



Urban Icons

Heritage architecture tells the stories *of* our cities

by Debra Prinzing

Why does the 40-story Rainier Tower in downtown Seattle look like a sharpened pencil balanced on its tip?

Dan Temkin, a local real estate executive and volunteer guide who's leading me and several visitors on the Seattle Architecture Foundation's "Greatest Hits" walking tour, explains that architect Minoru Yamasaki—a Seattle native who also designed the Pacific Science Center for the 1962 World's Fair at Seattle Center—wanted more open space, light and air at the street level, where humans come in contact with the skyscraper. >>>

The design for the 1977 tower—described by the Pacific Coast Architecture Database as “one of the most unorthodox skyscrapers in the world”—was a pedestrian-friendly approach in an era when tall buildings were increasingly defining cityscapes. The tapered-base design also reduced the “canyon effect” of strong winds that occur between high-rise buildings, Temkin says. “Personally, I love this building,” he enthuses. “Its beauty is in what’s not there. I call the point the ‘part that the beaver ate.’ ”

Going Places

I’ve lived and worked in Seattle for nearly three decades, so Fifth Avenue and University Street, where the tower is located, is quite familiar to me, but taking the “Greatest Hits” tour is giving me a newfound appreciation for landmarks I’ve so often rushed past. The tour is “designed to showcase buildings that were significant for their time, place and history in Seattle,” according to Stacy Segal, executive director of

the Seattle Architecture Foundation.

I’m realizing that a heritage-architecture tour can tell the story of a city via beautiful or interesting buildings; provide a great sense of place for residents and visitors; and offer insights about a city’s past and present, along with its values and personality.

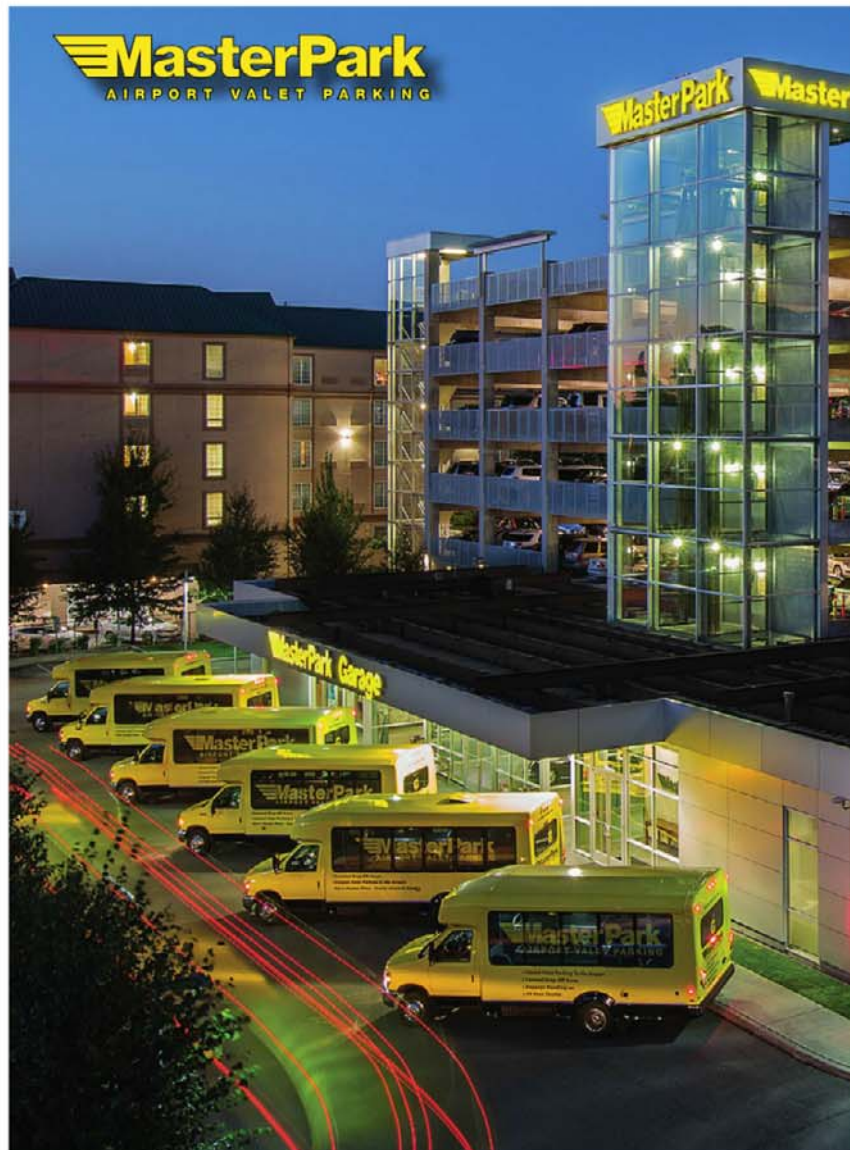
For instance, at Seattle Center (seattlecenter.com/tours/ has self-guided-tour info), the iconic Space Needle, built for the 1962 World’s Fair—the “Century 21 Exposition”—was joined in the year 2000 by the futuristic-looking, curvilinear EMP Museum, dedicated to exploring popular culture, including the music of local innovators such as Jimi Hendrix and of groundbreaking local bands such as Nirvana. Then in 2012, Chihuly Garden and Glass opened near the Space Needle to showcase the spectacular works of Puget Sound-area glass-art pioneer Dale Chihuly. And last year, the Center House food court became the Seattle Center Armory (reflecting its 1939 origins as the Seattle Field Artillery Armory), with new food purveyors such as Plum Pantry and Bigfood BBQ that

Seattle Public Library

• **Details:** Eclectic Modern style; designed by Rem Koolhaas and Joshua Prince-Ramus; completed in 2004; 1000 Fourth Ave.

• **Interesting information:** In an attempt to avoid the cubelike appearance that buildings occupying full city blocks often have, the architects staggered alternating floors of the steel-and-glass, LEED Silver-rated, 11-story library, with some floors jutting out farther east and others jutting out farther west, to capture light and views. The abstract shape is covered by an exterior “skin” of insulated glass and steel mesh. **On the 10th floor, a semi-hidden viewing platform allows you to peer all the way down to the main floor, for a great overview of the design concepts.** An interior “books spiral” design lets you wind your way up or down through the collections without having to take stairs or go to another part of the building.





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These new Seattle Center attractions indicate the value the city places on cultural and culinary experiences, complementing Seattle's longtime pride in showcasing—via the view from structures such as the Space Needle—the area's gorgeous natural surroundings and recreational opportunities.

Soaring Interest

Self-guided and docent-led walking tours are offered in communities around the country, including Northwest cities such as Seattle, Portland and Boise, that have intriguing buildings. And there's growing interest in urban architecture—in hearing the stories of the structures that define a city—among people of all ages, says Eric Wheeler, an architectural historian and retired real estate appraiser who now volunteers as a guide for Portland's Architectural Heritage Center.

Wheeler says the enthusiasm for architecture among younger people is exciting. "Forty years ago there was nowhere near the level of interest in architecture that there is now. It's not just the gray-haired oldsters like me, but also the 20-, 30- and 40-year-olds who are hip to architecture."

Heightened awareness of historical buildings might help to save significant structures from the wrecking ball, note preservationists such as Val Ballestrom, education manager of the Architectural Heritage Center. "The more people understand and appreciate architecture in all its forms, the more likely they will want to save what they have."

SEATTLE

Those of us on the "Greatest Hits" tour (just one of the many tours offered by the Seattle Architecture Foundation, which also takes participants to sites such as Pioneer Square, the University of Washington and "hidden treasures") get swept up in Temkin's passion for the stories of each building we visit. "I've discovered that most people do not look up when they walk around a city," Temkin says. "They see little more than what is going on at street level. On our

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(REPEAT)



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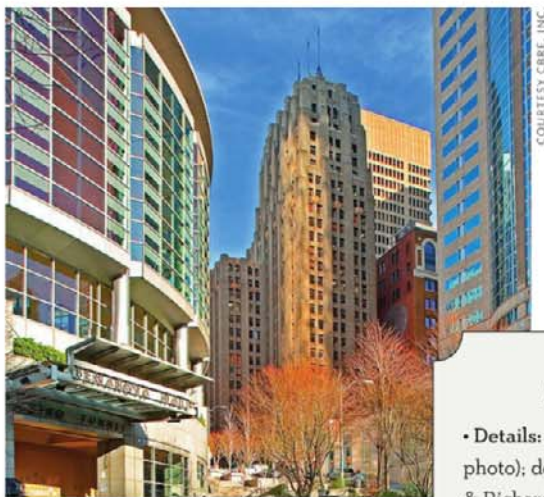
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Seattle Tower

• **Details:** Art Deco style (center of photo); designed by Albertson, Wilson & Richardson; completed in 1929; 1218 Third Ave.

• **Interesting information:** The 27-story building, one of Seattle's earliest and finest Art Deco towers, reflects the post-World War I prosperity enjoyed throughout the country. "There was a search for a modern style more representative of the time," says Seattle Architecture Foundation tour guide Dan Temkin. In its heyday, the Seattle Tower was called the Northern Life Tower. **During construction, all of the bricks were sorted and installed from darkest to lightest.** Look closely and you'll notice the subtle gradation. Darker bricks visually "anchor" the building at street level and the subsequent rows lighten toward the top.

tours, we look up above the street level to the middle and tops of the buildings—there is a lot going on up there."

Over the course of two hours, the "Greatest Hits" tour spans almost a century and more than a dozen buildings. We begin with the 1910 11-story Beaux-Arts Cobb Building, which boasted innovations such as high-speed electric elevators and a rooftop garden, Temkin says; continue to sites such as the 1929 Art Deco Seattle Tower and the avant-garde 2004 Seattle Public Library; and end with Seattle's sustainable City Hall, opened in 2003, which has a vegetated, runoff-slowning green roof.

PORTLAND

On a visit to the City of Roses to explore its architecture, I meet Val Ballestrem and Eric Wheeler from the Architectural Heritage Center, along with docents John Doyle

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SMITH TOWER

Forty-two-story Smith Tower, once one of the tallest office buildings in the world, is celebrating its centennial. The city's first skyscraper, whose frame required nearly 8 million pounds of steel, opened to the public on July 3, 1914.

Smith Tower's crown jewel is the 35th-floor Chinese Room, a lavishly decorated space with a carved teak ceiling, ornate carpeting and walls, and beautiful antique furnishings. The Chinese Room is open to the public most days, and the adult admission fee of \$7.50 includes a ride in an old-fashioned copper-and-brass elevator car. The 35th floor also has an **Observation Deck** that provides a 360-degree view of the city and beyond (smithtower.com).



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