

Colorado's Most Endangered Places

2010 Nomination Form

Site Name:

Colorado State Capitol Dome

Property Address:

200 East Colfax Avenue

Town / City:

Denver, CO 80203

County:

Denver

Mayor and/or County Commissioners:

Mayor John Hickenlooper

City Council President, Jeanne Robb, District 10 City Councilwoman

Public or Private Ownership:

Public

Name and Address of Property Owner:

State of Colorado

Department of Personnel & Administration

1325 Sherman St., Denver, CO 80203

Designations:

National Register of Historic Places, Contributing Building to Civic Center Historic District (1974)

State Register of Historic Places, Contributing Building to Civic Center Historic District (1974)

Local Landmark, Contributing Building to Civic Center Historic District (1976)

Nature of Threat:

The 2006 Colorado State Capitol Historic Structure Assessment reported the condition of the Capitol Dome, which is well over 100 years old, to be poor, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

There is evidence of corrosion and decay on almost every feature of the Dome. Rust is visible from the window lintels on the Dome all the way down to the drum at the roof level. In many instances, freeze/thaw action has broken off pieces of cast iron. The round columns appear to be rusting from the inside out, an indication they are filled with water, and pieces of the flutes have broken off.

The entire Dome will require extensive work to repair current damage and preserve the feature for future generations. **This work is time sensitive because the rate of decay is increasing with the passing of each winter.**

A failure of the exterior cast iron cladding has allowed moisture to corrode the iron framing of the Dome superstructure. This superstructure is subject to very dynamic loading given its prominence. **Therefore the potential loss of strength as a result of deterioration is a significant hazard to the building and its occupants.**

In fact, the deterioration of the superstructure was made very apparent in 2007, when a ten-pound piece of cast iron fell from the Dome. As a safety measure, work crews installed netting to catch future falling debris. Lance Shepherd, manager of design and construction for the Office of the State Architect, was quoted in a June 22, 2009 *Denver Post* article as saying, "It's the nature of cast iron. Once it starts to rust, it keeps eating away."

In the same *Denver Post* article, the architectural firm (Fentress Bradburn Architects, Ltd) hired to complete quarterly assessments of the Dome was quoted as writing in the most recent report, "In the last few months, the degradation of the Dome is continuing very rapidly. It is our recommendation that immediate action be taken to remedy the dire conditions of the Dome."

To date, the state has not allocated funding to complete the necessary repairs. The cost for rehabilitation of the Dome was estimated in 2006 to be approximately \$8 million, though today, the estimates now range between \$11 and \$30 million. In early 2009, the State Historic Fund (SHF) approved a \$3 million grant that required a match of \$8 million from the state. Legislators were unable to fund the match, so the \$3 million dollar grant from the SHF was rescinded and distributed to other grant applicants.

The current state of the national and local economy has thwarted plans to address "the dire conditions of the Dome" and in fact, Governor Ritter has stated that rehabilitation of the Dome would need to be postponed until, "We get to a place where we're seeing an uptick in revenues, then we'll look at how to invest money in our infrastructures." With budget shortfalls expected to hit \$838 million over the next three years, it can reasonably be expected that rehabilitation of the Dome is years away. Continued delay will likely lead to a worsening of the structural condition of the Dome and continue to raise the cost of repairs.

Contact information of the group(s) and/or individuals submitting the nomination. Please include phone numbers and e-mail addresses. This information remains confidential:

Capitol Building Advisory Committee,
Ms. Georgianna Contiguglia, Chair
303-755-5167 (h) or 303-907-6343 (c)
GJCONTIGUGLIA@aol.com

1. What is the historical significance of the property?

On August 1, 1876 President Ulysses S. Grant officially declared Colorado to be the thirty-eighth state in the union with Denver designated as its capital. It wasn't until November of 1881 that Denver was made the permanent capital by a vote of the people of Colorado, and not until 1886 that excavation began for construction of the Capitol. Construction required a total of twenty-two years, and costs totaled \$2.8 million (well exceeding the initial budget of \$1 million).

Architect Elija E. Meyers of Detroit designed the Capitol and over saw construction until an argument over his fees and problematic contractor relationships resulted in his involuntarily leaving the project. Meyers was a noted designer of public buildings during the Gilded Age, and is the only architect to have designed three state capitol buildings (Colorado, Texas, and Michigan). According to Marlene Elizabeth Heck, a professor of Architectural History at Dartmouth University, "A close examination of the architecture of the Gilded Age (1865-1914) reveals Elijah E. Myers to be one of the most successful, if not the single most successful and important architect of public buildings during this period."

Denver architect, Frank E. Edbrooke, was hired in 1898 as Meyer's replacement and remained as lead architect through the completion of the construction of the Capitol. Edbrooke is well known for his other work in Denver, including: the Brown Palace Hotel, the Oxford Hotel, Loretto Heights Academy, the Colorado State Museum at 14th and Sherman, the Chamber of Commerce Building at 14th and Lawrence, and the Navarre Building at Broadway and Tremont. More than thirty of Edbrooke's structures are currently listed on the National Register or make significant contributions to the building inventories of nationally and locally designated historic districts.

Initially, it was decided by the architect and contractor that the Dome was to be constructed of zinc and tin and then covered with copper. These choices prompted an outcry from the people of Colorado, who demanded that a grander material, and one native to Colorado, be used. Gold was the obvious choice, and so the Capitol Dome was gilded with 200 ounces of 24 carat gold in 1908. Once gold-plated, a debate raged over what should be placed atop the Dome as the final detail to mark the end of construction. An early suggestion was that a statue of "the most beautiful woman in Colorado" be commissioned and installed. Problems arose when the two female legislators at the time voted for themselves, and a male colleague advocated for his 13-year old daughter. Ultimately, an illuminated glass globe was selected as a more appropriate and less contentious choice.

The Colorado Capitol is one of only ten capitol buildings in the nation to feature a gold-plated dome.

2. Describe the property and surrounding area. Include any adjacent landmarks:

The Capitol Building is sited prominently on a hill southeast of Denver's downtown office and commercial district. It is surrounded by manicured lawns and trees, and is a contributing feature to Civic Center Historic District, which contains the Greek Theatre, the Voorhees Memorial, and the

McNichols Building. Denver 's City and County Building and Civic Center Park were sited to be directly in line with the Capitol, which also stands in proximity to the Denver Public Library, the Denver Art Museum, the State Judicial Center, the Colorado State History Museum, and several landmarked historic neighborhoods and districts. The view from the Capitol Dome provides an awe-inspiring vista of downtown Denver and the distant Rocky Mountains.

3. Describe how the site is known at a local, regional, or statewide level:

The Capitol Building and golden Dome is perhaps the most iconic structure in the state of Colorado and is well known and instantly recognizable by citizens across the state.

4. What is the community commitment for saving the site? What groups or individuals are involved? Is there a future vision for this site?

Community support is statewide. Aside from debates over funding, it is hard to imagine any opposition to completing the structural repairs required. Lawmakers, including the Governor, have expressed their desire to initiate the repairs, but as of yet have been stymied by lack of funding. The concept of a capital campaign is being discussed, but will require significant support from the corporate community and citizens of Colorado. A label of "endangered" may well be the clarion call needed to organize this support.

Media support for the Dome rehabilitation is evidenced by a recent Denver Post Editorial, which stated, "So come on, Colorado: Let's save the people's house and the golden Dome."

The groups involved include, but are not limited to:

- Capital Development Committee
- The Capitol Building Advisory Committee
- Colorado State Architect's Office
- Colorado Preservation, Inc.

The future vision for the site is simple – to begin and execute rehabilitation plans for the Dome.

5. Why is this place endangered and why should it be saved?

The Capitol Dome is endangered because of deferred maintenance that has now reached a crisis point. Unfortunately, this structural crisis coincides with an economic crisis that has left the state's coffers empty for the foreseeable future. The two qualifications for an "Endangered Place" are that of historical significance and the presence of a threat. Without question, the Capitol Dome is one of, if not the most, historically significant structures in the state of Colorado. The threat is real, and best captured by the words of the architectural team responsible for completing quarterly structural assessments, "...the degradation of the Dome is continuing very rapidly. It is our recommendation that immediate action be taken to remedy the dire conditions of the Dome."

There is no doubt that the Capitol Dome needs to be saved, only a question of when work will begin and where the necessary funding will be found. To date, lawmakers have been unable to allocate

the \$11 million to \$30 million needed to complete the repairs, and recent comments from the Governor suggest that funds may be years away, and dependent on an economic recovery.

6. Provide the name, title and phone number of others supporting this nomination:

Bessimer Historical Society, Corinne Koehler, President, 719-564-9086
Colorado Preservation, Inc., James Hare, Executive Director, 303-892-4260
Historic Denver, Inc., Robert Musgraves, Executive Director, 303-534-5288
Historic Douglas County, Larry Schlupp, Director, 303-681-3537
Historic Pueblo, Inc., Laurel Campbell, Interim President, 719-542-4458
Historic Routt County!, Townsend H. Anderson, Director, 970-875-1305
National Trust for Historic Preservation-Mt. & Plains Office, Barbara Pahl, Director 303-623-1504
Otero County Historic Preservation Board, Rebecca Goodwin, Member

7. Any additional comments you would like to make to support this nomination:

The Capitol Dome is an architectural, historical, and cultural treasure that must be preserved. Colorado Preservation, Inc. is in a unique position as the only statewide preservation advocacy group to create additional awareness of the worsening structural condition of the Dome, and to assist with a public fundraising effort. The people of the state of Colorado must be made aware of this dire situation. Private funding sources must be developed that can leverage any public monies that might be obligated to save this most spectacular symbol of the great state of Colorado.

The fact that it is nearly impossible to observe the degradation from a visitor's perspective likely makes it difficult for citizens of Colorado to truly understand the degraded condition of the Dome. Additionally, its prominence and iconic status leave many disbelieving that the state would allow the Dome to deteriorate to the point that it has become a hazard to the Capitol structure and occupants. By labeling the Capitol Dome as "Endangered", citizens, lawmakers, and the preservation community will be forced to confront the issues facing the Dome and work in some collaborative fashion towards a solution.