

## EQUITABLE BUILDING: CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT'S ITALIAN RENAISSANCE REVIVAL BEAUTY

### How do you think this building reflects Denver's economic prosperity during the Silver Boom?

The Equitable Assurance Society of New York built the Equitable Building at the end of the pre-Silver Crash boom, in 1892. The building served as the company's western office and attracted other financial concerns to 17th Street and the Central Business District. By 1893, it was home for Colorado's executive offices during construction of the State Capitol. The city's leading law firms, the First National Bank of Denver and the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad all moved in shortly after the 1893 grand opening. By 1920, the leading stockbrokers were here. People often visited to watch the Equitable Building's ticker tape (Barlow).

### Structure

The Equitable Building, designed by Andrews, Jaques and Rantoul, an architectural firm founded in Boston in 1885, was laid out in the shape of two "E's" laid back to back, and thus features lightwells that provide natural light to most offices. The exterior has a pinkish-gray Colorado granite base on the first two floors and pressed brick above. The building does not have a steel frame skeleton. The huge granite blocks of the first two stories support seven additional stories. The architects employed as much Classical embellishment as possible, including dentils, egg and dart molding and a bound acanthus. The fifth floor Palladian window and balcony are adorned with nude cherubs or amorini (Italian for little loved ones). Terra cotta from the Denver Terra Cotta Company is used for courses between floors and on the elaborate cornice. The banding helps separate the upper floors into successive horizontal wedding cake layers (Voelz Chandler, 2013).

The interior is one of the most beautiful in the city: it seems Equitable wanted nothing but the best. Marble from France, Italy, Vermont and Tennessee enhance the interior. The lobby is illuminated by a tripartite Tiffany window and elegant chandeliers, and is lined with buttery yellow marble, deep-red marble floors, marble pillars and a glass mosaic lined groin vault ceiling. The grand bronze staircase leads to a landing with a spectacular Tiffany stained glass window, "The Genius of Insurance," in which the Equitable Company, represented by Minerva, the Greek goddess of protection, comforts a bereft widow and orphan (Barlow).

Although the building opened to great acclaim, property values declined after the 1893 crash. Equitable rents did not reach pre-crash prices until 1902. In 1908, William Barth, president of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, purchased the building for \$1.3 million. Ownership changed two more times prior to the effects of the Great Depression, and in 1934 the owners defaulted on a \$50,000 loan and the structure went into foreclosure. Charlotte Barth Howell, granddaughter of the previous owner William Barth, purchased the building for \$950,000. The building changed owners in 1956, 1962, and 1968, each time selling for about \$2.5 million.

### Renovation

A Canadian-based company purchased the building in 1977 and restored it to its 1893 grandeur. This included a \$2 million renovation in 1980 that installed central air conditioning, restored the exterior and replaced the original revolving doors. Denver's St. Charles Town Company purchased the building

October of 2000 and began converting the structure to office condominiums. In the first year the company spent about \$5.5 million to “polish” the building. Company founder and CEO Charles Woolley II, a former director of Four Mile House Museum, took a special interest in making the Equitable shine as a first class restoration.

### **Neighborhood**

The neighborhood consists of 43 buildings identified as architecturally or historically significant and worthy of preservation. Many of the buildings were built in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and feature elaborate designs reflective of their original uses as banks, hotels and office buildings. These buildings create a stunning contrast to the glassy modern towers that surround them, provide the framework for the urban fabric of downtown and greatly enrich the pedestrian and visual experience of the Central Business District.

### **References**

Barlow, K. *The Equitable: Denver’s Grand Old Office Building, Spirits and Scandals at 17<sup>th</sup> and Stout Streets*. Retrieved from <http://www.barryengel.com/equitable-building>.

Voelz Chandler, M. 2013. *Guide to Denver Architecture*. Denver: Fulcrum Group.