired a large tract of land north of Hollywood, which had formerly been known as the Hurd property. In 1901, he added an additional sixty acres of the former Rancho La Brea land that he acquired from Ida Hancock.

In 1903, Whitley's Los Angeles Pacific Building and Development Corporation sub-divided the land known as the Holly Ocean View Tract, and established its development plan. As part of the plan Whitley selected Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards as the primary streets for the new development. Additionally, Whitley established a covenant to govern the sub-division that included provisions that no multiple family dwellings were to be built, no buildings were to cost less than \$3,500, and no liquor was to be sold in the tract. In part, this led to the development of Hollywood Boulevard as a prestigious residential street populated with large Queen Anne, Victorian, and Mission Revival style houses. Whitley's Holly Ocean View and Whitley Hills developments were extremely successful, and transformed what was once sparsely settled territory and farmland into a residential area considered one of the most beautiful suburbs of Los Angeles for its tree-lined streets, many churches, and large, handsome houses and gardens.

**Los Angeles Urbanization & Population Growth**

By 1920, the greater part of America's population had shifted into its cities, and the years that followed only served to cement this trend toward urban living. It has been estimated that over six million people moved into America's cities during the decade of the 1920s alone. Los Angeles was no exception to this trend. While both the City and County of Los Angeles experienced rapid population growth in the years after statehood in 1850, it was not until the 1890s that population gains were particularly precipitous. In the city itself, the population roughly doubled every decade between 1890 and 1930. During the 1920s alone, the city's population increased from approximately three-quarters of a million to 1.2 million. In Los Angeles County, the gains were equally impressive, if less consistent from decade-to-decade, with an increase from 936,000 inhabitants to 2.2 million. These dramatic surges in population created an intense demand for all sorts of services and infrastructural support.

***Urban Decentralization***

Los Angeles' period of most rapid population growth, the 1920s, coincided with a national trend toward urban decentralization. This trend had its origins in the rise of the nineteenth century industrial city. Enabled by advances in transportation and encouraged by cultural shifts, upper class populations began moving to suburban enclaves at the periphery of cities as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Initially a trickle, over time decentralization became a flood with residential, retail and service, and industrial uses all becoming well established in newly formed suburban communities. By the 1920s, the automobile furthered this trend by enabling many to live even greater distances from jobs, retail, and services as well as lessening dependence on a central downtown for any or all of these needs.

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<sup>13</sup> Information regarding early Hollywood and H.J. Whitley was taken from the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for Whitley Court, prepared by Historic Resources Group, October 2003.

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Los Angeles, like other major American cities, followed this pattern with the development of an extensive rail transportation network consisting of both streetcars and interurban trains. Hollywood, for example, was first serviced by streetcar as early as 1900. On May 9, 1923, ordinances enacted by the City Council of Los Angeles provided for the installation of ornamental lighting systems on Western Avenue between First Street and Romaine Street, and on Hollywood Boulevard, between Vermont Avenue and Vine Street.<sup>14</sup> By August 18, 1923, under the guidance of Frank Van Vranken, manager of the Los Angeles Motor Bus Company, the first bus line to be operated in Hollywood and the Wilshire district was established. A parade of over twenty of the big buses marked the beginning of the service, operated over Western Avenue between Los Feliz Boulevard and Slauson Avenue. The cars left each weekday on a ten-minute schedule, furthering the transportation capabilities of those living and working in Hollywood.<sup>15</sup>

**Hollywood in the 1920s<sup>16</sup>**

By the early 1920s, Los Angeles was the overwhelming destination of choice for those seeking good jobs and a temperate climate. Between 1920 and 1924 alone, some 100,000 annually made Los Angeles their permanent residence, lured by the oil, real estate, and film industries.<sup>17</sup> This tremendous influx of people and capital resulted in an unprecedented building boom. The demand for housing was intense, and developers responded by erecting high quality multiple-family residences. Many saw a financial opportunity in ensuring that the city was "well equipped to comfortably accommodate her many guests and to provide delightful homes for those who do not want to 'buy and build,' or who are waiting for the new home to be completed."<sup>18</sup>

Hollywood was the first secondary commercial center to develop in Los Angeles outside of downtown, a pattern that would be repeated throughout the metropolitan area.<sup>19</sup> The film industry in particular led to the development of Hollywood both as a residential and commercial center. Hollywood's first film studio was established in 1911 on the northwest corner of Sunset and Gower. Nestor Studios was drawn to Hollywood for its predictable weather and variety of landscapes that were ideal for the production of motion pictures. Impressed with Nestor Studios' success in Hollywood, other studios soon followed. Within months of Nestor's arrival, fifteen companies were shooting in and around Hollywood. The city's population grew rapidly to support the new industry, and by the early 1920s scores of small independent studios were operating in Hollywood.

Originally consisting of a population of 700 people when it was incorporated in 1903, Hollywood had grown to a population of 5,000 in 1910 and within nine years, in 1919, had expanded to 36,000 people.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, between 1910 and 1920, the population of Hollywood increased 720 percent. By 1930, the community's population exceeded 150,000. Writing in 1937, Edwin O. Palmer observed, "this growth was undoubtedly due to the motion picture business."<sup>21</sup> Hollywood's transformation from a residential community of spacious homes on large lots to an active urban center, to meet the needs of this thriving new industry, created radical changes in the built environment.<sup>22</sup>

Hollywood's development occurred in a relatively bucolic vein until World War I, with commercial development of Hollywood Boulevard in particular accelerating in the 1920s. The community began to establish itself as an alternate center for housing, commerce, and employment, and emerged as a potential rival to the downtown retail trade. It has been estimated that around 300 retail establishments lined Hollywood Boulevard in the 1930s, with an additional 100 on the boulevard's ancillary side streets.

<sup>14</sup> "Street Lighting Ordered," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1923.

<sup>15</sup> Western Avenue Bus Service in Operation, *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1923, p.1118.

<sup>16</sup> Portions of this text have been adapted from the City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument application for the Nirvana Apartments, prepared by Historic Resources Group, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Ovnick, Merry. *Los Angeles: The End of the Rainbow*. Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 1994, 161.

<sup>18</sup> *Hollywood Today*, 1928.

<sup>19</sup> Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall, Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Pitt 203.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>22</sup> Torrence, 68.



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Moreover, Hollywood developed as the center of the rapidly expanding film industry and various other commercial activities. These substantial developments are reflected in the resulting building stock that emerged.

According to "Motion Pictures," an article published in the *Los Angeles Times* on January 3, 1928, the film industry was to California in 1928 what the discovery of gold was in 1849. While gold brought California out of oblivion into national prominence, and paved the way for its great future, "motion pictures sustained, nurtured and built up the State to a point where its future is no longer a matter of conjecture—merely one continued wonderment. The cold figures of the industry tell a forceful and dramatic story, but they are not half as dramatic as the unlisted and incalculable benefits which have been derived indirectly from the studios." During the year 1926-1927 more than \$102,800,000 was expended for new productions in Southern California alone. The combined pay roll of the motion picture studios represented the staggering total of more than \$100,000,000 a year.

Twenty-five thousand persons were constantly employed in earning the above sum, a figure that does not include the army of "extras" who worked intermittently on projects. All performers receiving \$15 a day or less in 1928 were considered "extras." For the first three months of its existence the Central Casting Bureau, which in 1928 would be located in the newly constructed Hollywood Western Building, booked 60,000 jobs for "extras". The weekly pay roll of the industry in Los Angeles, excluding extras, was greater than the combined pay roll of petroleum productions, meat packing, canning (fruit, vegetables and fish,) confectionery, ice cream, bakeries, beverage plants, ice plants and food products.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, Hollywood Boulevard started to evolve into the main thoroughfare of Hollywood's commercial district and numerous two-and-three-story commercial buildings were built along the thoroughfare of this increasingly urban center. Early commercial buildings included small stores, a post office, a hotel, and other retail establishments. Banks, restaurants, clubs, bookstores, clothing stores, and department stores were introduced, catering to the demands of the growing numbers of those who worked and lived in and around Hollywood. Movie palaces, formerly located only in downtown Los Angeles, were also built in Hollywood, a natural outgrowth of the industry that was driving much of the community's development.

Three competing real-estate interests caused particular concentrations of development at Highland Avenue, Cahuenga Boulevard, and at Vine Street. As the population grew, however, the commercial aspect of the district grew as well, and it began to overtake the residential portions of the boulevard. Soon residential lots off of Hollywood Boulevard were being intensified and transformed into commercial or mixed-use developments, as developers sought ways to accommodate Hollywood's burgeoning population. During the most intense period of development, 1924-1929, high-rise commercial buildings began to proliferate along Hollywood Boulevard.<sup>24</sup>

Within a few years commercial and mixed-use buildings replaced most of the homes that once graced Hollywood Boulevard, and the three early concentrations of development were linked. As Hollywood continued to rise as the capital of the motion-picture industry, many in the business sought to live near the studios, leading to an increased demand for new apartment buildings to be built. Much of Hollywood's residential development in the 1920s, therefore, was directly related to the dramatic increase in Hollywood's population caused by the film industry.

Significant concentrations of commercial and mixed-use buildings were constructed along Hollywood Boulevard. These structures were sited in areas of prominence below the wealthy residential foothills, such as Whitley Heights and Hollywood Knolls, and provided a bridge between commercial areas, studio plants, middle class, and wealthy single family residential areas."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> "Motion Pictures," *Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 1928.

<sup>24</sup> Year Promises Huge Boom, *Los Angeles Times*, January 2, 1924, p.A19.

<sup>25</sup> *Hollywood Today*, 1928.

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The Hollywood Western Building was a part of the concentration of building activity that took place in Hollywood in the 1920s, as it became more urbanized due to the success and growth of the film industry. The building reflects the profound changes to Hollywood's built environment during its architectural evolution, and is significant as a commercial and building built in 1928, during the most intense period of development in Hollywood, which occurred from 1924-1929.

### **J.J. Morgan & Development of the Hollywood Western Intersection**

Hollywood pioneer and noted real estate developer Jeremiah J. Morgan planned to build the four-story structure currently referred to as The Hollywood Western Building. An Illinois native born on July 2, 1841, Morgan moved to Iowa in his early adulthood. He married Alice J. Lewis soon after and in 1868, took up a government claim near Cherokee, Iowa. It was in Cherokee that he entered the cattle business. After ten years, he relocated to Woodbury County, Iowa, where he engaged in the cattle rearing business extensively. He was the first settler in the entire region, and the township was named after him.

For several years Morgan was an influential businessman in Iowa, but the severe climate encouraged him to relocate to Los Angeles in 1887, at age 46.<sup>26</sup> Upon his arrival to Los Angeles, an announcement appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* stating that Morgan was very well known across Iowa and brought with him the highest of recommendations from bankers, Congressmen and others, including Secretary of the Treasury, Leslie M. Shaw (former Governor of Iowa), as to his successes in business.<sup>27</sup> As early as 1888, Morgan began purchasing land in the Hollywood area, quickly establishing himself as a real estate broker and developer in one of the region's most popular areas of growth. He purchased a 30-acre tract of ranch land in Hollywood, extending from what is now Western Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard, to Van Ness Avenue, and north to Franklin Avenue.

In 1905, Morgan subdivided a portion of his Hollywood holdings into "Morgan's Hollywood Tract" where the main thoroughfare, Morgan Place, was named after him. Morgan Place (now Gramercy Place) soon became home to some rather grand estates, including Louis C. Lohman's Dennis & Farwell designed house set on a generous 31,400 square foot lot.<sup>28</sup> By 1911, Morgan and his son, A.F. Morgan, purchased and subdivided additional tracts in Hollywood, including land along the foothills of Hollywood, between Morgan Hill Drive and Wilton Place. One property he owned was 5512-5516 Hollywood Boulevard, a two-story commercial building designed by Charles R. Spink and constructed by Lee Campbell in 1917. In 1920, Morgan hired Spink to design him a grand new home on Taft Avenue in the newer tract.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1920s, as the national economy boomed, Morgan moved to expand his real estate business into the arena of multiple-family and commercial development in Hollywood, which was quickly becoming an established commercial center. J.J. Morgan & Company (also known as the Morgan Investment Company), the real estate office he led, had offices at 5627 Hollywood Boulevard, a prime location.<sup>30</sup> From this post on Hollywood Boulevard, Morgan and his son purchased and subdivided additional land, west of their first track and west of Western Avenue along Hollywood Boulevard. In early fall 1923, Morgan added to his growing collection, acquiring land at the prime intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue. By December his plans to develop the land were well enough under way to merit coverage in a *Los Angeles Times* article.<sup>31</sup> According to the *Times*, The Hollywood Western building was originally conceived as an office tower slated to rise 12 stories.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com): June 15, 1900. 1900 population (12<sup>th</sup> Census of the U.S.). Woodbury County, Iowa; 1910. 1910 population (13<sup>th</sup> Census of the U.S.). Cahuenga Township/Precinct/Hollywood; 1920. 1920 population (14<sup>th</sup> Census of the U.S.). Cahuenga Township/Precinct/Hollywood.

<sup>27</sup> "Morgan Comes to Stay," *Los Angeles Times*, undated.

<sup>28</sup> "Planning Summer Work," *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1908, p.V19.

<sup>29</sup> "City is Astir with Building," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1920, p.V1.

<sup>30</sup> For J.J. Morgan, *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1925.

<sup>31</sup> Morgan's Hollywood Tract: West ½ of lot 28 and West ½ of lot (illegible), as shown on Map Book #6, MR 7, p.92. Morgan Place later changed to Gramercy.

<sup>32</sup> Huge Office Structure: Height-Limit Building to Cost \$1,500,000 Will Be Erected at Hollywood and Western, *Los Angeles Times*,

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The office tower Morgan proposed to build with an estimated cost of \$1,500,000 was to have a frontage of 114 feet on Hollywood Boulevard and 100 feet on Western Avenue. The structure would have included 200 offices on the upper floors and stores on the ground floor and was to be constructed as early as January 1924. Lindley & Selkirk, architects of the neighboring Bricker Building constructed by Morgan, were to simultaneously design the office tower. However, Morgan passed away a millionaire on May 31, 1925 at age 84, before ground could be broken for the adjacent office tower.

The proposed tower was never built, and in 1926 Morgan's estate sold the land at the corner of Hollywood and Western to the Mayer Investment Company, led by Louis B. Mayer, motion-picture producer. Mayer paid a cash consideration of \$550,000 for the property, which fronted for 228 feet on Hollywood Boulevard and had a depth of 178 feet on Western Avenue.<sup>33</sup> Soon Mayer would develop the corner of the property along Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue, with the construction of The Hollywood Western Building. The building, designed by well-known theater architect S. Charles Lee, would in time develop its own historic significance, having been constructed to house Mayer's Central Casting Company and due to the dramatic architectural statement made on its primary elevations.

By all accounts, Morgan's personal life was rather colorful. Married in 1866 to Alice Jane Lewis, Morgan had five children, twenty-one grandchildren, and 16 great-grandchildren. In 1909, Morgan became a widower and generated extensive *Los Angeles Times* coverage for his re-marriage to a much younger woman, and later, in 1915, for his attempt at a quiet out-of-state divorce resulting in litigation over alimony and child support. After Morgan's death at age 84 in 1925, his estate was extensively contested. Despite the nature of press coverage regarding his personal life, Morgan's obituary described him as one of Hollywood's "oldest and most influential residents."<sup>34</sup>

***Louis B. Mayer and the construction of the Hollywood Western Building***<sup>35</sup>

Owners Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg commissioned The Hollywood Western Building in 1928. Strategically located, the building was in close proximity to the Hollywood studios it served, among which were the now legendary Columbia Pictures Corporation, Warner Brothers, and Paramount Pictures. Renowned theater architect S. Charles Lee was chosen to design the building, an appropriate choice given both the owners of the building as well as the industry the building was meant to serve. The structure was designed in the most modernistic architectural vein available at the time, and was given numerous dramatic embellishments that express the spirit and essence of Hollywood.

The ground floor of The Hollywood Western Building originally housed ten shops, nearly all of which were leased within one month of the start of construction. The upper floors of the building consisted of office spaces, with the second floor also entirely leased prior to the building's completion by "professional men," including doctors, dentists, and chemists. The building's success at being fully leased prior to its completion was in large part due to the fact that it was so strategically located in the heart of the burgeoning Hollywood community as well as in close proximity to the studios of the motion picture industry.

In 1928, both the Central Casting Bureau and the MPPA were among the most important institutions within the motion picture industry. The Central Casting Bureau leased the entire third floor. Dedicated on January 25, 1926, the Central Casting Bureau was the industry response to the difficulty of assembling a "cast of thousands" at a time when any audition brought out hoards of job and glory seekers. The Central Casting Bureau included an extensive staff involved in direct communication with practically every producer of pictures, and handled the casting for all studios of any importance. It was reported in 1928 that through the organization there were more than 330,000 placements of stars, actors, and extras during the year 1927.

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Dec. 15, 1923, pg. II1.

<sup>33</sup> Realty Deals Run High: Hollywood Boulevard Lease Features Day Involving More Than \$2,000,000 in Property, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 17, 1926, p.A5.

<sup>34</sup> For J.J. Morgan, *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1925.

<sup>35</sup> Information regarding the architectural description of the Hollywood Western Building was taken from the Mills Act Nomination Form for the Hollywood Western Building prepared by ICF Jones and Stokes, May 2007.

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The fourth floor was entirely occupied by the office of the MPPA, including a handsome suite for its directing head, Will H. Hays, and his local representative, Col. Fred W. Beetson. MPPA was a particularly powerful and far-reaching organization within the motion-picture business. The MPPA was organized in 1922 by the New York based Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) to counter charges that the industry was promoting immoral and antisocial behavior. The organization was charged with the task of censoring film titles and story lines under Rule 21 of the Code of the Motion Picture Industry, guidelines adopted in 1927 to ensure that Hollywood movies were of unquestionable and uncompromising morality. Cecil B. DeMille was the first president of the MPPA. Louis B. Mayer, a founding member, became president in 1931. After former Postmaster General Will Hayes was hired to head the organization, it was later dubbed the Hayes Censorship Office. In his new role, Hays soon became known as the "Czar of All the Rushes."

Architect S. Charles Lee considered both the Central Casting Bureau and MPPA tenants when designing the exterior of the building, depicting in the dramatic cast-stone bas-relief friezes on each of the street elevations actors and actresses performing in a classical epic before a megaphone-wielding director in a canvas chair. The characters carved into the elevations are semi-nude, with this then-risqué motif chosen to directly contrast with the fourth floor tenant of the building, the Central Casting Bureau. While the entire design aesthetic added to the Art Deco structure was Lee's ode to the motion picture industry; the nudity of the characters was a pointed but lighthearted attempt by Lee to note the ever-changing nature of the industry as it matured.

The inclusion of the increasingly influential Central Casting Bureau and MPPA within The Hollywood Western Building concentrated at that intersection an enormous amount of activity and daily contacts with thousands of people heretofore distributed in different sections of Hollywood. Interestingly, Mayer also owned considerable additional Hollywood Boulevard frontage immediately adjoining his new building, which he planned to improve as well. While Mayer is not known to have built another building adjacent to the Hollywood Western Building, his choice of location for the building, as well as his role in determining what type of structure would best serve the Casting Bureau and MPPA specifically, contributed greatly to Hollywood's development in the 1920s as the hub of the motion picture industry.<sup>36</sup>

The dedication of The Hollywood Western Building and its business block upon its opening was fitting given its relationship to the motion picture industry, as the opening night ceremonies rivaled a Hollywood motion picture premier. On the evening of December 8, 1928, S. Charles Lee officiated and emceed the event, acting as master of ceremonies. The honorary role of opening the primary (north) elevation's decorative bronze doors with a golden key was given to actress Norma Shearer, wife of part owner Irving Thalberg.<sup>37</sup> A historic photograph depicts the lively scene, with Lee, Thalberg, Shearer, and an excited audience of other influential Hollywood figures gathered around the front entrance.<sup>38</sup> MGM's "Baby Stars" distributed souvenirs to the throngs of people who waited to see their favorite stars and to catch a glimpse of the impressive structure and its lobby.

### **High-Rise Development in Hollywood**

As the major period of sustained development occurred in the 1920s, Hollywood's physical form was heavily influenced by the architectural and technological innovations of the period. Engineering and construction techniques in the 1920s, for example, allowed for the building of "skyscrapers," as they were then known, which emerged as an affordable, efficient, and desirable form of commercial design. In 1920s Hollywood, much of the community's high-rise construction occurred along Hollywood Boulevard, with many of the buildings built to the existing height limit. One article in the *Los Angeles Times* described the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue in 1924 as an area experiencing rapid growth, with a large four-story hotel and business structure being erected by the United Cigar Stores Company at one corner, paving the way for The Hollywood Western building to be constructed at

<sup>36</sup> "Western Avenue Intersection Draws Attention," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1928.

<sup>37</sup> "Structure Opened with Golden Key," December 9, 1928.

<sup>38</sup> Valentine, 49.

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another prime corner of the intersection.<sup>39</sup> Constructed in 1928 and located on Hollywood Boulevard, The Hollywood Western Building is an excellent, intact example of the high-rise development that occurred along Hollywood Boulevard in the 1920s, and in particular, during the most rapid period of development and population growth that occurred from 1924 to 1929.

Commercial buildings accounted for a large percentage of construction throughout the city during the 1920s; the building's status as a "skyscraper" rendered it characteristic of its location and period. Hollywood's 1920s high-rise construction exceeded not only other commercial centers in the Los Angeles area but even rivaled that of other parts of the country. By 1930, Hollywood Boulevard had developed in its own skyline characterized by a row of high-rise buildings stretching for well over a mile.

High-rise commercial buildings, such as The Hollywood Western building, were most often constructed along existing commercial thoroughfares rather than within residential enclaves. As such, their designers were much less constrained by stylistic program imposed by the desire for compatibility and, thus, were able to draw from a wider design palette. The building employs the Art Deco style, which was the most popular architectural style of the time, highlighted with cast stone figures representing the dramatic arts of motion pictures.

### ***Architectural Style***<sup>40</sup>

During the period of rapid commercial growth in Hollywood that was particularly intense between 1924 and 1929, the architectural styles of buildings constructed were representative of those most popular between the World Wars. Whereas banks and government buildings were typically designed in the more formal Beaux-Arts styles, other buildings constructed in Hollywood took on more fanciful or exotic images. Ornamental revival styles such as Spanish Colonial Revival and Italian Renaissance Revival reflected Hollywood's self-conscious extravagance, while the new Art Deco and Moderne styles fit the community's aspirations for glamour and sophistication.

The Art Deco style emerged from the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes, an exhibition held in Paris from which the term was coined. Metalwork, ceramics, furniture, mural painting, and other arts by skilled craftsman were incorporated into buildings, avoiding classical motifs. The figurative arts were incorporated into modern objects and used into classical architectural details.<sup>41</sup> Characterizing the architecture of Los Angeles from this period, architectural historians David Gebhard and Robert Winter state: "The truth is that the spirit of the 1920s recognized that architecture, like the other arts, is an art of effect. If the effect is good, try anything."<sup>42</sup> An early example in Los Angeles was the Oviatt Building, commissioned immediately after the exposition and constructed in 1927-1928 in downtown. The Hollywood Western building was constructed two years prior to the Pantages Theatre on Hollywood and Argyle Street, which was also designed in the Art Deco style, invoking the symbolism of The Hollywood Western building's movie motifs.<sup>43</sup>

While much of the resultant eclecticism of Los Angeles architecture was a result of movie-set design, the connection between Los Angeles' real world architecture and its back-lot architecture was most likely a reciprocal association:

*Dreaming about and pursuing various states of fantasy have been part of the Southern California lifestyle since its earliest days. It was this supportive and encouraging attitude toward novelty and cultural hyperbole, as much as the perpetual spring, which brought the movie industry to Los Angeles in 1910. The relationship between the building*

<sup>39</sup> "High Figure Involved In Site Lease," *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1924, p.D2.

<sup>40</sup> Portions of this text have been adapted from the City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument application for the Nirvana Apartments, prepared by Historic Resources Group, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Leland Roth. *American Architecture*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001. P. 374-375.

<sup>42</sup> Gebhard, David and Robert Winter. *Los Angeles: An Architectural Guide*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs- Smith, Publisher, 1994, xx-xxi.

<sup>43</sup> Roth, p. 374-375.

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*of movie sets and the building of the city that surrounded the studios is one of mutual dependence.*<sup>44</sup>

In the 1920s, Los Angeles was still a very young city whose character, architectural and otherwise, was just beginning to take shape. The tremendous growth of the film industry during this period would profoundly influence that character. This environment would lead to what has been called “architecture of diversion”:

*Diversion took place through delight and deceit. In the absence of any established academic architectural tradition, Los Angeles became a proving ground for the development of all kinds of theatrical architecture.*<sup>45</sup>

The Hollywood Western building includes architectural characteristics that are hallmarks of the style, including its symmetrical composition, vertical emphasis, flat roof, rectangular windows, arched door openings, pilasters, and carved motifs are all hallmarks of the style. Aside from minor ground floor storefront alterations, the building retains a high degree of integrity and quality of design.

The creative climate of Hollywood in the 1920s found expression in “unrestrainedly imaginative styles.”<sup>46</sup> Although the Art Deco style was used, as was common with late 1920s commercial buildings in cities, the Hollywood movie influence is apparent in the carved cast stone ornament applied on the vertical pilasters of the building, as well as above the main entrance. Even the fire escape, which has attached balconies, displays the carved Hollywood symbolism.

The Hollywood Western Building makes a significant contribution to the character of a commercial building corridor in the heart of Hollywood. It is an example of commercial buildings within the Hollywood Boulevard corridor provided for a concrete need for the movie industry. Buildings like The Hollywood Western Building changed the streetscapes of Hollywood and played an integral part in its architectural evolution, as the community and the greater Los Angeles area boomed in the 1920s.

### **Architect**<sup>47</sup>

The life and career of S. Charles Lee (1899-1990) coincided with the rise and fall of the American movie theater in the twentieth century. Although the development of the movie theater and related building types, especially in their early forms, are usually associated with a group of eastern and Midwestern architects, the history of the building type, especially in the post-movie palace era, can be explored through Lee’s work, which spans the evolution from movie palace into neighborhood house.<sup>48</sup> Lee designed many of the most admired movie theaters in the country. Local examples of his work include the Tower and the Los Angeles Theaters, both of which are part of the National Register Historic Theatre District in downtown Los Angeles.

Born Simeon Charles Levi in Chicago in 1899, five years after the first commercial showing of motion pictures in the United States, Lee was the son of American-born parents of German-Jewish ancestry, Julius and Hattie (Stiller) Levi. From an early age, Lee witnessed the evolution of motion pictures, frequenting vaudeville theaters, nickelodeons, and early movie houses. After graduating from a technical high school in 1916, Lee attended Chicago Technical College, graduating with honors in 1918. His first job was as architect for the South Park Board of the City of Chicago. During World War II, he enlisted in the Navy. After his discharge in 1920, he entered the Armour Institute of Technology to study architecture. The course followed the principles of the Ecole des Beaux Arts and this training is reflected

<sup>44</sup> Polyzoides, Stephanos, Roger Sherwood, and James Tice. *Courtyard Housing in Los Angeles*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Ovnick, 162.

<sup>47</sup> Information regarding the architectural description of the Hollywood Western Building was taken from the Mills Act Nomination Form for the Hollywood Western Building prepared by ICF Jones and Stokes, May 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Valentine, xi.

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in the composition and imagery of his later drawings. It is also reflected in his own emphasis on the plan as the driving force of the design. This practical approach would serve him well in his many commercial designs.

The City of Chicago was itself a key influence on Lee, who benefited by living in the environment of Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Daniel Burnham, and burgeoning American Modernism. Chicago was the birthplace of the American skyscraper and the commercial Chicago School. Chicago's architecture combined grand plans, functional design, and artistic innovation to express the power of commerce in uniquely American department stores and office towers. Less than twenty years old at the turn of the century, the city was new and modern and at the center of architectural innovation for the rest of the country. Louis Sullivan, one of Lee's mentors, said, "The passion to sell is the impelling power in American life." With partner Dankmar Adler, he expressed this power in Chicago buildings such as the Auditorium (1886) and the Schiller Theater Building (1891-1892), multi-use buildings housing culture with commerce."<sup>49</sup>

Lee's specific training, however, began when he first apprenticed in the offices of early motion picture theater architects. The American movie theater as a building type drew on trends related to Lee's education and experiences, including Beaux Arts styling, functional modernism, and popular design. As his own architectural career began to take shape, Lee specialized in motion picture theater design, but even his non-theater commissions were infused with the same theatricality and emphasis on functional innovations.<sup>50</sup>

Like Sullivan's and Wright's, Lee's mature work emanated from the plan. It was modern but not stark, simple but not dull. A building by Lee was rational and integrated, an entity in which each part served the whole. Ornament consisted of focused expression and often-symbolic quotation, not a hodgepodge of applied decoration.<sup>51</sup> Lee considered himself a modernist, and his career revealed "both the Beaux Arts discipline and emphasis on planning and the modernist functionalism and freedom of form."<sup>52</sup> He also was a pragmatist, designing his buildings to support and enhance the commercial ventures they housed.<sup>53</sup>

The Hollywood Western Building represents a shift in Lee's work away from historicism and toward modernism. As a student, and after his graduation from the Armour Institute, Lee worked for Rapp & Rapp, a Chicago architectural firm specializing in the construction of theaters in the Midwest. In 1921, Lee came to California on vacation and decided to stay. He immediately established his own architectural practice in Los Angeles. Between 1921 and approximately 1928, Lee's practice included the design of a variety of building types, many of which were commissioned by people in the motion picture industry. Lee's theatrical designs for residential and commercial buildings soon came to the attention of Fox West Coast Theaters and as a result he received several commissions for Fox Theaters in a number of cities in the western United States.

During the 1920s, both Lee's work and the movie palace itself reflected a growing awareness of the importance of client amenities, which also served as advertising gimmicks. Whether designing a theater, office building, or residential structure, Lee began to combine theatricality with pragmatic concerns. Romantic, historicist façades revealed progressive ideas about space planning and an emphasis on function. In particular, Lee's residential buildings of the 1920s can be viewed as stage sets for living, with decorative flourishes that suggest richness and elegance, primarily on their public face. He arranged floor plans to maximize views and minimize plumbing and insisted on modern conveniences and services.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, xii.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Scheid, 2000.

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When “talkies” were developed in the late 1920s the result was a significant building boom to construct theaters that could accommodate sound. From that point on, Lee specialized almost exclusively in theater design. Whereas during the 1920s, most theaters still followed the form of the European theaters designed for live stage performances, and during the 1930s, theater designers began to cast aside stages along with historical styles. Some of Lee’s best-known Southern California theaters were designed in modern styles including the Art Deco Fox Wilshire (1929) and the Streamline Moderne Academy Theater (1939). The construction of the Hollywood Western Building in 1928, therefore, occurred just as Lee began to more fully incorporate modern motifs into his designs.

The Hollywood Western Building exploited the same qualities of showmanship found in Lee’s earlier work but predicted the Moderne direction of 1930s Hollywood: the Art Deco movie palace. During this period, Lee became adept at the use of publicity to build a reputation for himself and his architecture, becoming a “nonactivist within the architectural profession but an activist in the business community of his clients.”<sup>54</sup>

Whereas the first generation of motion picture theater architects believed that the new theater form would be accepted more willingly under the guise of established cultural institutions; they, therefore, designed buildings that fit that mold. The next generation of theater architects was younger, American born, and educated, and products of twentieth-century thought. Lee had foundations in the Old School, but as a mature architect he pursued the Moderne vein. His first movie palaces were period revival pieces but with technical innovations. He soon began to shift away from the historicist emphasis to introduce modern lines, which he boldly incorporated into the design of The Hollywood Western Building.<sup>55</sup>

Lee retained an office in Beverly Hills into the late 1980s. Upon retirement he donated what remained of his professional papers to the Research Library at the University of California, Los Angeles, including original plans, renderings, and photographs of buildings. The Hollywood Western Building is featured prominently in the collection, which includes the structure’s original plans and related architectural notes.

### **Summary**

The Hollywood Western Building exhibits fine architectural qualities that are becoming increasingly rare in Hollywood, both as an exceptional example of the Art Deco style and as a structure that embodies the dramatic development of 1920s high-rise commercial and residential construction in Hollywood. Therefore, The Hollywood Western Building is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places at the local level under Criteria A and C for the critical role it played in the Hollywood motion picture industry and for its association with prominent theater architect S. Charles Lee.

The relationship of The Hollywood Western Building to the motion picture industry is reflected not only in its architecture but also in its original owners, the architect chosen to design it, and in its original and longstanding tenants. Designed by renowned theater architect S. Charles Lee for owners Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg, The Hollywood Western Building was built to house both the famed Central Casting Bureau offices as well as the MPPA, two of the most significant institutions within the motion picture industry during its golden era.

Embellished with carvings and figures expressing the “Spirit of Hollywood,” and designed by one of the most significant theater architects of all time for influential movie producers to house offices where the business of Hollywood was conducted in its heyday; The Hollywood Western Building is an irreplaceable monument to the movie industry. The building retains a very high level of integrity, with key character defining features intact and preserved. While the original ground level storefronts, signage, and half-story roof portion were removed from the building many years ago, the structure continues to have a strong historic association with its original construction, architect, owners, and tenants, and its architectural significance within the continuum of Hollywood’s development in the 1920s and that of the motion picture industry continues to be dramatic and strong.

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<sup>54</sup> Valentine 50.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 52.



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Aside from interior alterations, The Hollywood Western Building's historic setting, design, materials, workmanship are intact. The building has been in continuous use as a mixed-use commercial building, and a strong sense of historic feeling is evident at the property.

The Hollywood Western Building was declared Historic Cultural Monument No. 336 on January 6, 1988, as a monument to the historic, cultural and economic significance of the movie industry. The relationship of The Hollywood Western Building to the motion picture industry is reflected not only in its architecture but also in its original owners, the architect chosen to design it, and in its original and long-standing tenants. The building is an intrinsic part of Hollywood history, constructed during its most intense period of development, 1924-1929, when the influence of the motion picture industry made Hollywood an adjective as well as a place known throughout the world.

A Department of Parks and Recreation Primary Record form was prepared for The Hollywood Western Building on October 11, 1994, as part of a survey of earthquake damaged properties for the purposes of Section 106 review. The determination regarding the building's significance, made by Historic Resources Group, found it to be significant under National Register Criteria A and C for the critical role it played in the Hollywood motion picture industry and for its association with prominent theater architect S. Charles Lee.

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**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 for the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

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

Name of repository: South Central Coastal Information Center

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** \_\_\_\_\_

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### 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property** .292 acres

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

#### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: \_\_\_\_\_ Longitude: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Latitude: \_\_\_\_\_ Longitude: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Latitude: \_\_\_\_\_ Longitude: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Latitude: \_\_\_\_\_ Longitude: \_\_\_\_\_

**Or**

#### UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or  NAD 1983

1. Zone: 11S Easting: 379206.39 Northing: 3774189.69

2. Zone: \_\_\_\_\_ Easting: \_\_\_\_\_ Northing: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Zone: \_\_\_\_\_ Easting: \_\_\_\_\_ Northing: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Zone: \_\_\_\_\_ Easting : \_\_\_\_\_ Northing: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

P M 31-73 POR of Lot A. The Hollywood Western Building (5500 Hollywood Boulevard) is located at the southwest corner of the historically dynamic intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue. The property is 111 feet wide by 114 feet long. The Hollywood Western Building extends along the majority of the property. The boundaries of the property have long been established, and include features extant at the time of or soon after The Hollywood Western Building's construction: the building itself, the space separating the building along its rear (west) elevation from the parking lot it shares with the Bricker Building (1671 N. Western Avenue) to the south, and the narrow space between the

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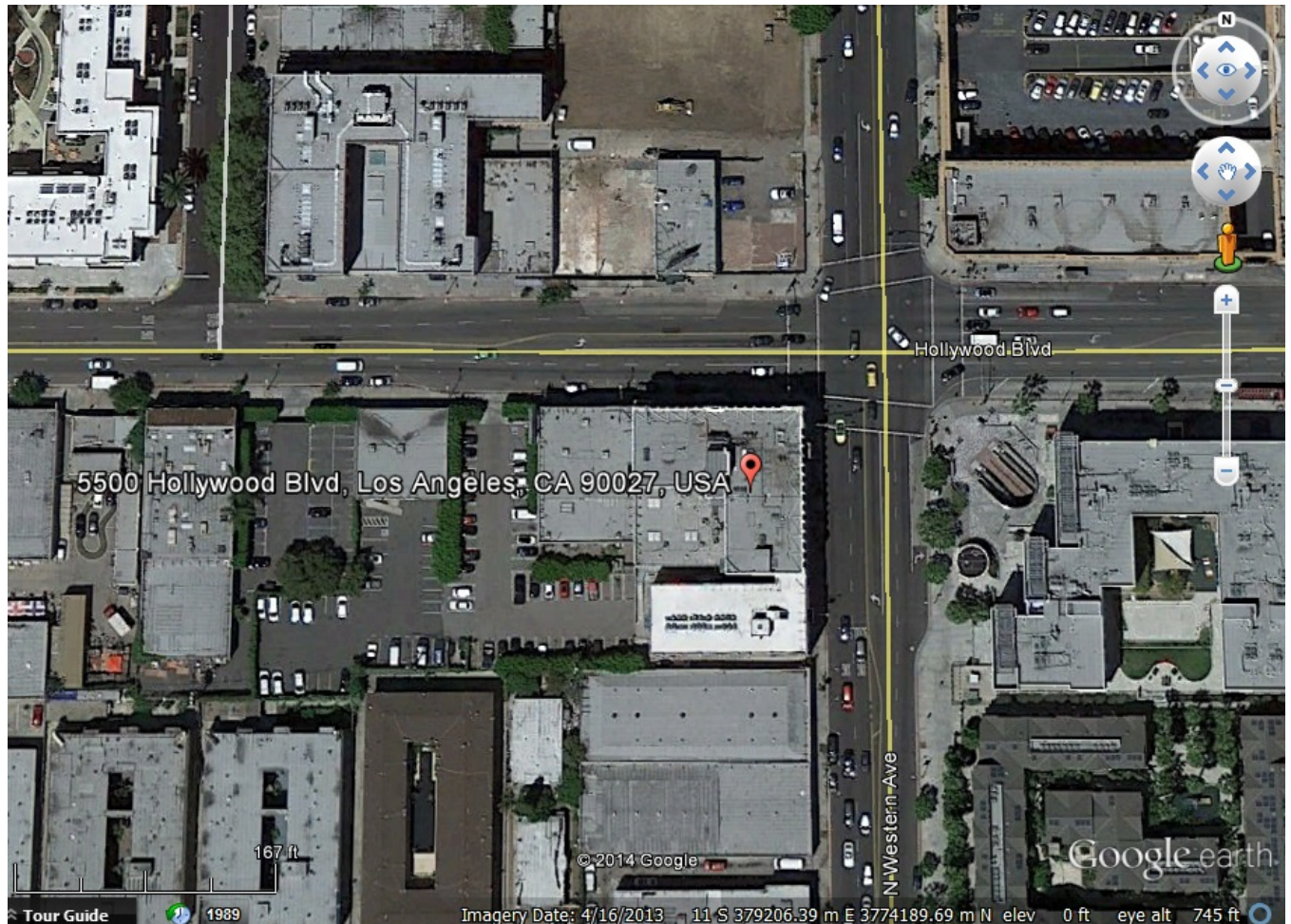
Bricker building and The Hollywood Western Building. The building slopes slightly downward, toward its south elevation, following the slope of Western Avenue.

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries selected are the historic boundaries of the parcel.

**Additional Documentation**

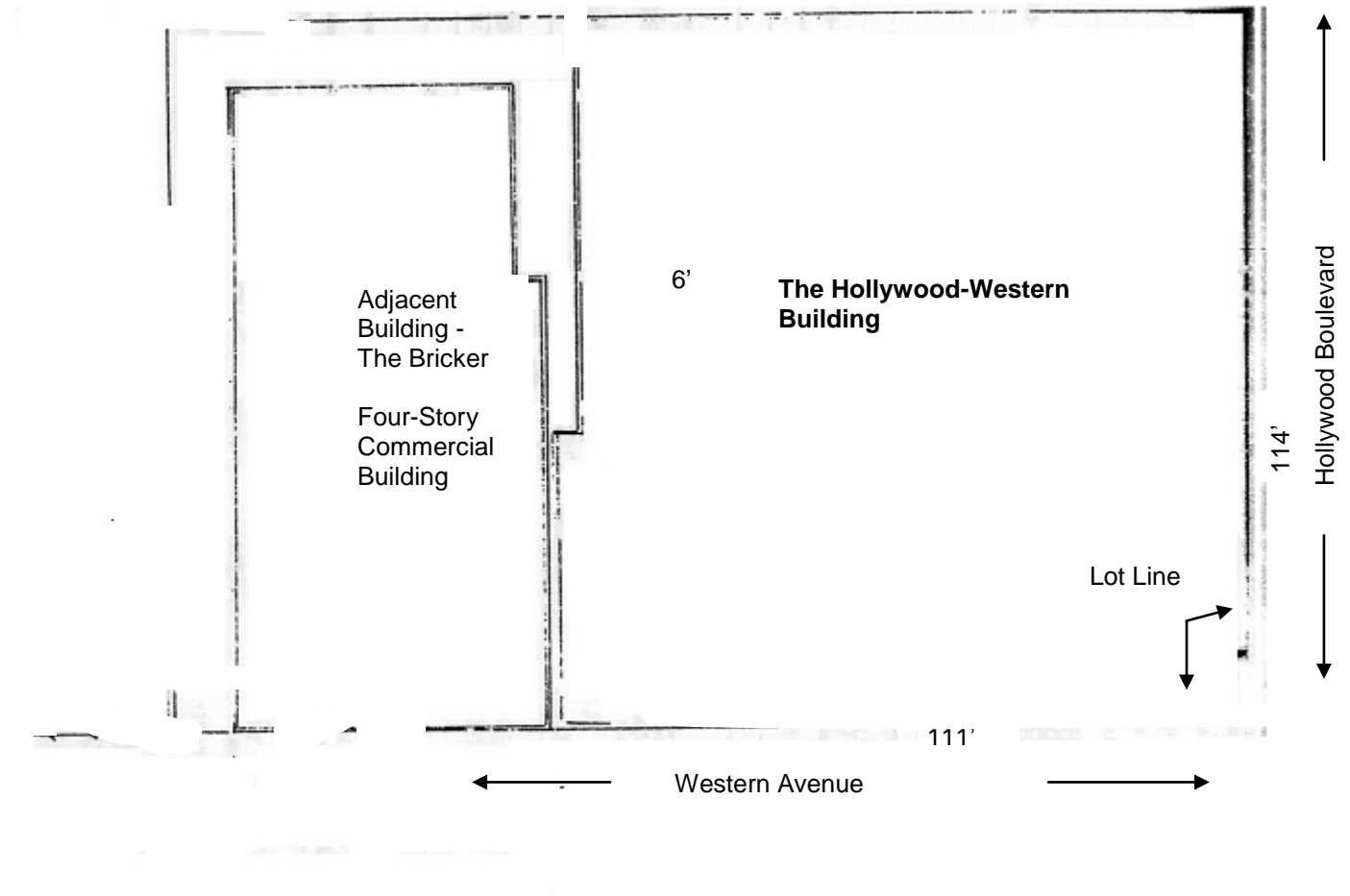
- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.



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



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**Photo Log**

Name of Property: The Hollywood Western Building, 5500 Hollywood Boulevard  
City or Vicinity: Los Angeles (Hollywood)  
County: Los Angeles County  
State: California  
Name of Photographer: Elizabeth Hilton, ICF International  
Date of Photographs: September 24, 2014  
Location of Original Digital Files: 601 W 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 900, Los Angeles, CA 90071

Photo #1 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_001), Northeast façade, camera facing southwest.

Photo #2 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_002), Northwest façade, camera facing southeast.

Photo #3 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_003), Southeast façade, camera facing northwest.

Photo #4 (of 12. CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_004), East (secondary) elevation, camera facing west.

Photo #5 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_005), North (main) façade, camera facing south.

Photo #6 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_006), West (rear) elevation, camera facing northeast, photograph of the west elevation (the section that cannot be seen from the street).

Photo #7 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_007), South (rear) elevation, camera facing north, photograph of the south elevation (the section that cannot be seen from the street).

Photo #8 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_008), North (main) façade, camera facing south, detail of the primary entrance.

Photo #9 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_009), North (main) façade, camera facing south, detail of the primary entrance brass doors and transom.

Photo #10 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_0010), North (main) elevation, camera facing south, detail of pilasters, window bays, and cast stone reliefs.

Photo #11 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_0011), East (secondary) elevation, camera facing west, detail of fire escape and balconies.

Photo #12 of 12. (CA\_LosAngeles\_HollywoodWestern\_012), Interior of North (main) façade, camera facing north, detail of the original staircase.



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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.