

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic name: American Life & Accident Insurance Company of Kentucky Building

Other names/site number: "American Life Building" / JFL-6

Name of related multiple property listing: n/a

2. Location

Street & number: 471 W. Main St. (3 Riverfront Plaza)

City or town: Louisville State: Kentucky County: Jefferson

Not For Publication: n/a Vicinity: n/a

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

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

I hereby certify that this X 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 X local

Applicable National Register Criteria: ___A ___B XC ___D

<p>Signature of certifying official/Title: Craig Potts/SHPO Date _____</p> <p>Kentucky Heritage Council/State Historic Preservation Office ___</p> <p>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>
<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>
<p>Signature of commenting official /Title: _____ Date _____</p>
<p>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>

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:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

Private:

Public – Local

Public – State

Public – Federal

Category of Property

Building(s)

District

Site

Structure

Object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing
<u>1</u>
<u>1</u>
<u> </u>
<u> </u>
<u>2</u>

Noncontributing
<u> </u>
<u> </u>
<u> </u>
<u> </u>
<u> </u>

buildings
sites
structures
objects
Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register n/a

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

COMMERCE/Business - Office

Current Functions

COMMERCE/Business – Office

7. Description

Architectural Classification

MODERN MOVEMENT / International Style:
Miesian

Materials:

Principal exterior materials of the property:
Glass, Steel

Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

The American Life and Accident Insurance Company of Kentucky Building (JFL-6; hereafter, shortened to “American Life Building”) is a six-story, cube-shaped midrise office tower built to serve as the headquarters for this Louisville, Kentucky-based insurance company. Internationally

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

recognized German émigré and architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), initially designed the building in collaboration with his clients; it was completed after Mies' death by his protégé, Bruno Conterato, and opened in 1973. The area proposed for listing is 1.097 acres and includes one contributing building and one contributing site, the surrounding plaza.

The American Life Building displays several characteristic International style / Miesian design elements. The exterior structure of the building is well-proportioned and the form visibly expressed by the use of horizontal steel bands and vertical steel columns, punctuated by large expanses of floor-to-ceiling window glass on every façade. The glassed-in ground floor lobby is recessed 15 feet in every direction, creating a colonnade around the perimeter and giving the appearance that the upper floors are floating. The flat, landscape-designed plaza was conceived with deliberate setback, both from the Main Street perspective and from the Riverfront Plaza / Belvedere perspective, to allow the architecture of the office building to be fully conveyed on the site. Interior floor plans embrace universal space concepts with openness and adaptability paramount for modern businesses.

The use of Cor-Ten spandrel panels on the American Life Building was likely an experiment since weathering steel had an unproven track record for architectural use at the time. It's possible that the selection of Cor-Ten as an exterior material came about after Mies' death in August 1969. Although Mies regularly worked with steel and glass, the specific use of Cor-Ten is not characteristic of his body of work since it was not used in any of his other designs. After solving early installation issues at the site with the Cor-Ten spandrel panels, the material continued to patina unevenly and the rust runoff from heavy rains caused damage to the building's windows, surrounding plaza, and parking deck below. In 2004, after consultation with Cor-Ten authorities, the owners followed the recommendation to protect the Cor-Ten steel from further deterioration by sealing it with a high-performance acrylic coating tinted a dark brown-gray color. The coating is reversible. No other treatment has been suggested for solving the problems and damage caused by the rust.



Main south facade [credit: PRG Commercial Property Advisors]

Setting

The American Life Building is located at the northeast corner of Fifth Street / Montpelier Place and West Main Street in the heart of Louisville's Central Business District. It is sited at the southernmost boundary of the raised Riverfront Plaza / Belvedere, which was designed in the early 1970s as part of a major downtown redevelopment plan. North of the Plaza (and underneath a

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

portion of it) is Interstate 64, and beyond that, the Ohio River. To the west of the subject property is the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts (1983), a statewide cultural and arts facility. To the south across Main Street is First National Tower / National City Tower / PNC Tower (1972), an International style office tower designed by Harrison & Abramovitz that was the tallest building in Kentucky for two decades. Diagonally across the intersection from the American Life building is the Humana Building (1985), headquarters of the Humana health insurance company; it was designed by renowned architect Michael Graves. To the east is One Riverfront Plaza (1972), the Galt House Hotel (1972), and the Galt House East (1984). The Galt House is the largest hotel in downtown Louisville. The immediate area was built up at the same time, or within the next decade, as the construction of the American Life Building coincided with the redevelopment of the riverfront.



American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building (Latitude: 38.257338 Longitude: -85.757800)

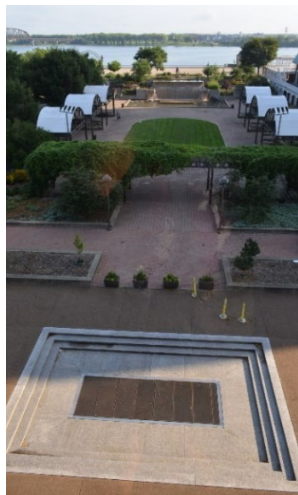
The building rests upon a podium-like slab of Texas granite and is accessed on the south / Main Street side by a series of broad steps from the sidewalk level. The northernmost section of the site features a small rectangular-stepped retention basin.

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State



South façade and plaza steps



View to north from building

The landscape elements of the Riverfront Plaza / Belvedere were envisioned by Greek landscape architect, Constantinos Doxiadis, a friend and contemporary of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. When Mies accepted the commission for the American Life Building over the phone, he was reported to have stated: “I would like to build a sculpture in the plaza.”¹ On the design of the sculpture, Mies and his protégé, Bruno Conterato, came up “with a single concept: “The air supports the cube.”²



American Life Building and Riverfront Plaza ca. 1973 [Jimmie Wallace Collection]

Exterior

The cube-shaped American Life Building is a five-story office building with a stepped-back sixth-floor penthouse and a green roof that cannot be seen from the ground level. It is symmetrical and has a steel framework that expresses its structure with applied Cor-Ten steel spandrel panels. Each

¹ Welton, J. Michael. “Thoroughbred Architecture,” 2006.

² Ibid.

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

façade is the same, with an exterior made up of three structural bays, each 42 feet wide. The building sits on a recessed lobby that is nearly transparent, and the upper floors are composed of large plate glass windows, six in each bay and recessed about one foot from the steel. From inside, the views of downtown and the river are uncompromised by the large floor-to-ceiling windows. This “skin and bones” construction of glass and steel was favored by Mies in many of his designs; the interplay between interior and exterior space was one he had explored since the 1920s. *Refer to the end of Section 7 for a discussion about Cor-Ten steel used on the building.*



North façade ca. 1974 (from Welton article)



Colonnade and recessed lobby

The lobby is recessed 15 feet on all sides and is lined by a colonnade with twelve massive columns evenly spaced around the building’s perimeter. The recessing of this ground-level floor, coupled with the lobby’s exterior glass walls, create the illusion that the floors above it are floating, a design element Mies used on both high-rise skyscrapers and low-rise buildings.

Basement / Foundation

Below ground, reinforced concrete was used for construction of the foundation. “The problem of sandy river soil has been solved... [with] deep pilings for support – in the case of American Life, about 25 feet below the lowest basement level.”³ Two levels of private underground parking are not street-visible and are accessed by mechanical garage doors on the lower level, adjacent to Fifth Street / Montpelier Place to the west.

A third basement level contains a gym and squash court; an original in-ground hot tub and two sauna rooms are also present, but these are no longer used by employees. These employee health amenities were part of the original design and were often touted in company literature to encourage office leasing.

³ *Louisville Magazine*, Feb. 1972: “Mies van der Rohe Moors on Riverfront”

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

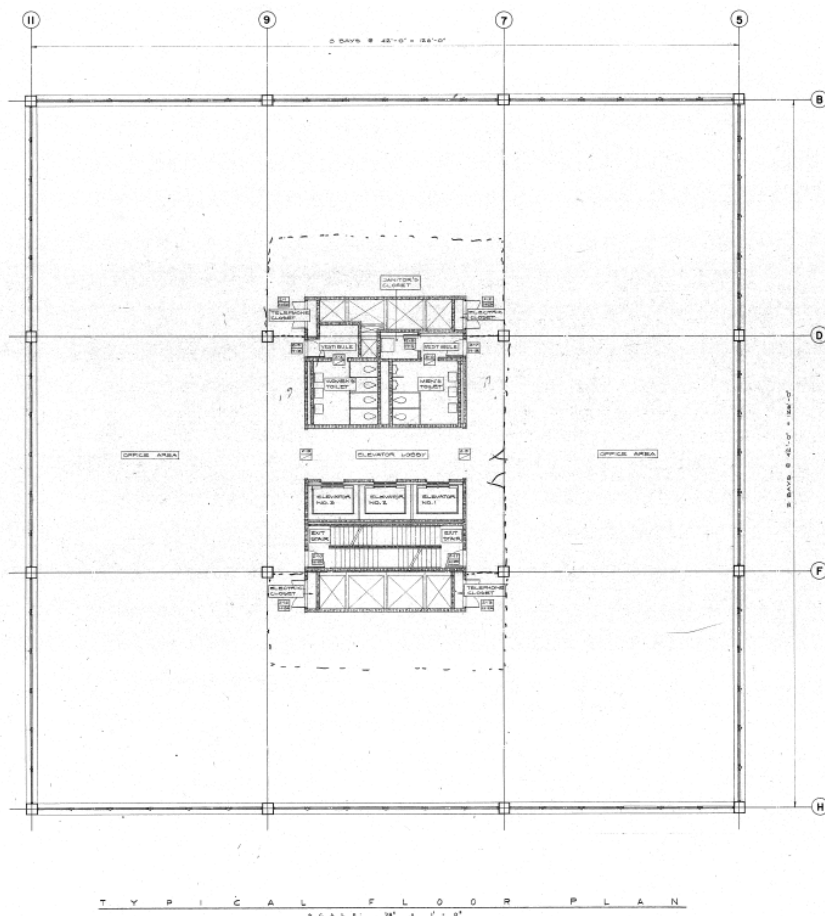


Sauna rooms and in-ground hot tub, no longer in use



Squash court

Three elevators and an internal stairway in a central core provide circulation from floor to floor. This method of concentrating the core utility and mechanical functions into the center of the building provides flexible space and natural lighting for office use at the periphery of the floors.



Typical floor plan showing the central core and grid plan of the building (Office of Mies van der Rohe)

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Interior

Entrances to the central, high-ceilinged lobby are on the north and south exterior facades only. This description on the SAH Archipedia webpage about the American Life Building lobby goes into more detail on the materials:

“The lobby, with the elevator core at its center, is impressive in its simplicity of form and richness of materials. The walls and floors are clad ...with matte and high-polished finishes respectively. The fittings are by Knoll and Herman Miller, but the offices are not a museum of mid-century Modernism and have been updated several times.”⁴



Lobby looking out towards West Main Street



Elevator core

The three floors above the lobby are for leased offices. When the American Life Building was built in the early 1970s, modular office space was an innovative corporate trend designed to give adaptability to modern businesses. This “universal space” concept was considered more efficient for changing needs over time, and it was one that Mies embraced as vital for interiors. Most of the interior office space is intended to be flexible; some office spaces are delineated by glass walls, each set within a metal framework. Further floor divisions are provided by a system of removable partitions that change according to the requirements of the tenants. All remaining spaces are laid out in 7-ft² modules, each with lighting and climate control. Tenants are able to divide space and the possibility of using any 7-foot multiples in both directions opens up a variety of design options. The large floor-to-ceiling windows and lack of interior columns afford excellent views of downtown as well as the Ohio River and beyond.

⁴ Carbone, Cristina. “American Life & Accident Insurance Company of Kentucky Building.” SAH-Archipedia.org

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State



A typical open office tenant floor



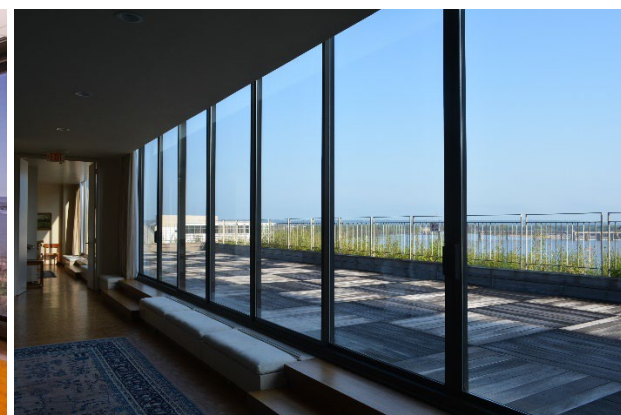
View of the river from an open office

The fifth floor features executive offices, meeting rooms, and cubicles for support staff of the American Life and Accident Insurance Company of Kentucky. The library was thoughtfully designed to function as a boardroom with commanding views of the Ohio River and features high-end walnut wall panels and shelves for company literature, awards, and collections. Other original materials in the library include bronze door handles and a parquet floor.

The penthouse on the top floor is divided from east to west into bedroom/bath, living room/reception area, catering kitchen, bedroom/bath; it is occasionally used for visiting guests or for events. The southernmost half of the top floor contains mechanical systems. The outside deck provides an impressive place to host a corporate gathering with an unobstructed view of the river.



Library on the fifth floor [PRG]



View of the deck and river from the penthouse

A flat roof caps the building. In 2009, a green vegetative roof was added as an energy conservation and efficiency measure; it can be viewed from the taller downtown towers that surround the building but not from the public right-of-way at ground level. At the time the green roof was installed, the American Life Building “was able to increase its sustainability and prominence in the area by installing the largest privately-owned vegetative roofing system in Kentucky.”⁵

⁵ “American Life & Accident Insurance Company,” GreenRoofs.com

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State



Vegetative roof and penthouse, photo ca. 2009 (GreenRoofs.com)

Alterations to the American Life Building & Cor-Ten Steel Discussion

The American Life Building is still owned by the company responsible for its design and construction. The owners have taken care to continue the architectural and aesthetic concepts that are in keeping with its core Miesian values, with the interior layout and site setting remaining relatively unchanged. The arrangement of elements in the adjacent, city-operated Riverfront Plaza / Belvedere have changed over time, but the open, surrounding landscape remains which provides a gathering space for the community and excellent views of the river. HVAC and wiring have been updated in the building in past office renovations. Some exterior plaza work took place in the late 2010s to reduce storm-water discharge into the sewer, with materials chosen that were similar to the original plaza materials. Window glass panels were replaced in-kind in appearance for energy efficiency.

Although Mies regularly worked with steel, glass, and concrete, the specific use of Cor-Ten is not characteristic of his body of work since it was not used on any of his other designs. The use of Cor-Ten weathering steel spandrel panels in the design for the American Life Building was an innovative experiment that ultimately failed in this application. Weathering steel had not been used as a material on one of Mies' buildings before and it had an unproven track record in architectural use in the late 1960s.

The selection of Cor-Ten steel for the building may have come later in the planning process after Mies' death in August 1969. The building plans were not final for several years after that due to issues with coordination of the overall riverfront site, according to newspaper articles. In a January 1972 *Courier-Journal* announcement of the new building model, the exterior material was introduced as "Cor-Ten, a special structural steel that "bleeds" or "rusts" for about two years before

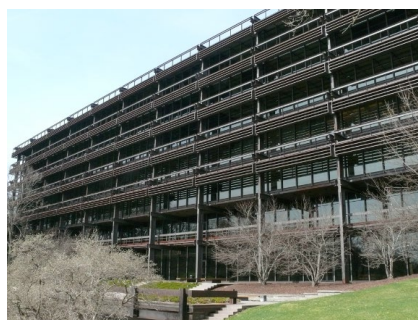
American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

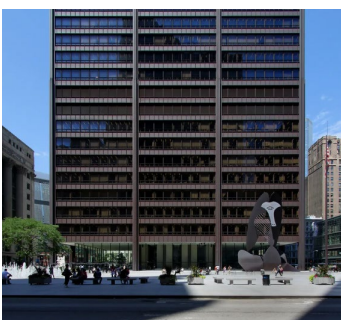
it attains a bronze-like patina.”⁶ However, exterior elevation drawings dated 1972 from the Office of Mies Van Der Rohe, located in the American Life archives, indicate “steel spandrel cover” and “steel column cover” but do not specify Cor-Ten steel as the type of steel to be used.

“COR-TEN” is a trademark owned by U.S. Steel. The name refers to two particular steel properties: corrosion resistance and tensile strength, and the material is intended to oxidize with time to a rust-colored patina as it ages. Weathering steel is now known to be sensitive to humid environments, a poor choice for the American Life Building since its north façade is sited less than 600 feet from the Ohio River in a city well-known for its high humidity, especially in the summer months. U.S. Steel, in recent literature dated 2004 in the company archives, no longer recommends Cor-Ten steel for siding or roofing purposes in architectural applications.

Used initially for railcars in the 1930s and 1940s, one of the first architectural uses of Cor-Ten steel was in 1964 by Eero Saarinen and Associates for the John Deere & Co. Administrative Center in Moline, Illinois. Closer to Mies’ home in Chicago in 1965, the Chicago Civic Center (now the Richard J. Daley Center) was designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill with C.F. Murphy and features Cor-Ten steel on its thirty-one-story exterior. The Daley Center Plaza also contains a large sculptural art piece made of Cor-Ten steel by Pablo Picasso. These high-profile mid-1960s buildings may have influenced the selection of Cor-Ten for the American Life Building and are still extant.



John Deere Admin. Center
(SAH-Archipedia.org)



Daley Center
(Skyscraper.com)



Omni Coliseum – no longer extant
(AtlantaHistoryCenter.com)

However, other large buildings using weathering steel during this period later experienced failures with the material. The Omni Coliseum in Atlanta, Georgia, is one example in another humid climate that is unfortunately no longer extant:

“Completed in 1972, the Coliseum opened as the home of the Atlanta Hawks (NBA) and the Atlanta Flames (NHL, 1972-1980). Its distinctive design was an architectural feat. The structure, designed by TVS Design, was made of Cor-Ten steel, a metal intended to weather and rust. In theory, the rust eventually creates a protective seal for the building, and give structures made from it their signature oxidized appearance. TVS Design planned for a space age looking arena, and its roof system, called ortho-quad trusses and resembling an egg crate, was its most distinctive feature... For the Olympic Games [in 1996], it was the site of the indoor volleyball

⁶ Courier-Journal. “American Life shows model of new riverfront building,” Jan. 29, 1972.

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

competitions. More than 20 years old by this time, the Cor-Ten steel was also proving to be a failed experiment. The weathering continued and rust resulted in holes in the roof and walls. Making it through the summer of 1996, the arena was then scheduled for demolition and replacement the following year.”⁷

Cor-Ten was applied to the American Life Building as spandrel panels 40 feet long and 4 ½ feet high that wind around the outside of the building like bands, for a total of 60 spandrels in all. Towards the end of construction in late 1972 and early 1973, there were issues with buckling of the Cor-Ten panels soon after installation, called a “freak problem” in a 1973 *Courier-Journal* article, that may have been partly due to how the spandrels were installed on the smaller building:

“Both the architects and the U.S. Steel Corp., which developed Cor-Ten steel, were surprised. The huge steel manufacturer “couldn’t believe it,” said Bruno Conterato...

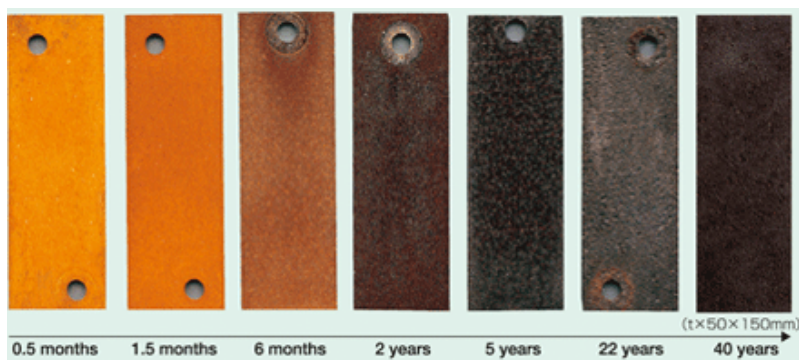
In taller buildings, the spandrels usually are reinforced with steel rods, filled with concrete and supported on the main steel members of the building. Any expansion stress from temperature change is relayed by the spandrels to the main structure.

But on the small Louisville building, the architects decided to eliminate the reinforcing rods and concrete to lighten the weight of the building. Instead, they placed expansion joints at each end of the spandrels, to let them expand horizontally.

However, after the first spandrels were placed... the architects found that the heat of the sun caused the 5,000-pound panels to curve outward in a bow shape.

To correct the problem, the spandrels will be bolted more securely to the face of the building, so they expand without buckling.”⁸

Before being exposed to the weather, Cor-Ten steel appears silver like other varieties of steel, with the rust color aging to a bronze patina in about 2 years. The intended “rust crust” of the Cor-Ten is supposed to protect the steel. Nippon Steel Corporation explains the change over time (see caption below) alongside a patina color scale on their website:



Nippon Steel Corporation: “COR-TEN exhibits a yellowish appearance in the initial stage of use, and the color gradually changes to brown. Then, as it sits in its surrounding environment, the color changes to a sedate blackish brown in one to two years. Then, the color changes very little once again, but only to a deep brown.”⁹

⁷ “Sites and Venues of ’96,” AtlantaHistoryCenter.com

⁸ *Courier-Journal*. “Problem delays a riverfront building,” April 27, 1973.

⁹ NipponSteel.com, “Weathering Steel Cor-Ten”

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Unfortunately, even after solving the spandrel installation issue, the Cor-Ten on the American Life Building did not weather as uniformly as envisioned, with uneven patches of color forming instead of a consistent patina, possibly due to window washing solutions. The rust-colored runoff from heavy rains was discoloring the windows and plaza, damaging the foundation, and leaking into the parking deck below. From a business standpoint, the unsightly appearance also led to difficulty in securing tenants for the building.



Exterior, unknown date
(American Life archives)



Photo posted on Archinect.com Forum in 2005,
but was likely taken before that date

A brief article in 2004 in the trade journal *Architectural Record* said:

"[The American Life Building] is the only one by Mies or his successor firm to use Cor-Ten. The material was supposed to oxidize for seven years, creating a self-sealing, rusty patina. After more than 30 years, however, the rusting had continued, and had become streaked by chemicals used to clean the windows. "We were getting a lot of complaints," says [Nana] Lampton, "including from prospective tenants." Lampton consulted experts at U.S. Steel and Turner Construction before deciding to coat it in a sealant called Sher-Cryl, leaving a flat, milk-chocolate-brown finish."¹⁰

After dealing with these issues for almost 30 years, in 2004 the owners consulted with Cor-Ten authorities about possible solutions. To preserve the building's structure and material, they followed the recommendation that the Cor-Ten should be sealed with a high-performance acrylic protective coating called Sher-Cryl HPA made by Sherwin-Williams. The coating is reversible. While the Cor-Ten panels are a different color, the material is still present, and the building structure is still evident in its form.

The Sher-Cryl coating can be tinted; the building was sealed again in 2010. The color appears more dark gray than brown (specifically, the color is SW-7048 or "Urbane Bronze") since it has faded with time since its application. Painted steel in other architectural uses eventually needs to be repainted every 10-15 years as well. If necessary in the future, applications of the Sher-Cryl coating may opt for a darker brown color to more closely emulate the aged patina of Cor-Ten.

¹⁰ Brake, Alan G. *Architectural Record*. "New coating for Mies building ruffles feathers," 2004.

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

It should be noted that the appearance of the color of the building tends to change based on the location of the sun over the course of the day. These two photos (below, unedited) were taken at 11 AM and 12:30 PM, left to right, on the same clear day in late May 2024:



American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- 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

- 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: ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance: 1969-1973

Significant Dates: 1969, 1973

Significant Person: n/a

Cultural Affiliation: n/a

Architect / Builder

Architect: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe / Bruno Conterato / Office of Mies van der Rohe
Builders: Turner Construction Co.

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Statement of Significance

Summary Paragraph

The American Life and Accident Insurance Company of Kentucky Building (JFL-6) in Louisville meets the first term of National Register Criterion C. The property is a significant example of a period and type of design, specifically the late career of modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969). Mies' work is so prolific, so defining, and regarded so highly that his oeuvre is regarded here as a type of construction for the sake of comparisons, but the wider typology of Modern architecture could serve as a type, as well. The significance of the American Life Building is explored through its history and within the architectural context "Mies' Modernism Design Style in the 1960s at the End of his Career." It is significant as a midrise, corporate office building constructed with steel and glass in the International / Miesian style. Mies designed the building, but its completion was carried out by his protégé, Bruno Conterato, after Mies' death. The American Life Building is one of the last designs of Mies' career and is the only Mies-designed building in the state of Kentucky. The siting of the American Life Building was a key element in the redevelopment of the Riverfront Plaza / Belvedere in the early 1970s, with the insurance company maintaining its location on a lot it had occupied in the downtown business district since 1929. The period of significance begins in 1969, when Mies prepared the initial design for the building, and ends in 1973 when construction was completed by his associates. The building stands as an interesting combination of and transition between Mies' favored building types: the exposed steel frame high-rise building and the single-story clear-span building. The American Life Building is a true, symmetrical Miesian box expressing those characteristics both through the simplicity of the grid structure as well as the openness and sense of transparency of the interior space.

Architectural Context: Mies' Modernist Design Style in the 1960s, at the End of his Career

Characteristics of International Style

To appreciate Mies' place in the development of Modernist design, a short overview of Modernist design evolution is necessary. Architectural historians cite a number of projects in the early 20th century as giving rise to what became recognized as Modernist architecture. Accounts of early Modernism could even reach back to the late 19th century, to Chicago architects who began to employ steel framework to build skyscrapers in rebuilding the city after the fire of 1871. Louis Sullivan and the Chicago School sought new aesthetic modes suited to tall buildings, especially commercial offices.

Accounts of Modernism usually begin in the early 20th century with a number of factories being built whose exterior presentation broke with the traditions that called for applied historical ornament to give a building a finished appearance. Many of these buildings appeared in Europe, though American automobile factory designers, particularly Albert Kahn for the Ford Company, created large production buildings with clean lines that frankly expressed their industrial identity.

As more conspicuous versions of these buildings began to populate large cities, urban commentators looked for a phrase to identify this new aesthetic. While the antecedents may be a point of debate, no one argued that Modernism remained undefined after the 1932 show at the

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Museum of Modern Art in New York City titled “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition,” curated by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock. This gave a pliable name, International style, to the wide array of Modernist expressions (<https://www.archdaily.com/409918/ad-classics-modern-architecture-international-exhibition-philip-johnson-and-henry-russell-hitchcock>). Shortly the 1932 Museum of Modern Art show, some of New York’s iconic skyscrapers were erected. After 1945, the International Style became more mainstream outside of New York and other American cultural centers, in cities such as Louisville.

International Style was a departure from the classical, traditional architecture of the time, with a focus on clean lines and limited ornamentation. The historic context for the ca. 1956 University of Louisville Library (aka Schneider Hall) presented in the National Register nomination (NRIS #13000561 – author Gail Gilbert, listed in July 2013) provides a relevant summary of “**Modern Architecture from 1945-1965**”. The development of the modern architectural style is discussed in general, as well as analyzed against other modern buildings within the city of Louisville, Kentucky at large.

Gilbert notes mid-twentieth century architectural characteristics that directly pertain to Mies’ body of work:

The International style emerged in Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 30s. It emphasized volume rather than mass; regularity and balance rather than the classical concern for symmetry; and the avoidance of applied ornament. It replaced the eclecticism of the 19th century, and eventually the term “international style” became synonymous with modern architecture...

“Some who wrote about this new aesthetic likened the buildings to a machine, where form was simplified, and beauty came from revealing the structure’s function. Architectural elements like steel, iron and glass – associated with economic and technological advancement – replaced traditional brick and wood construction. Buildings organized around repeatable forms became the norm...

Thus, this context offers the following characteristics that indicate excellence in midcentury modern design:

- *Use of innovative technology to solve structural, programmatic or aesthetic challenges.*
- *A design that integrates the building well with its immediate landscape, often a plaza which balances the horizontal (site) with the vertical (high rise building). The most well-designed Midcentury Modern buildings do not give the impression of being placed randomly on top of the landscape, though this effect is not universal.*
- *An overall look of simplicity, using basic geometric forms and eschewing ornamentation to express that simplicity.*
- *Connecting of the inside and the outside by the generous use of glass which creates harmony with the site. Often materials used on the outside of buildings were continued in the interior, further connecting the outside and inside. Outside rooms were also favored.*

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

- *Paying attention to the quality of light, encouraging light without seeing the light fixture.*
- *Skill in the handling of proportion, scale, materials and detail.”*

While these characteristics are said to describe excellent midcentury modern design and the International Style in general, most of these characteristics also define Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s overall body of work, including the American Life Building late in his career, which was one of his last designs before his death in August 1969.

Mies’ Career Trail

Appointed in 1930 by Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was the third and last director of Bauhaus in Germany. The political environment at the time made it difficult to maintain the architecture school, and even after moving it from Weimar to Berlin in 1930, the Bauhaus was eventually shuttered in 1933.

After Mies came to the United States in the late 1930s, he began a lengthy stint at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago, working on the campus master plan. “Mies’ plan for the IIT campus was one of the largest projects he ever conceived and he developed it for twenty years. Today the campus contains 20 of his works, including the famous Crown Hall [built in 1956, photo below], which add up to be “the greatest concentration of Mies-designed buildings in the world.”¹¹

More background history on Mies can be found in the National Register / National Historic Landmark nomination for S.R. Crown Hall (NRIS #01001049 – author Eric D. Thompson, listed in August 2001).



S. R. Crown Hall, ca. 1956. Photo from MiesSociety.org

S.R. Crown Hall is recognized as a National Historic Landmark, and the entire Mies-designed IIT campus (26 buildings) was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2005:

*Mies himself considered S.R. Crown Hall to be the clearest statement of his philosophy of a universal building type, which was associated with what has come to be called the "International Style." **However, within this architectural style, there is a complete and***

¹¹ “IIT Master Plan and Buildings,” ArchDaily.com

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

*distinct genre and style more precisely known as "Miesian", due to its very specific synthesis of technology, materials, detailing and design. Crown Hall is the epitome of both.*¹²

Peter Carter, in his book Mies van der Rohe at Work, explains this combination of elements in the Crown Hall design, stating that it “represents the first large-scale realization of Mies van der Rohe’s concept for a clear-span / universal space building.”¹³

The encyclopedia at the Chicago Architecture Center defines clear-span construction as a “building design approach in which large interior spaces are created without the need for intermediate supporting columns or walls,” and defines universal space as the “design concept of creating open, flexible, and adaptable interior spaces that can accommodate a wide range of activities and uses.”¹⁴

Carter goes on to describe the specific building types favored by Mies:

*Mies van der Rohe believed that, from the standpoint of function, a building should satisfy two important considerations: First, it should provide an optimum solution to the client’s needs; and second, it should allow individuals the freedom to arrange their working and living spaces as they wish. He was convinced that a direct relationship existed between a general functional category, its overall space requirements and the structural system which could provide these. For this reason the majority of his buildings fall into one of three distinct types: (1) The high-rise skeleton frame building; (2) The low-rise skeleton frame building; (3) The single-storey [sic] clear-span building.*¹⁵

Mies’ clear span buildings are further grouped into categories based on the roof structure and size. Farnsworth House has a “rectangular roof plane supported between perimeter columns”; Crown Hall has a “rectangular roof plane attached to the underside of exposed trusses or bents”; and the third category is based on a square roof structure with an orthogonal grid of perimeter supports.¹⁶

Some of this third category were proposals or designs that were unbuilt. The Bacardi Office Building in Mexico City, while expressing rectangular massing instead of a square form, was built in reference to a previous square roof plan drawing for an unbuilt design for Bacardi in Santiago de Cuba. The Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, Germany, expresses this square roof structure with eight perimeter columns, set in the center of the facades and not on the corners. The design of the American Life Building takes the square form vertically, with multiple stories and twelve perimeter columns instead of eight. Some of Mies’ completed low-rise building designs in the 1960s can be seen in Table 1, with late career high-rise buildings in Table 2. All building photos, dates, and locations were taken from MiesSociety.org, a website established by the Illinois Institute of Technology College of Architecture. The photo for the American Life Building in Table 1 is credited to PRG Commercial Property Advisors, and the photo for the Toronto-Dominion Centre in Table 2 is from Wikipedia.

¹² “S.R. Crown Hall,” National Historic Landmark nomination form, 2001.

¹³ Carter, Peter. *Mies van der Rohe at Work*, p. 87

¹⁴ Architecture.org, Chicago Architecture Center, definitions.

¹⁵ Carter, p. 110

¹⁶ Carter, p.81

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Table 1: Low-rise Building Designs by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the 1960s

LOW-RISE SKELETON FRAME	
	
Home Federal Savings & Loan Assoc. (office) 3 stories, recessed lobby, square form, colonnade (1962: Des Moines, Iowa – NRHP, 2016)	Meredith Memorial Hall at Drake University 2 stories, rectangular mass (1965: Des Moines, Iowa)
	
Richard King Mellon Hall at Duquesne University 4 stories, recessed lobby, rectangular mass, colonnade (1965: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)	Westmount Square shopping concourse 3 stories, recessed lobby, rectangular mass (1967: Montreal, Quebec, Canada)
SQUARE PLAN ROOF STRUCTURE PRECEDENTS – NO CORNER COLUMNS	
	
Bacardi Office Building (based on earlier Cuba design) 2 stories, recessed lobby, rectangular mass, colonnade (1961: Mexico City, Mexico)	Neue Nationalgalerie (gallery) 1 story, recessed lobby, square form, colonnade (1968: Berlin, Germany)
LOW-RISE BUILDINGS DESIGNED BY MIES BUT COMPLETED AFTER HIS DEATH	
	
Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library 4 stories, recessed lobby, rectangular mass (1972: Washington, DC – NRHP, 2007)	American Life & Accident Insurance Co. (office) 6 stories, recessed lobby, square form, colonnade (1973: Louisville, Kentucky)

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Even while his low-rise buildings shared similar design characteristics, Mies also continued to design high-rise skeleton-frame buildings reminiscent of his seminal 1958 bronze Seagram Building in New York City late in his career (listed on National Register in 2006). Five buildings, recognized as being designed by Mies, were completed by his office after his death in August 1969:

- 1969: Toronto-Dominion Centre, Canada (high-rise)
- 1970: One Illinois Center, Chicago (high-rise)
- 1972: Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC (low-rise; NRHP, 2007)
- 1973: IBM Plaza, Chicago (high-rise; NRHP, 2009)
- 1973: American Life & Accident Insurance Co., Louisville, KY (mid-rise)**

Table 2: High-rise Building Designs by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the 1960s

				
Seagram Building, New York City 1958; bronze cladding	Chicago Federal Ctr., Chicago 1964; painted steel	Toronto-Dominion Centre, Canada (1 st 2 towers) 1967, '69 ; painted steel [Photo: Wikipedia]	One Illinois Center, Chicago 1970 ; bronze-anodized aluminum cladding	IBM Building, Chicago 1973 ; bronze-anodized aluminum cladding

History of Riverfront Plaza / Belvedere: Louisville Redevelopment & Urban Renewal

This section was written by Joanne Weeter (2015) and edited by Jessica McCarron (2024).

By the time Mies had accepted the commission for the American Life Building in 1969 and began initial plans, just a few months before his death, a long history of redevelopment was already unfolding in downtown Louisville. The site of the American Life Building was right at the center.

The plan to redevelop Louisville's waterfront in the 1950s and 1960s was hailed by civic officials and citizens alike as a return to the city's Ohio River roots. The plan for the redevelopment was entwined with the popularization of the skyscraper and the refinement of the modern style of architecture in the city of Louisville.

American Life's property was in the middle of the discussion of the redevelopment of Louisville's waterfront. The property sat squarely on Lot #1 of the City plat of Louisville on what had been a

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

mound constructed by Native Americans. Ruben Durett, in *Centenary History of Louisville*, saw this mound as “probably what determined the beginning of lot numbering in the city.” (*Durrett, the Centenary History of Louisville, 1892*).

Long after the Native American mound had been removed, The Keller Building, a multistory masonry office building designed by C. D. Meyer and dating from 1901, had stood on lot #1 at the northeast corner of Fifth and Main Streets. The American Life and Accident Insurance Company, under the leadership of Dinwiddie Lampton, Sr., acquired this building during the Stock Market Crash of 1929 when an acquaintance met hard times and had to sell his assets. As the years passed, American Life personnel had amassed as many as 14 separate lots adjacent to the Keller Building with an eye to building something bigger and better on the lot. That foresight put them in an excellent position when there was talk of redeveloping Louisville’s waterfront into a Riverfront Plaza/Belvedere. (*Samuel Thomas Papers, 1963-2012, University of Louisville Archives Collection Subseries: Modern Contemporary Architecture Schickli houses thru Civic Center, Box 126, item number #73. American Life and Accident Building Bruno Conterato Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe firm 1971-1973. Second Renaissance Revival thru Sullivan-esque, Box 120, item number #67. Keller Building 1901 C.D. Meyer, architect*).



Ca. 1963, Keller Bldg at left before clearance.



Ca. 2024, same view today. All buildings post-1970.

On April 12, 1970, *Courier-Journal and Louisville Times* Urban Affairs Editor, Don Ridings, outlined the nearly 50-year effort to remove blight and industry from Louisville’s wharf area at the Ohio River near Fifth Street. It was a reminder to the newspaper readers that city fathers no longer viewed Broadway as the one and only center of Louisville’s financial, civic, and artistic activities. It was a reminder of the ongoing and arduous effort to reclaim the city’s River roots. The *Courier-Journal* article began with the paragraph, “... the hiss-thump, hiss-thump of the pile drivers has replaced the glib promise, and the bullying growl of dirt moving bulldozers has superseded the rustle of yet another discarded paper plan. Dirt is moving, and concrete is being poured on the Riverfront project between Fourth and Sixth Streets. The new sounds are sounds of building, not planning and argument. The new shapes are of things going up, not being torn down.” (*Ridings, Don. “Progress Report on the Riverfront.” The Courier-Journal, April 12, 1970, section H*).

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Accompanying this April 12, 1970, *Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times* article was a sidebar chronology with photographs of how the Louisville Riverfront project had evolved over the years. What follows is the text from that sidebar, titled “How Plans Have Changed over 40 Years” :

1930	Plans for a Louisville Riverfront project began 40 years ago when Harlan Bartholomew, a city planning consultant of St. Louis, proposed this park-on-the-River scheme, backed by high-rise buildings.
1957	27 years later, Bartholomew came back with this design proposal for the Louisville Riverfront. Architectural drawings of the stores, office buildings and roads were superimposed on [the] photo.
1962	This is how the Reynolds Aluminum Service Corporation envisioned the Riverfront in its 1962 proposal. The marina had been added to a version released a year earlier. Doxiades and Associates was the architect. Reynolds, then joined by G. E. [General Electric], quit the project in 1967.
1965	Two years before Reynolds pulled out of the project altogether, its plan for a Marina already had been eliminated, because of costs, and it had returned to a “shelf” concept: a larger and more elaborate version of the Belvedere now being built for viewing [the] River.
1968	The artist’s sketch prepared in 1968 for the Riverfront commission proposed a Belvedere with a performing arts center at left, just east of Fourth Street. The center has never materialized. Next to the center, from left are the new hotel being built, new Louisville Trust Company Building, a proposed New American Life and Accident Insurance Company Building and proposed apartments.

(*Ridings, Don. “Progress Report on the Riverfront.” Courier-Journal, Apr. 12, 1970, Section H*)

The waterfront redevelopment was to be a public-private partnership. Individual businesses and corporations were to work alongside officials from the City of Louisville to develop a plan that would return the rough city wharf area and the railroad tracks adjacent to the river into a welcoming public space that could be enjoyed by all. As city leaders and urban planners hashed out the details of what this new modern Riverfront Plaza/Belvedere would look like, the American Life and Accident Insurance Company owners were pondering the design of their new corporate headquarters. The first iteration was a 12-story tower designed by a local architecture firm.

As early as 1964, it was announced that the local architectural firm of Arrasmith and Judd had been selected to design a new 12-story home-office building for the American Life and Accident Insurance Company. Dinwiddie Lampton, Jr., president of American Life, made clear in the article that the design for the project was “preliminary and subject to adjustments to fit into the overall development plan of the adjacent Reynolds Metals company project.” Mr. Lampton went on to say that “we want to build whatever best fits with the Reynolds design”. The text of the article continues by giving a thorough description of the preliminary design. “If carried out, in final design, this would give Louisville its first building with such a dramatic entry to a contemporary building.” With this new building, as well as the Reynolds high-rise office tower also close to the present Bullitt Street, Main Street will have its first new skyscrapers since the 1880s when the Columbia Building rose to what were once considered unprecedented heights.” (*“American Life Reveals Design for New Office.” The Courier-Journal, February 16, 1964, section 5*)

History of the American Life & Accident Insurance Company Building

This section was written by Joanne Weeter (2015) and edited by Jessica McCarron (2024).

Nancy “Nana” Lampton, the granddaughter of Dinwiddie Lampton, Sr., started working at American Life in 1966. She became its chairman in 1971 and has continued in that role to this day. Nana attended college at Wellesley in the early 1960s and studied art and art history under Teresa

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Frisch (Asian and Middle Eastern Art History) and Curtis Schell (Italian Renaissance). On a summer study abroad to Florence, Rome, and ultimately to Berlin, she gained a wider appreciation of art and architecture. (*Personal email correspondence between Joanne Weeter and Nana Lampton, September 24, 2015*).

By 1969, Ms. Lampton had a discussion with her father, Dinwiddie Lampton, Jr., and together they decided that the design for a 12-story office building designed by Louisville architects Arrasmith and Judd might not be the architectural solution they sought for their corporate headquarters. She believed that the American Life Building was a key component of the Riverfront Plaza/Belvedere redevelopment and would have a major impact on the urban landscape as originally conceived by world-famous urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis. Both daughter and father agreed that a change in direction was necessary.

Interestingly, Mies' Seagram Building in New York City was inspired by another father-daughter relationship. In 1953, the daughter of Seagram's distilling empire founder, Samuel Bronfman, was persuaded by his 26-year-old daughter Phyllis Lambert, to hire an architect worthy of real merit for its proposed headquarters building. After a lengthy design review of architects that included luminaries such as Eero Saarinen, Marcel Breuer, Pietro Belluschi, Walter Gropius, Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, I. M. Pei, Minoru Yamasaki, and Frank Lloyd Wright, Lambert, working alongside Philip Johnson, narrowed her options down to Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. Lambert eventually settled on Mies. He immediately hired Philip Johnson and "put him in charge of much of the interior work." (*A Personal Stamp on the Skyline: a Determined Daughter Helped Shape the Seagram's Building,* *New York Times, Arts and Architecture Section, April 7, 2013, P. 23*)

A 1972 article in *Louisville Magazine* explained that American Life Insurance Company President, Dinwiddie Lampton, Jr. was persuaded by his daughter, Nana Lampton, chairman of the board, to ask an eminent architect who had impressed her with his modernist style and design expertise. Ms. Lampton had selected Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and had made her wishes known to her father. The Lamptons asked Mies to respect the setting for the American Life Building in his design.



Ludwig Mies van der Rohe



Bruno Conterato

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

According to *Louisville Magazine* in 1972, Dinwiddie Lampton, Jr., stated: “Frankly I didn’t expect an architectural firm of such international stature to be interested in such a building... When they were, I accepted their professional guidance entirely... So I told [Bruno] Conterato directly how much money we could spend and asked him to put an appropriate building on the site. He’s done it.” The magazine goes on to state that Conterato believed that:

*[D]esigning a small building may not be financially profitable to the firm, but it’s worth undertaking if there’s a chance—as there is in Louisville—to make it architecturally significant... **It’s an advantage for us to do a building in such a prominent location. As for size, sometimes a low building - or even an underground building - is a good solution for preserving an open space. There’s no question that buildings cannot be put up as separate entities; there must be respect for their surroundings.***

The *Louisville Magazine* article goes on to state that Conterato and his team of architects viewed their subject property within the context of the entire Riverfront development and considered all structures that were located within a block of the site so that they might develop a building that was contextually a good fit:

*This will be a small building on a site that, from a zoning point of view, could easily have been five times as tall or quite a bit wider... **But as we developed the program, it became evident that the needs of our client didn’t point to a large building and that a low roofline would serve as a counterpoint to the 40-story First National Bank across Main Street and give a new human scale to the whole downtown Riverfront. It will link Main Street with -rather than obstructing it from - the Riverfront...** We wanted to come up with something that would be very strong architecturally—not a sawed-off building but one that could hold its own in design and proportion... The view from the River will be great—a progression of heights from the shore to the Belvedere to the American Life to [the] First National Tower.*

The article finishes with Bruno Conterato recalling Mies’ intent for the building: “We’d like to think the American Life and Accident Building will carry out the philosophy of Mies van der Rohe, **applying modern technology to the interpretation of a fine architectural solution...** It’s like poetry—the essence is not in the use of tremendously complicated words but in the care in which words are used.” (“*Mies Van Der Rohe on Riverfront: American Life Picks High Style Lowrise,*” *Louisville Magazine*, February 1972)

Local Accolades for the American Life Building

The academic and historic preservation communities recognized the architectural merit of the American Life Building almost immediately after construction was completed in 1973. William Morgan, architectural critic for the *Courier-Journal* and Professor of Architectural History and Design at the University of Louisville, working with a graduate-level class, produced a brochure in 1975, listing Louisville’s 15 most important works of contemporary architecture. The building was included and ranked #1 as most significant. In the introduction to the “New Architecture in Louisville” brochure in 1975, Morgan summarized Louisville’s architectural context:

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Architecturally, Louisville is somewhat conservative. New buildings do not usually represent avantgarde styles (with some notable exceptions, particularly the work of the firm of Jasper Ward). Rather, new buildings in Louisville are refinements of new styles pioneered elsewhere. Louisville's rich architectural heritage from the 19th century is well-known and generally appreciated, so it is hoped that this small sampling—purposefully subjective and necessarily incomplete—will interest Louisvillians and visitors alike in the buildings that contribute to the fabric of the city and which will be tomorrow's landmarks.

In 1979, Morgan published *Louisville: Architecture and the Urban Environment*, based on articles he had written for the *Courier-Journal* in a Sunday column, "The Urban Environment." Morgan contrasted the effect of the huge National City Tower, a glass-wall skyscraper which:

[O]wes its genesis in large part to Mies van der Rohe, one of the major figures of 20th-century design, and yet Mies's own American Life and Accident Building on the Belvedere is only five stories tall. American Life, which is one of his last works, represents the essence of Mies's teaching, for this utterly simple structure is merely a box. As its walls are replaced entirely by window space, the building is defined primarily by its 12 supporting columns. This simplicity is deceptive however, for the architect who said "I don't want to be interesting, I want to be good," has created an exceptionally handsome building that is of great interest. Using the Belvedere as a podium, and by raising the upper stories so that the building seems to float, Mies has produced what is virtually a classical Temple. The sheltered area formed by the recessed ground-floor echoes the pavilions of the Belvedere and becomes a natural extension of those human-scaled spaces.

The American Life Building continues to be heralded as a local architectural achievement. In 2014, Kentucky Educational Television (KET) celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the Kentucky Chapter of the American Institute of Architects with an award: 10 Buildings That Changed Louisville. The American Life and Accident Insurance Company of Kentucky Building was on that list, only one of two modern buildings recognized (*The "Ten Buildings That Changed Louisville" spotlights history of the city's most iconic buildings; 2014 September 22*).

Bruno Conterato, in a letter dated June 7, 1976 (on letterhead of his firm at the time: Fujikawa, Conterato, Lohan and Associates), suggested the American Life Building to a large national company potentially looking for office space in Louisville:

While we are proud of our accomplishments, in many cases because of the scope of work, it is seldom that we can look at a more limited project with equal or greater pride. The American Life Building was one of those rare opportunities, in which the location, the surrounding amenities, and the project itself all combine to make it exceptional... centered in what has become the focal point of Louisville's downtown area.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Bruno Conterato, the Office of Mies van der Rohe, and the owners of the American Life & Accident Insurance Company of Kentucky all played a part in the design of the American Life Building. The building is a landmark to the city's downtown redevelopment plan in the mid-twentieth century and sits in a prominent position as an icon to modernist aesthetics of

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

corporate office towers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It remains an important part of the central business district landscape in downtown Louisville.

Evaluation of the Architectural Significance of the American Life Building within its Architectural Context

The American Life Building is an architecturally significant expression of Modernism and of Mies van der Rohe's design work. The combination of the relatively short building placed on a special civic space became a successful pattern of Modernist creations. Modernism consciously and proudly broke from the aesthetic rules that had dominated urban design in all the years before it that Kentucky existed. Prior to Modernism, styles came into fashion and were displaced by new styles, but there was a visual continuity among all styles, as architects drew upon the elements of ancient historical buildings. Modernist architects sought a new way of constructing a visually pleasing building whose beauty did not depend upon reference to historical style elements. Architects in this mode attempted to create an ideal version of a building whose aesthetics were satisfying on their own terms, whose effect did not depend upon their coherence with nearby buildings. This aesthetic could be called "acontextual." Mies has been cited as one of the most successful to work out this new vision for a beautiful building. His vision, and that of other Modern masters, prevailed until the 1980s, when postmodern architecture arose as a challenge to this aesthetic of self-referential design.

The similarities in Mies' 1960s low- and high-rise modern buildings are clear: clean grid lines of glass and steel, recessed lobbies, geometric and symmetrical massing, and massive support columns around the perimeter that form a colonnade. The buildings are all thoughtfully set within a surrounding plaza or on the corner of an intersection, many with deliberate, planned setbacks from the street. The careful placement of each building within its own site became the design dialog with which a building was judged. The communication between building and its immediate context, was the measure of its aesthetic success, rather than how well it co-existed with or complemented the buildings that surrounded it. The American Life Building succeeds in that dialog with itself, between the building and its Belvedere site.

The American Life Building is more compact than those that surround it, designed in a near cubic form instead of a rectangular box. It is taller than some of Mies' later low-rise buildings. It resembles the ca. 1962 Home Federal Savings & Loan Association building in Iowa with its massing and colonnade, but is several stories taller.

Mies' inspiration and initial design for the American Life Building was respected even as his associate, Bruno Conterato, carried out final plans and overseeing construction. Some of Conterato's influence is likely a part of how it looks today. While Mies' later designs – also finished after his death – incorporated the use of cladding instead of painted steel (i.e., bronze-anodized aluminum on both the ca. 1970 One Illinois Center and the ca. 1973 IBM Building), the American Life Building used Cor-Ten spandrel panels. As discussed earlier, the spandrel panels were installed differently on the midrise building than they had been applied on larger projects. Eliminating the vertical supports as seen on other low-rise buildings, the eye is drawn to the horizontality of the glass alternating with the steel bands on the American Life Building.

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Evaluation of the Integrity of the Architectural Significance of the American Life & Accident Insurance Co. of Kentucky Building

*The National Park Service defines historic integrity as “the ability of a property to convey its significance”¹⁷ and also recognizes that “all properties change over time.”¹⁸ This nomination claims the property meets **Criterion C**, significant for architecture as a corporate office building designed in the International, Miesian style. Section 8 will go into more detail on Mies’ career and the American Life Building within his overall body of work.*

The American Life Building is a significant example of a period and type of design, specifically the late career of modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Mies work is so prolific, so defining, and regarded so highly that it is regarded here as a type of construction. It is possible to conceive his work within a wider type, that of all Modernism and International style. The integrity judgments on the American Life Building would likely be much the same within either typology.

Integrity of **Location** and **Setting** are retained. The American Life Building has not been moved from its original site and the building is in its original location within the larger Riverfront Plaza / Belvedere master plan developed in the 1970s. The American Life Building’s intra-site setting is an integral and important part of the overall Modernist design of the property. The building and Belvedere together played a role in local efforts to revitalize the waterfront. It was carefully sited with the other planned buildings and green space that surrounds it, and it continues to serve as a gateway for visitors and residents to access views of the river from the downtown Main Street.

The American Life Building is still owned by the company responsible for its initial construction, and great care has been taken to continue the architectural and aesthetic concepts that are in keeping with its core Miesian architectural values. Integrity of **Design** – which focuses on physical form, plan, structure, and style – is retained. The size and siting of the building was thoughtfully planned as a step down from the taller towers around it and to also provide a viewshed through the plaza to the river. Since ornamentation is minimal in buildings of the International Style, the building’s geometric shape and cube-like symmetrical form, steel skeleton structure, and glass curtain walls announce modernist characteristics for the period in which it was built as a departure from traditional architecture. The recessed, glassed-wall lobby provides a lightness to the massing while also inviting the outside in, as viewed from the interior. Organization of space in the surrounding plaza continues into the interior with a transparent lobby and open office floor plans for versatility and flexibility. **Workmanship** is retained and is visible in the way the modern building was constructed, with steel and glass composing a grid on the exterior, and mechanicals and utilities concentrated in a central core on the interior. Mies was concerned with the design flexibility of the inside of his buildings as well as the outside and his innovative influences can still be experienced.

Because the original Cor-Ten steel exterior did not weather as envisioned by client and architect, the exterior steel was cleaned and sealed with a tinted acrylic coating of Sher-Cryl in 2004 to

¹⁷ How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, Bulletin 15, p. 44

¹⁸ Best Practices Review, Issue 9, Sept. 2024: “Assessing Integrity, Not Condition”

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

protect the metal from uneven deterioration and to prevent rust runoff from discoloring the windows and the masonry upon which the building rests. The integrity of **Materials** is diminished, but the American Life Building still reads as a Miesian design due to the use of structural steel frame and large glass panels. The use of Cor-Ten was an experiment that didn't work out as anticipated, and the owners consulted with Cor-Ten experts for a reversible, protective solution. The color of the material is different, but Cor-Ten in and of itself is a material that changes in color over time. If necessary, in the future, applications of the Sher-Cryl coating may opt for a darker brown color to more closely emulate the aged patina of Cor-Ten. The overall physical characteristics of the building's design and materials still convey their significance as a Miesian example of corporate modernism.

Integrity of **Feeling** and **Association** are retained since the "overall sense of past time and place"¹⁹ are maintained. The building communicates its professional identity as a downtown office building, and the company that built it still maintains its headquarters in the building. The area on the north side of Main Street between 3rd and 6th Streets was literally rebuilt from the ground up after urban renewal made its way through the business corridor. All of the buildings that surround the American Life Building are post-1970 and tell a story of the city's determination to transform a portion of downtown in a modern way for future use. The planning process took decades with many changes, and the current streetscape evokes this vision of rebuilding the area with office towers, a major hotel, a cultural center, and park-like community gathering space that continues to draw residents, workers, and visitors to downtown and the river.

¹⁹ How to Complete the National Register Registration Form, Bulletin 16A, p. 4.

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

9. Major Bibliographical References

Brake, Alan G. "New coating for Mies building ruffles feathers," *Architectural Record*; New York. Vol. 192, Iss. 12, (Dec 2004): 42. Accessed online via ProQuest.

Carter, Peter. Mies van der Rohe at Work. London: Pall Mall Press, 1974.

Courier-Journal (Louisville, KY) newspaper articles, accessed online via ProQuest:

1973 Apr. 27: "Problem delays a riverfront building." (Joan Riehm)

1970 Apr. 12: "Progress Report on the Riverfront" (Don Ridings)

Louisville Magazine article, Feb. 1972

Morgan, William. "Louisville: Architecture and the Urban Environment." Dublin, N.H: W.L. Bauhan, 1979.

Welton, J. Michael. "Matters of Design: Thoroughbred Architecture" *Interior Design*, May 2006.

National Park Service. *Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places* forms:

- National Historic Landmark: "S. R. Crown Hall (Chicago, IL)." Eric D. Thompson. Listed 2001. NRIS #01001049.
- "Illinois Institute of Technology Academic Campus (Chicago, IL)." Mark Kasprzyk and Douglas Gilbert. Listed 2005. NRIS #05000871.
- "Martin Luther King Memorial Library (Washington, DC)." Kim Williams, Anne Brockett, Emily Paulus. Listed 2007. NRIS #07001102.
- "University of Louisville Library (Louisville, Kentucky). Gail R. Gilbert. Listed 2013. NRIS #13000561.

Websites, informational:

- ArchDaily.com "AD Classics: IIT Master Plan and Buildings / Mies van der Rohe." Entry written by Adelyn Perez.
- Architecture.org – Chicago Architecture Center
- CorTen.com "What is Corten Weathering Steel?"
- GreenRoofs.com "American Life & Accident Insurance Company"
- MiesSociety.org
- NipponSteel.com "Weathering Steel Cor-Ten"
- SAH-Archipedia.org "American Life and Accident Insurance Company of Kentucky Building." Entry written by Cristina Carbone.

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

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 # _____
 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: University of Louisville Archives & Special Collections

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): JFL-6

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.097 acres

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

1. Latitude: 38.257338 Longitude: -85.757800

Verbal Boundary Description

The property proposed for this listing corresponds to the Jefferson County Property Valuation Administrator parcel ID 015E00200000. This parcel corresponds to the address 471 West Main Street. The entire American Life & Accident Insurance Company Building and all the land historically associated with it is proposed for listing.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the building and the plaza that has been historically associated with the property, which immediately surrounds it.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Jessica Jewell McCarron, MHP / Historic Project Manager
organization: Weyland Ventures
street & number: 815 W. Market St. #110
city or town: Louisville state: KY zip code: 40202
e-mail: Jessica@WeylandVentures.com

American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

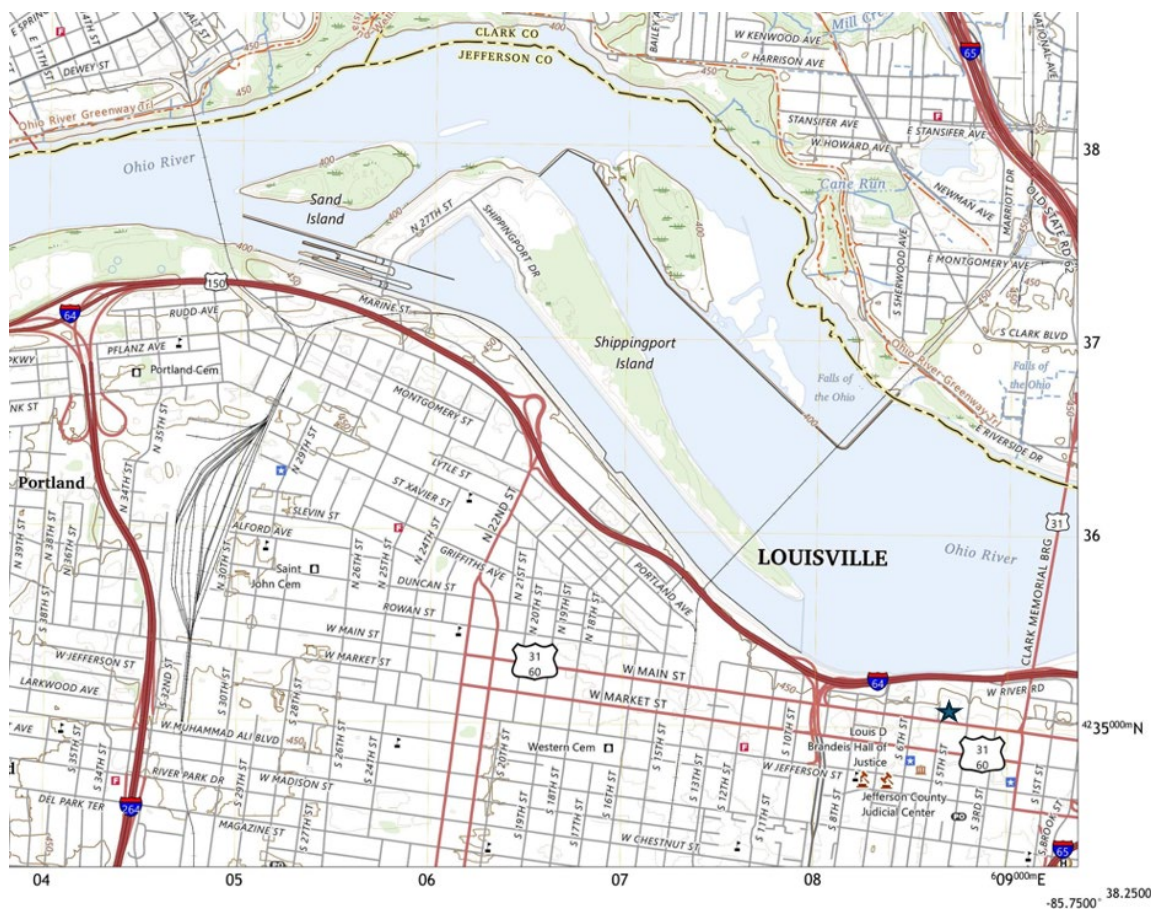
Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Revisions and additions for the 2024 form were made to a previous nomination that was submitted to the state and NPS in late 2015. Research and descriptions, some of which has been retained in the 2024 submission, were prepared by:

name/title: Joanne Weeter
organization: Historic Preservation Consultant
city or town: Louisville state: KY zip code: 40207

Additional Documentation

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location. The American Life building is located at the star in the lower right corner.



American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
Name of Property

Jefferson, Kentucky
County and State

Photographs/Photo Log

Name of Property: American Life & Accident Insurance Co. Building
City or Vicinity: Louisville
County: Jefferson
State: Kentucky
Photographer: Jessica Jewell McCarron
Date Photographed: July 2024

Photo 0001: Exterior; looking northeast from across Main Street
Photo 0002: Exterior; looking northwest from sidewalk towards front facade
Photo 0003: Exterior; looking northeast from walkway to Belvedere
Photo 0004: Exterior; looking southeast from Belvedere towards rear facade
Photo 0005: Exterior; looking north from building towards Ohio River
Photo 0006: Interior; lobby, looking out towards Main Street
Photo 0007: Interior; lobby, central elevator core
Photo 0008: Interior; typical upper office floor
Photo 0009: Interior; fifth floor boardroom / library
Photo 0010: Interior; fifth floor boardroom / library
Photo 0011: Interior; sixth floor penthouse, looking north towards Ohio River