



COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT MEMO REPORT OF FINDINGS FOR CERTIFICATE OF DEMOLITION ELIGIBILITY

May 8, 2021

Address: 1565 Colorado Blvd.

Legal Description: COLFAX AVE PARK SUB 02364 B24 L32 TO 46 INC

Current Building Name: Royal Palace Motel

Construction Date: 1969

Source of Information: Denver Assessor's Office; Sanborn Insurance Maps 1962 (corrected to 1967); *Denver Post*

Architectural

Architectural Style: Motel/ International Style

Architect/Builder: Lee Kinnie Co.

Source of Information: *Denver Post*

Historical

Original owner: John T. Norton; Royal Host of Colorado, Inc.

Original use(s): Motel

Current use(s): Vacant

Historical background:

John T. Norton of Clarkson Development Co. announced plans for a new hotel at the intersection of Colorado Blvd. and E. Colfax Ave. in December 1967. The *Denver Post* featured a project description and showed conceptual drawings by architect Richard T. Crandall. The new \$2.3 million dollar, 300-unit hotel project would include "twin, eight-story helical structures containing the motel units, each with a lanai balcony. A conical 'gourmet lounge' would be suspended on an archway between the tops of the two motel towers." The project also included underground parking and a swimming pool.

Norton was born in North Dakota in 1926. He attended medical school at Northwestern University followed by an internship at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Norton then moved to Denver, establishing a medical practice. He was also well-known locally for his involvement in thoroughbred horse racing. Norton helped establish the Centennial Racetrack and was active in the Colorado Breeders Association and the Horseman's Benevolent & Protective Association.

The motel at Colorado Blvd. and Colfax Ave. appears to be Norton's first and only venture into real estate development. State records show that the Clarkson Development Company was incorporated in September 1967. The name appears to have come from Norton's residence

since he was living at 1901 Clarkson St. at this time. Assessor records show that Norton had purchased the land for the project earlier in 1967. The 1961 Sanborn Map show that prior to the development of the motel, this block of Colorado between Colfax and 16th was primarily single-family dwellings, with a filling station, office building, and apartment building located on the south end of the block. The 1967 Sanborn map update shows that the filling station had been expanded and the other structures on the block demolished.

Norton's 1967 proposal was much grander than what was eventually built. It is unknown why Norton's original concept fell through, but given the scale of the motel proposed, the budget and complex engineering were likely an issue. The original Expressionist proposal was replaced with an International Style motel. The revised design was greatly reduced in scale with a simple rectangular form that would have been much easier to construct. The Royal Palace Motel as constructed is much more typical of 1960s motel construction in general and motels along Colfax.

Royal Host of Colorado, Inc. appears to have taken over the motel project with a notice in the *Denver Post* from April 13, 1969 announcing that "a 70-unit Royal Host motel just north of E. Colfax on Colorado Blvd." was under construction. A *Denver Post* article about a trade union dispute from August 12, 1969 also describes Royal Host of Colorado, Inc. as the motel owner. However, no records of ownership transfer from Norton could be located. The Master Property Records do not show any ownership transfers after Norton's purchase. And the chain of title section of the Real Property Records for this address are blank. Newspaper and web searches were unable to uncover any additional information on Royal Host of Colorado. It seems likely that this company also operated the Royal Host Motel at 930 E. Colfax, constructed in 1966 and that this was built as a sister motel though this could not be documented. The permit for the Royal Palace Motel lists the cost as \$256,000 and the builder as Lee Kinnie Co. Based on a newspaper search, Lee Kinnie Co. were general contractors who primarily constructed custom homes. They had been active in Denver metro construction since the late 1950s.

The Royal Palace Motel opened in 1969 at the end of the golden era of motels along Colfax. The prominent role of motels along Colfax began declining with the construction of I-70 through Denver from 1964-1968. Tourists who had previously driven Colfax Ave. through Denver now had the option to bypass central Denver and continue to the mountains or to stay at new chain hotels established along I-70. However, development along E. Colfax in Denver continued during the 1960s including the Royal Host Motel at 930 E. Colfax in 1966, a White Spot at 601 E Colfax in 1967, and the Royal Palace Motel in 1969. The location of the Royal Palace Motel at the intersection of Colfax and Colorado likely helped business since it could attract those traveling on Colfax Ave. as well as travelers exiting I-70 at Colorado Blvd. and heading south into central Denver.

Colfax Ave. began to get a seedier reputation as some of the businesses pushed out of downtown by urban renewal projects relocated to the Colfax Ave. corridor. In 1993, the *Denver Post* ran an article, "Colfax Ave—It's a 24-mile-long main street" discussing the challenges faced by Colfax Ave.:

The strip started to suffer when Interstate 70 was completed in 1965, taking away travelers and business. Then suburban malls sprang up, pulling away customers and department stores. The 1960s and 1970s also were the heyday of topless bars and sexually explicit theaters. Colfax became home to many of them. Denver razed blocks of

seedy shops on Larimer Street in 1967, and some of them were reborn on Colfax. Colfax became known as a crime-ridden street, and it has never been able to shake that image, renovation programs notwithstanding.

During the 1970s, there were fights between business owners and residents over signage along Colfax. In 1973, Capitol Hill United Neighbors (CHUN) began a campaign to eliminate flashing and moving signs. CHUN objected to the signs because “their ugliness contributes to the visual deterioration of the neighborhood and because they are wasteful of energy in a time when energy should only be used for necessary purposes.” The April 1975 issue of *The Urban Dweller* thanked the businesses that had changed their signs and called out those who still had flashing or moving signs. The Royal Palace Motel was among the later. A statement from Mr. Gilbert Goldstein, an attorney representing the Royal Palace Motel as well as the Broadway Plaza Motel, was included in the newsletter. According to Goldstein, these motel signs were not “garish and ugly, but on the contrary, in my view are quite attractive and perform a useful function.”

Despite Colfax’s decline, the intersection of Colfax Ave. and Colorado Blvd. remained among the busiest in the city, with Colfax Ave serving as a major traffic arterial through central Denver and Colorado Blvd. continuing to develop as one of Denver’s predominant commercial corridors as well as a link to the new residential areas developed in the southern part of Denver during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. As the reputation of Colfax Ave. declined many of the motels along Colfax shifted from serving tourists to locals in need of temporary housing. The motels also became associated with crime along the corridor including the unsolved murder of John Eggers at the Royal Palace Motel in 1998. The Royal Palace Motel closed in 2013.

In the past decade, there has been increasing interest in preserving the mid-century character of Colfax Ave., especially its Googie architecture, tourist motels, and neon signs. In 2012, the Save the Signs Facebook page was established to promote and preserve Colorado’s neon heritage. In 2014, Colorado Preservation, Inc. (CPI) placed the Neon Signs of Colfax on their Colorado’s Most Endangered Places List. According to CPI, “The mid-century neon signs on Colfax Avenue are a reminder of the corridor’s past life as the ‘Gateway to the Rockies.’ Elaborately designed and brightly lit signs lined Colfax Avenue as motels, restaurants and roadside attractions competed for the business of travelers. . . . These signs represent an era for Colfax Avenue that has long since passed, and should be preserved. The neon signs are iconic within the community and represent an important piece of Colorado history.” The Royal Palace Motel sign was one of the signs called out as important to preserve in the listing.

In the East Area Plan adopted in 2020, the following vision of what the Colfax corridor could look like in 2040 was presented: “Colfax Avenue has retained its unique, gritty character while evolving into a community destination and a gateway that celebrates recent arrivals who’ve come to call the East Area home. Renovated shopfront buildings, repurposed and fixed up motels, and distinctive neon signs intermingle with new mixed-income and mixed-use, multi-story buildings along the iconic street.”

Based on a search of History Colorado’s COMPASS database, there do not appear to have been any previous surveys of the Royal Palace Motel or evaluations for local, state, or national designation. However, a National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF) “Commercial Resources of the East Colfax Avenue Corridor” was written in 2009 which provides a context for the development of E. Colfax from Grant Street to Colorado Blvd. from the 1880s,

to 1968. MPDFs are context documents which serve as a basis for evaluating the National Register eligibility of related properties. It appears that 1968 was chosen as the end date for the MPDF since that is the year that the segment of I-70 through Denver was completed. However, since the Royal Palace Motel was opened in 1969, just a year after the completion of I-70, the MPDF provides relevant information to its evaluation. Though this staff report is evaluating for local rather than national significance, many of the criteria used for evaluation are similar. If the period of significance for the MPDF were extended to 1969, the Royal Palace Motel would meet the requirements for listing in the National Register of Historic Places outlined in it, eligible under A for Commerce and C for Architecture.

The MPDF does include the Royal Host Motel at 930 E. Colfax Ave. describing it as reflecting “International style architectural elements in its rectangular form, flat roof, cantilevered balconies forming hoods for balconies below, strong horizontal emphasis overlaid with vertical elements, and stacked floors.” Historic photos and post cards show that design of the Royal Host Motel was very similar to the Royal Palace. It was four and half stories tall with open balconies and an open elevator at the corner similar to that originally on the Royal Palace Motel. However, the Royal Host Motel has been substantially altered since the MPDF was written. Due to extensive remodeling, including the partial enclosure of the cantilevered balconies and application of stucco to the exterior, it has lost integrity and likely its eligibility for designation.

Additional context for evaluation was provided by the National Register nomination form for the Fountain Inn at 3015 E. Colfax. Constructed in 1959, the Fountain Inn is a four-story motel with a design influenced by the International Style. The Fountain Inn was listed on the National Register in 2020. According to the nomination:

The Fountain Inn is significant under Criterion A in the area of Commerce for its association with East Colfax Avenue’s development over time into one of Denver’s most important commercial corridors. As a luxury, 54-room motor hotel, with a restaurant component and 111 parking spaces, the Fountain Inn was a full-service hospitality business that supported tourists, travelers, and local residents by providing lodging and entertainment. The Fountain Inn is also significant under Criterion C in the area of Architecture as an excellent example of the Post- World War II Hotel/Motel Building type and a representative expression of Modern Movement architecture, specifically International Style design principles as applied to the motel type. The building represents local Colorado architect Aubrey B. Brelsford’s interpretation of the International Style, a popular style for commercial buildings constructed during the 1950s and 60s. Representative features of the style embodied by the Fountain Inn include the use of concrete, glass and steel; flat surfaces; symmetry; and repetition of geometric forms. The building’s rectangular form, simple massing, flat roof, pilotis, cantilevered open-air staircases, and minimalistic design details are also characteristic of the style, which emphasized volume over mass and eschewed decorative ornamentation.

According to Amy Unger, State and National Register Coordinator at History Colorado, “well-preserved examples of mid-century modern motels like the Fountain Inn are relatively rare along East Colfax, and oftentimes underappreciated. It is wonderful to see the historical and architectural importance of this property recognized and celebrated.”

The Royal Palace Motel contains many of the same features as the Royal Host Motel but is arguably more intact since it also retains its original signage. The Royal Palace Motel is also

perhaps a more representative example of the International Style as applied to multi-story motels since it includes cantilevered balconies. The Royal Palace Motel also features a more prominent location at a major intersection.

Source of Information: Denver Assessor's Office; 1929 Sanborn Map (corrected to 1961), 1962 Sanborn Map (corrected to 1967); Denver City Directories; Federal Census Records 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940; Denver householder's Directory and Street Avenue Guide 1924-1950; Denver building permits 1915-1955; *Denver Post*; *Westword*; *Denverite*; Denver East Area Plan; "America's Roadside Lodging: The Rise and Fall of the Motel" by Lori Henderson in *Historia* Spring 2010; "Commercial Resources of the East Colfax Avenue Corridor by Thomas H. Simmons and R. Laurie Simmons, 2009; Fountain Inn National Register Nomination by Christopher James Imbler, 2020.

Designation Eligibility Assessment

Landmark Designation Criteria:

A structure or district may be designated for preservation if, due to its significance, it meets the criteria listed in subsections (1), (2), and (3) below

(1) The structure or district maintains its integrity;

(2) The structure or district is more than 30 years old, or is of exceptional importance; and

(3) The structure or district meets at least 3 of the following 10 criteria:

- It has a direct association with a significant historic event or with the historical development of the city, state, or nation;
- It has direct and substantial association with a recognized person or group of persons who had influence on society;
- It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style or type;
- It is a significant example of the work of a recognized architect or master builder;
- It contains elements of design, engineering, materials, craftsmanship, or artistic merit which represent a significant innovation or technical achievement;
- It represents an established and familiar feature of the neighborhood, community or contemporary city, due to its prominent location or physical characteristics;
- It promotes understanding and appreciation of the urban environment by means of distinctive physical characteristics or rarity;
- It represents an era of culture or heritage that allows an understanding of how the site was used by past generations;

- It is a physical attribute of a neighborhood, community, or the city that is a source of pride or cultural understanding;
- It is associated with social movements, institutions, or patterns of growth or change that contributed significantly to the culture of the neighborhood, community, city, state, or nation.

Integrity: If a structure maintains its integrity, it may be designated for preservation.

- Has integrity
- Does not have integrity

Does the structure have potential for designation?

- Has potential for designation
- Does not have potential for designation

The Royal Palace Motel has the potential to meet three of the designation criteria:

First, the Royal Palace Motel embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of the mid-20th century motel type. It is a good example of the urban motel form influenced by the International Style. Urban motels are a variation of the mid-century motel type that are taller with a more compact design to fit with their location in more densely developed areas. The one to two-story design is replaced with four to five stories and U-shaped or other linear plans are replaced by a space-saving rectangular plan. The International Style was also more commonly used for taller motels in an urban setting.

Key features of the Royal Palace Motel include: exterior access to rooms from balconies, large parking lot, distinctive and highly visible signage featuring a crown, regular fenestration, exposed roof beams, and exposed stairs. The design is a simple interpretation of the International style, which favored utilitarianism and economy. Many characteristics of the International style – simple massing; flat roofs; smooth surfaces; lack of ornamentation; use of concrete, glass, and steel; and cantilevered balconies – are features of the motel building. The cantilevered balcony accessing the guest rooms maximized the size of the guest rooms within the building mass.

The word “motel” is a combination of “motor” and “hotel”. The motel form evolved along with popularity of automobile travel and in relationship to the road. The mid-century motel form developed in the 1940s and 1950s as the cabins of the tourist courts popular in the 1920s and 1930s were combined into a single structure. Motel units shared a common foundation as well as plumbing and air-conditioning which dramatically reduced construction costs. Motels featured exterior access to rooms, with elevated walkways to access upper-story rooms. Motel signage was key to capturing the attention of travelers, and at mid-century signs grew larger and more elaborate. According to Michael Karl Witzel, “Instead of the motel building, the sign became the main point of focus. And why not? Here were complex structures that were nothing less than architectural advertising sculpture, artful creations that became icons for America’s growing car

culture” (Witzel 2000, 155). The new motels were designed for comfort, convenience, and efficiency. Easy access from major roadways and parking adjacent to the motel room were key.

The 1960s were the heyday of motel construction in the U.S. “America’s Roadside Lodging: The Rise and Fall of the Motel” provides a good summary:

A July 1960 *New York Times* headline read, “150 New Motels Planned in 6 Months” in the United States. 33 By October 1960, the *Times* declared that “209 Motels Started” in the United States; clearly bypassing the plans for 150 earlier that year. . . . Motels, a form born on the rural roadside, were no longer being restricted to obscure towns and bucolic settings; urban tourists could now find them in the cities. This was just the beginning of the major changes about to impact roadside lodging in the United States. During the success years of the 1960s, motels evolved closer and closer to the old hotel form Starting along the roadside, private motels were often built with features easily seen from the highway and this included swimming pools and signage. Soon Americans accepted that corporate America could offer the security and standardization needed while traveling to unknown places. Historians Jakle, Sculle and Rogers note that in 1962 only 2% of motels were franchises and by 1987 franchises accounted for 64% of the industry. With the building of the limited access interstate system in the 1950s many towns were bypassed. That combined with the powerful marketing schemes and appeal of the franchise spelled the demise of many of the mom-and-pop establishments along the highway. The abandonment of these buildings by credible owners and the introduction of the budget chain motel meant a new era of negative publicity for the motel in the 1980s and 1990s and the eventual downfall of the motel’s original respectable form.”

Second, the Royal Palace Motel represents an established and familiar feature of Denver, due to its prominent location at the intersection of Colorado Blvd. and Colfax Ave. and physical characteristics including its eye-catching sign. The motel is located at intersection of two major commercial thoroughfares: Colorado and Colfax. Though the prominence of Colfax as a tourist corridor was reduced with construction of I-70, this remained among Denver’s busiest intersections, connecting two of Denver’s major arterial roads. Colorado Blvd. is also key as a link to I-70.

The Royal Palace Motel is a good example of Roadside Architecture. Roadside Architecture is defined by its relationship to the road. It is intended to serve those arriving by automobile and designed to for maximum roadside visibility and recognition. According to the “Commercial Resources of East Colfax” MPDF: “some of the corridor’s commercial buildings may also be significant for design and ornamentation that attracted the notice of passing travelers along the roadway. Such differentiation set a building apart from its neighbors amidst the crush of businesses along the commercial strip.” Attention-grabbing signage was a key feature of mid-century motel design and the Royal Palace Motel signage is among Denver’s best-known neon signs, including inclusion in Colorado Preservation, Inc.’s Most Endangered Places listing for the Neon Signs of Colfax.

Finally, the Royal Palace Motel promotes understanding and appreciation of the urban environment by means of its distinctive physical characteristics and the increasing rarity of the midcentury motel form in Denver. The motel tells the story of midcentury commercial/tourist development of Colorado and Colfax. It is a remnant that represents the heyday of motels along

Colfax. As perceptions and use of motels changed over time, the Royal Palace Motel also represents the grittier era of Colfax history.

The popularity of the automobile increased immensely in the mid- to late-1950s, and there is a direct correlation between the growth of the motel industry and the increased number of automobiles on roads and highways. Roadside commerce emerged during this era resulting in commercial development along roadways outside downtowns where there was ample room to create parking areas to accommodate automobiles. This historic trend represents an important era in the physical growth of cities and towns, and it resulted in the rise of new property types such as motels and shopping plazas. According to the “Commercial Resources of East Colfax” MPDF: “the businesses along the roadway supported tourists, travelers, and neighboring residents with retail and service outlets, entertainment, lodging, and automotive services. Such properties are associated with the area’s development over time into one of Denver’s most important commercial corridors.”

The Royal Palace Motel is a key part of the character of the Colorado Blvd. corridor as expressed in this November 5, 2015 tribute in Westword, “Colorado Boulevard Isn’t That Bad—Really!”:

This past weekend my car was crawling down the Boulevard when something hit me: as much as this is a terrible excuse for a street, it’s also a wonderfully preserved look at Denver’s many past lives. While Colorado is by no means untouched by the current development boom that threatens to turn every block of this city into a harsh, overpriced, bland blob of cheap construction materials and thoughtless design, it does leave a certain impression that reminds me of old Denver in good ways. From its mid-century modern commercial structures to turn-of-the-last-century stone buildings, Colorado Boulevard deserves a little more respect for keeping Denver feeling like Denver The Royal Palace Motel rots away not far from this intersection, one of many rundown tributes to a time when Colfax was the main entrance and exit for motorists passing through the Denver metro area. Its gaudy, mirror-mosaic sign lives on behind a construction fence, and the exterior glass elevator that made me want to live in the structure as a kid has long been cement-blocked off. . . . This trip along the street I so often love to hate made me think: There are so many untold stories of Denver. It’s not just about the structures and places that are already considered historical or noteworthy; sometimes it’s just about what places mean to you.

According to an article in Denverite (“If it wasn’t for Colfax motels, “my family and I would be on the street”):

As documented in postcards and property records, there were once more than 200 motels, hotels and lodges along Colfax in Aurora, Denver and Lakewood, beckoning to cross-country travelers on U.S. 40. In a recent drive down Colfax, I counted a little more than 60 motels and hotels, including higher end establishments like the Holiday Chalet and some more formally converted to long-term housing, like the Argonaut Apartments and the Golden Manor assisted living facility, which was once the Four Winds Motel.

Looking at the listing of current and former Colfax motels on colfaxavenue.org, there were once more than fifteen motels along Colfax in Denver and only a handful of these have survived.

The Royal Palace Hotel retains sufficient integrity to convey its significance as a 1960s motel with an International Style-influenced design. The location and setting are intact with the relationship to the intersection of Colfax and Colorado a key feature. The motel's integrity of design is good. The building retains its historic design features that convey characteristics of the motel type and the International Style, including its rectangular form, simple massing, flat roof, fenestration pattern, strong horizontal lines, exterior room access, and open balconies. The motel also retains its original neon sign. Some modifications have been made including the enclosure of the corner elevator and replacing solid panels at the balconies with a combination of metal railings and narrower panels. However, these changes do not significantly detract from the overall design intent. The Royal Palace Motel continues to clearly convey the feeling of a mid-twentieth century Modern motel, evoking a strong sense of the past.