NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME
HISTORIC
Saint Cecilia's Cathedral

AND/OR COMMON
Same

2 LOCATION
STREET & NUMBER
701 North 40th Street

CITY, TOWN
Omaha

STATE
Nebraska

3 CLASSIFICATION
CATEGORY
    _DISTRICT
    X BUILDING(S)
    _STRUCTURE
    _SITE
    _OBJECT

OWNERSHIP
    _PUBLIC
    _PRIVATE
    _BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION
IN PROCESS
BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS
    X OCCUPIED
    _UNOCCUPIED
    _WORK IN PROGRESS
    ACCESSIBLE
    YES RESTRICTED
    YES UNRESTRICTED
    _NO

PRESENT USE
    _AGRICULTURE
    _MUSEUM
    _COMMERCIAL
    _PARK
    _EDUCATIONAL
    _PRIVATE RESIDENCE
    _ENTERTAINMENT
    _RELIGIOUS
    _GOVERNMENT
    _SCIENTIFIC
    _INDUSTRIAL
    _TRANSPORTATION
    _MILITARY
    OTHER

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY
NAME
Archdiocese of Omaha, c/o The Most Rev. Daniel Sheehan, Archbishop

STREET & NUMBER
6605 Farnam Street

CITY, TOWN
Omaha

STATE
Nebraska

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION
COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.
Douglas County Courthouse, Register of Deeds

STREET & NUMBER
17th and Farnam Streets

CITY, TOWN
Omaha

STATE
Nebraska

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS
TITLE
Historic Preservation in Nebraska

DATE
1971

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS
Nebraska State Historical Society

CITY, TOWN
Lincoln

STATE
Nebraska
Saint Cecilia's Cathedral is located on the crest of one of Omaha's rolling hills, and the situation is at the northern extreme of the "Gold Coast," a residential section that began developing around the turn of the century. The cathedral is a dominant feature of Omaha's cityscape, and its twin towers are visible from a distance (see photo 1). Construction of this Spanish Renaissance Revival building commenced in 1905 and the cornerstone was laid two years later. But consecration did not occur until 1959 when the total building project was completed.

The main facade (see photo 2) exhibits an interesting contrast between the enlivened surfaces of the nave's gabled end and the smooth finish of the towers. Entrance to the narthex is through the triple portal's bronze doors that are separated by Tuscan columns. There are three arched windows above the portal to indicate the choir and organ loft's location. Embellished niches are between the windows (see photo 3), and heavily rusticated columns carry on the vertical thrust. Combined with the pediments, these elements allow for a lively play between light and shadow. The quatrefoil window is surrounded by moldings and appears to be suspended. Other decorative stonework is above the rose window, and the gable is treated with Baroque scrolls.

Identical cupolas terminate the twin towers which achieve a height of 187 feet. The cupolas utilize voluted curves, a detail used throughout the whole exterior as a unifying feature. Massive buttresses employing volutes surround the nave (see photo 5). These volutes are notable as being large and dramatic elements that render the nave a strong sense of stability.

At the building's northeast corner is Our Lady of Nebraska Chapel, a division with a curvilinear parapet and a semi-circular apse (see photo 5). North of this chapel is the cathedral's secondary entrance (see photo 6) that leads into a vestibule built flush with the chapel. A second chapel, the Nash Chapel, is situated near the cathedral's southwest corner.

The interior plan consists of a nave without transept, an ambulatory, a spacious narthex and north entrance vestibule, a semi-circular apse, and the two attached chapels. The nave is a great auditorium terminating with a sanctuary dominated by a high altar of white marble and a wooden cathedra, screen and clerical stalls (see photo 7). The ceiling, a huge barrel vault with enriched molded ribs (see photo 8), is supported by a series of double-arched bays. The nave is lit both by clerestory windows and first-floor side windows.

Opposite the sanctuary and above the narthex is a loft for organ and choir. A frieze encircles the nave and sanctuary, and high above the altar in the apsidal half-dome is painted the figure of Saint Cecilia flanked by attendant angels.
Further interior richness is provided by stained glass in the clerestory windows depicting the church's great liturgical hymns, and stained glass in the ambulatory windows portraying the patrons and founders of religious orders in the Archdiocese of Omaha. The ceiling's ambulatory is encrusted with blue and gold tesserae representing the sky and stars. Mosaics on the ceiling of the Nash Chapel contain arabesque designs, and Our Lady of Nebraska Chapel's windows are filled with stained glass reassembled from 16th-century Spanish churches.

The width and length of the cathedral are 138 feet and 255 feet respectively. The architect specified limestone blocks covering a steel frame as the construction means to render the building a fireproof state. Both the interior and exterior are in excellent condition.

The nominated property is a four-acre lot bounded by streets on the north, west and south. The rear of the apse delinates the nominated lot's far east extent. In this lot's southeastern corner is a contemporary one-story diocesan building of brick construction. Due to the reciprocal nature between the cathedral and site, the full four acres are necessary for inclusion.
Saint Cecilia's Cathedral, begun in 1905, is significant as being a dramatic departure from the common architectural styles selected for Roman Catholic churches in the early twentieth century. It ranks as one of the ten largest cathedrals in the United States, and its size speaks well of the aspirations and pride of Roman Catholics in Omaha and the Middle West. Further significance is achieved through the building's associations with Thomas Rogers Kimball, an eminent American architect, and by the building's majestic site location.

The cathedral's style is Spanish Renaissance Revival, a style prevalent in Mexico and South America, but largely unexplored in the United States in the early part of this century. The Spanish Renaissance Revival did, in fact, "not become prominent in the United States until after the Panama-California Exposition at San Diego in 1915, after which Spanish architecture became the rage (Batie, p. 70)."

Thomas Rogers Kimball (1862–1934) studied at the University of Nebraska for two years before going to Massachusetts, where he studied art in Boston and completed a three-year course in architecture at M.I.T. Further studies in art were conducted at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Kimball began an architectural practice in Boston in 1889, and opened an office in Omaha five years later. His career was quite productive, and was distinguished mostly by public buildings in the mid-western states. He served as president of the A.I.A. for two successive years (Withey and Withey, pp. 344-45).

The architect had supposed historical grounds for selecting the distinctive Spanish Renaissance style for Saint Cecilia's: "If the reports concerning the expedition of Coronado in 1541 be accepted as true, the first clergyman to visit the region now included in the State of Nebraska was a (Spanish) Catholic priest--Father Juan de Padilla, who accompanied the expedition (Wakeley, p. 387)." Kimball stated that the cathedral was to be "one of the first, if not the first, to be built in the United States strictly following the Old Country conventions (The True Voice, March 17, 1905)."

Kimball began plans for Saint Cecilia's in 1901 under the supervision of Archbishop Richard Scannell:
Kimball's design was followed carefully throughout the 54-year period of construction, even after his death in 1934. Although his plans included four chapels, funds permitted construction of only two . . . . The cathedral's prolonged construction period was largely due to Bishop Scannell's dictum that the building would proceed only as funds were available (Omaha City Architecture, p. 146)."

Saint Cecilia's parish was founded in 1888 and an elegant building was erected shortly afterwards. By 1894, however, the congregation had grown too large for the church. The new building commenced by the parish in the early 1900's became the third Roman Catholic cathedral in Omaha and the laying of the cornerstone, attended by most bishops and archbishops of the Middle West, was a joyous occasion in the Catholic community's history. The True Voice, an Omaha Catholic publication, anxiously followed the cathedral's construction progress until 1916 when enough work was completed to hold services. In addition, this publication urged its readers to purchase houses or lots in the cathedral's vicinity.

Saint Cecilia's was consecrated in 1959 upon the completion of domed cupolas atop the twin towers. The vast majority of work, however, took place prior to 1916 when the first services were held. The cathedral ranks among Omaha's truly monumental edifices. The hillcrest upon which Saint Cecilia's was erected is elevated 1200 feet above sea level. Omaha is a series of hills rising from the Missouri River Basin. The elevated site was selectively chosen, allowing the cathedral to serve as the most prominent building in the city's east central section.
MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See continuation sheet

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: 4 acres

QUADRANGLE NAME: Omaha north

QUADRANGLE SCALE: 1:24000

UTM REFERENCES

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

A 1 5 2 5 1 1 0 4 1 0 B
C 4 5 1 2 3 1 9 1 0 D
E F G H

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

A square lot bounded by Chicago Street on north, 40th Street on west, Davenport Street on south, and the cathedral's apse serving as the far eastern extent: Lot 14, western third of Block 3, Park Place, as identified on City of Omaha Plat.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE CODE COUNTY CODE

STATE CODE COUNTY CODE

FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE: Daniel Kidd, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION: Nebraska State Historical Society

STREET & NUMBER: 1500 "N" Street

CITY OR TOWN: Lincoln

DATE: November 1978

TELEPHONE: 402/432-2793

STATE: Nebraska

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL   STATE   LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE: [Signature]

TITLE: Director

DATE: 11/22/78

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

DATE
Batie, David L. "Thomas Rogers Kimball: Was He a Nebraska Architect?"


The True Voice. Omaha, March 17, 1905.


Photo 3 of 8—detail, main façade looking east
Photo by Henry Wong, 1972, Nebraska State Historical Society (H673.5-3502)

Photo 4 of 8—detail, main façade, looking east
Photo by Henry Wong, 1972, Nebraska State Historical Society (H673.5-3500)
Photo 5 of 8—apse of cathedral and rear & side of Our Lady of Nebraska Chapel, looking southwest
Photo by Henry Wong, 1972, Nebraska State Historical Society (H673.5-3499)

Photo 6 of 8—north portal, looking southwest
Photo by Henry Wong, 1972, Nebraska State Historical Society (H673.5-3498)