

Self Guided Seattle Architecture Tour



Make sure you are wearing comfortable walking shoes, have your wet weather gear at hand and some water. We're going on an urban hike beginning at Seattle's King Street Station and ending at the Seattle Center. Check the blog post on Duende by Madam ZoZo for a link to the accompanying Google map - www.duendebymadamzozo.com/seattle-architecture-tour/

Important safety note: Throughout this tour, particularly in the historic district of Seattle, Freeway Park and Belltown, you will come across many of the city's homeless population and those suffering addiction. Do not take this tour after dark. I also recommend keeping your valuables secure and out of view while maintaining an awareness of your surroundings.

King Street Station – 303 S Jackson St (entrance is on S King St)

We'll begin in the historic downtown of Seattle, known as Pioneer Square and established in 1852. Let's rendezvous outside King Street Station and check out this elegant relic from the heyday of rail travel. Built between 1904 and 1906, King Street Station was designed by associate architects of Grand Central Terminal in New York City.

The tower was modelled after Campanile di San Marco in Venice, Italy. If you want to take a peek inside at the ornate interiors—the entrance is via S King St. We'll wait for in the plaza on S Jackson St for you to return.

Washington Shoe Building (aka J. M. Frink Building or Washington Iron Works Building) – 159 S Jackson St

Wander westward along S Jackson St, passed the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park housed in the 1889 Cadillac Hotel on your right. In the next block on our left will be the Washington Shoe Building.

The first four floors of this building were commissioned in 1892 by J.M Frink for Washington Iron Works which occupied the site until around 1895. The original building was designed by the firm of Boone and Willcox. Boone was one of the few architects who successfully worked both before and after Seattle's Great Fire.

The Washington Shoe Company was the building's next occupant and current namesake. It used the property as a combined factory and retail space, supplying boots to stampedeers en route to the 1897 Klondike Gold Rush.

In 1912, a further two stories were constructed under the watch of architects Blackwell and Baker. The building became office space in 1920 and Art Deco embellishments were added during the following decade or so.

Clues in the pavement

Look down at the sidewalk and you might also notice purple glass mosaics. Pioneer Square's street level was raised early in Seattle's history due to drainage issues. If you've heard about Seattle's Underground Tours, you'll know passages at the original street level still exist. The purple glass mosaics are actually skylights created to allow natural light to enter the tunnels below. The glass was not originally purple but turned this colour due to a reaction between sunlight and the mineral manganese in the glass.

Pioneer Square – 1st Ave

Turning right into 1st Ave, continue northward noting the historic neighbourhood's Renaissance Revival architecture – stone buildings with symmetrical facades featuring arched windows and doorways. These masonry structures were all built after the Great Seattle Fire decimated the original timber buildings of Pioneer Square in 1889.

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At the corner of 1st Ave and Yesler Way, stop to note a few buildings as follows.

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Pioneer Square Pergola – Corner of 1st Ave and Yesler Way

This ornate cast iron and glass pergola was built in 1909 and designed by Julian F. Everett. The Victorian structure was designed as a “comfort station” to shelter cable car passengers and provide subterranean public bathrooms. The lavish bathrooms had terrazzo floors and marble stalls with brass and nickel fixtures but were closed when the cable car ceased operation in the 1940s.

Pioneer Building – 600 1st Ave

The Richardson Romanesque, Pioneer Building was completed in 1892. The sandstone structure was commissioned by Henry Yesler, a Seattle co-founder and two-times mayor. The building was designed by Elmer Fisher who was responsible for various Seattle buildings after the Great Fire.

During the Klondike Gold Rush, 48 mining companies had offices in the Pioneer Building. It is also said to have housed “Seattle’s finest speakeasy” during the Prohibition era.

Sinking Ship Garage – 515 2nd Ave

Continue on Occidental Ave S. When we reach Yesler Way, we’ll turn right. Take a close look at the parking garage opposite. You’ll instantly recognize why this unusual multi-story parking deck was dubbed “Sinking Ship Garage”!

Smith Tower – 506 2nd Ave

At the corner of 2nd Ave we will be standing at the foot of Smith Tower, claims to be Seattle’s first skyscraper. The Smith Tower is named after Lyman Cornelius Smith and his son Burns Lyman Smith, East Coast industrialists who made their money manufacturing shotguns and typewriters.

The younger Smith had visited Seattle in 1888 and raved about it to his father. A few years later Smith senior bought 8 parcels of land in Pioneer Square, sight unseen.

Eventually, Smith senior visited the West Coast and met with the character responsible for our next building, John Hoge. Both had plans to build a skyscraper in East Coast style. The two egos clashed before they settled on an agreement to each build 14-story buildings. As you can see, neither was a man of their word and the Smith Tower won the height battle at 33-stories. Smith Tower was designed by Syracuse firm Gaggin & Gaggin and was completed in 1914.

If you have the time and inclination, there is a viewing deck and Prohibition-themed bar at the top of the Tower. This is one of three observation decks I will point out along the tour.

Hoge Building – 705 2nd Ave

Turn into 2nd Ave and continue to Cherry Street, where we’ll find the Hoge Building. Banker and real estate investor James D. “John” Hoge commissioned the building in 1911 and it remained in the Hoge family until 1986. The 18-story brick and terracotta clad structure combining Second Renaissance Revival and Beaux-Arts, was designed by Bebb & Mendel.

Historic site

Previous to the Great Fire, this plot of land was the site of the first colonial dwelling in Seattle. The cedar log cabin was built and resided in by Carson Boren, a member of the Denny Party that arrived in Seattle in 1851.

Arctic Building – 700 3rd Ave

Make a right into Cherry St. On our way up the hill to 3rd Ave, we’ll pass what was formerly the Grand Opera House, now a lowly parking garage with only its Richardson Romanesque outer to hint at its former glory.

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When we reach 3rd Ave, we'll turn left. On our right will be The Arctic Building, you'll know it by the walrus grotesques decorating its façade and polar bear over the entrance. The Beaux-Arts building was established as a bar in late 1907 by two men who made their fortunes in the Klondike Gold Rush. They formed the Alaska Club, a social club for Arctic explorers.

Columbia Center (aka Bankamerica Tower; Columbia Seafirst Center) – 701 5th Ave

Making a right turn at Columbia St and at the next corner (intersection with 4th Ave) we will see the Columbia Center. This is Seattle's tallest building at 286m (943ft). Completed in 1985, the skyscraper was reduced from its planned 305m (1000ft) because of the commercial flight path over Seattle's downtown. It was designed by Chester L. Lindsey and Associates.

The Post-Modernist structure appears to be a bundle of three towers with convex forms. The Columbia Center houses our second observation deck, with a 360-degree view from the 73rd floor.

The Rainier Club – 820 4th Ave

From the Columbia Center, continue on 4th for two blocks. On the right, we'll pass The Rainier Club, a private social club housed in a Jacobean-revival style building which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The clubhouse was designed by Spokane architect Kirtland K. Cutter in 1904. You won't miss its juxtaposition with the surrounding cityscape, particularly the F5 Tower (Seattle's 7th tallest building) looming up from behind the historic stone structure. At the intersection of Madison and 4th Ave we will have Safeco Plaza on our left and Seattle Public Library on our right.

Safeco Plaza (aka Seattle-First National Bank; Seafirst Building) – 1001 4th Ave

For a moment Safeco Plaza was the tallest building west of the Mississippi. Designed by Naramore, Bain, Brady and Johanson (NBBJ). The 192m (630ft) Modernist tower completed in 1969 is now Seattle's 7th tallest building and has been nicknamed "the box the Space Needle came in". Safeco Plaza set a trend of setting office buildings back from the street. The generous plaza features bronze sculpture "Vertebrae" by British artist Henry Moore.

Seattle Public Library – 1000 4th Ave

From this same spot on the corner of Madison St and 4th, we will have Seattle Public Central Library on our right. Pitched as a "library for the digital age", the rough cut gemstone of Seattle's downtown, was completed in 2004. The architects were Rem Koolhaas and Joshua Prince-Ramus of Rotterdam-based Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). Take a lap around this building to see its various guises and explore the inside. Seattle artist George Tsutakawa, created the abstract "Fountain of Wisdom", at the library's 4th Ave entrance.

Back on the street, we'll turn left into 5th Ave, keeping the Library on our left and continue another block until we reach the IBM Building. This area is dense with interesting and historic Seattle buildings, so we are going to lap this block too.

1200 Fifth (aka IBM Building) – 1200 5th Ave

First take in the former IBM Building designed by Minoru Yamasaki, architect of the World Trade Center in NYC. The Modernist office tower's street-level arches reflect that of the neighbouring historic, YWCA and Olympic Hotel buildings.

Turn right into Seneca St, crossing 6th Ave into Freeway Park (behind the Park Place Building).

Freeway Park – 700 Seneca St

No matter what you think of Brutalist architecture, Freeway Park and its concrete labyrinth are a welcomed disguise to the interstate that lies below. Opened in 1976, the 5.2 acre Park takes up the air rights of the I-5, bridging Downtown and the First Hill neighbourhood. The Park's concrete "Canyon" and water feature are intended to muffle the vehicular sounds below.

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Plymouth Church – 1217 6th Ave

Return to 6th Avenue and we will find ourselves in front of the chalky white Plymouth Church. This Modernist structure was designed by Naramore Bain Brady & Johanson (NBBJ), a global architecture firm founded in Seattle in 1943—we'll see more of their work in a moment.

The church was built in 1967 after the former Georgian Revival building was damaged in the 1965 Puget Sound Earthquake. Four columns salvaged from the older building now stand in Plymouth Pillars Park on the corner of Pike St and Boren Ave.

Rainier Tower – 1301 5th Ave

From 6th Ave, turn left into University St and let's make a stop in the plaza at the corner of 5th Ave (next to the IBM Building) to observe several more structures in the area. On the corner opposite the plaza is Rainier Tower. Rainier Tower is another Minoru Yamasaki design completed in collaboration with NBBJ. Its 11-story concrete pedestal supports 29 floors of offices.

At this point in his career, Yamasaki wanted to declutter cityscapes like those of densely urbanized New York. He created this design in an attempt to preserve the potential green space around the base of the building, allowing for landscaping and light to enter. This design had to be carefully engineered to fulfil the strict building codes of seismically-vulnerable Seattle.

This iconic Seattle building has various nicknames including the “pencil building” and the “beaver building” for its resemblance to a tree that has been gnawed at by a Beaver.

Rainier Square Tower – 401 Union St

In the same block you can see Seattle's second tallest building at 259m (850ft), Rainier Square Tower. The glassy skyscraper was completed in 2021. The tapering curve design by NBBJ was intended to preserve the view of the neighbouring Rainier Tower, giving the building its own distinctive form.

Fairmont Olympic Hotel – 411 University St

Another building we can see from this position is the historic Olympic Hotel, currently managed by Fairmont Hotels and Resorts.

This 10-acres of land (roughly 6 blocks) of Downtown Seattle was the original campus of the University of Washington and is referred to as the “Metropolitan Tract”. In 1895, UW moved to its present location and looked to lease the downtown holding.

Leasee the Metropolitan Building Company engaged Howells & Stokes, a New York architectural firm, to create a master plan for an integrated development. The resulting “Metropolitan Tract” laid out a plan for 10 buildings of which only five were built. They included a department store, offices, residences and a hotel. The buildings were specified to be uniformly 11-stories tall, clad in brick with Beaux-Arts style terracotta decorations.

The Olympic Hotel completed in 1924 at a cost of \$5.5 million, was not exactly to the Metropolitan Tract specifications. “Larger! Grander!” said the Community Hotel Corporation who subleased the plot. So, New York-based architectural firm George B. Post & Sons went bigger and bolder, creating a design now listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.

Almost 2000 people attended the Olympic Hotel's grand opening. Illustrious former guests of the Hotel include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bing Crosby, Joan Crawford and John Wayne, along with US Presidents Herbert Hoover, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

Take a stroll down University Street passed the front of the Fairmont Olympic Hotel. When we reach the corner of 4th Avenue, you'll be able to see the Cobb Building.

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The Cobb – 1301 4th Ave

The Cobb is the only original Metropolitan Tract building still in existence. 11-stories, brick with terracotta ornamentation. Check!

1201 Third Avenue (aka Washington Mutual Tower) – 1201 3rd Ave

Before turning right into 4th Ave, take a look down University Street. You can't miss Seattle's third tallest building, 1201 Third Avenue. The 235m (772ft) Post-Modern office tower was designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates and The McKinley Architects.

The building took the place of the Savoy Hotel, which lent two of its aluminum castings to the newer structure. The historic Brooklyn Hotel Building that shares the same city block, was too incorporated into the design.

From this angle, you will see that the Art Deco, 1929 built, Seattle Tower Building (aka Northern Life Tower) at 1218 Third Avenue must have also been influential on the design.

Fun fact

1201 Third Avenue is a popular nesting spot for some local Peregrine falcons. They have been monitored since 1994 via a webcam dubbed FalconCam and the Urban Raptor Conservancy now bands fledglings so they can be tracked. A Seattle Seahawks logo was installed above the nest to symbolically watch over the brood.

1411 Fourth Avenue – 1411 4th Ave

At the corner of University and 4th, turn right. Continue another two blocks and turn right on Pike. As we pass 1411 Fourth Avenue Seattle on your left, note the Art Deco style and Celtic decorations on the outside of this building. Also, notice the beautiful bronze-framed storefront at the entrance, originally a Brewster Cigar Company shop.

Robert Chambers Reamer (1873-1938) designed this 1929 Art Deco addition to the Seattle skyline that replaced a horse trough – no joke! Reamer designed a number of Washington buildings and often experimented with Art Deco. However, he is remembered more for his work with the Yellowstone Transportation Company including Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park.

Coliseum Theater – 500 Pike St

Return to 5th Ave via Pike St and on the corner you will see the Coliseum Theater, now a retail space. This was Seattle's first theater built specifically for film (rather than stage), opened in 1916.

The Neoclassical-style theater has a white terracotta façade and formerly featured a half-dome marquee over the corner entrance which has since been replaced by a glass awning. Architect Benjamin Marcus Priteca was also responsible for the design of the nearby Paramount Theater.

Turn left into 5th Ave and continue until you reach Stewart St. In the block between Olive Way and Stewart St, you will see the Times Square Building.

Times Square Building (aka Times Building) – 414 Olive Way

The same year the Coliseum Theater was constructed, the white terracotta clad Times Square Building was also completed. Architects Charles Bebb and Carl Gould designed the flatiron shaped, Beaux-Arts block to house the editorial arm of the Seattle Times newspaper. By 1931, the newspaper had outgrown the building and a new Art Deco home was constructed for the paper, nearby in the South Lake Union.

Take a right into Stewart and a quick left into Westlake Ave, continuing to 7th Ave where you will turn left again. You won't miss The Spheres on your left as you proceed up 7th.

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The Spheres – 2111 7th Ave

These Amazon-owned orbs are another Naramore Bain Brady & Johanson design. Constructed in 2018, the trio of bubbles house a multi-level cloud forest consisting of around 40,000 plants. The high altitude, tropical rainforest species need to be kept around a balmy 22 °C (72 °F).

The Spheres do not use geodesic technology, as you might expect. They are a pentagonal hexecontahedron (aka Catalan solid) form made up of a white, steel skeleton that underlies 2600 triangular glass panels.

The Spheres are an Amazon workplace open only to employees and their guests. So, you will need to make an Amazonian friend to take a look inside, or join an Amazon HQ tour.

Continue on 7th and make a left turn onto Denny Way, which will take us right up to the corner of the Seattle Center.

Chief Seattle

Along the way you will pass Tilikum Place, home to a life-sized Chief Seattle statue created by James When. The statue was unveiled in 1912 by Seattle's great-great-granddaughter. It honours the city's namesake, a Chief of the Suquamish and Duwamish peoples who occupied the area prior to colonial settlement.

Seattle Center – 305 Harrison St

In 1962, Seattle was host to the Century 21 Exposition, more commonly known as the Seattle World's Fair. Over the course of 6 months, almost 10 million visitors attended the Fair, themed "Living in the Space Age". What is now known as the Seattle Center was the Exposition site and many of the current buildings were constructed for the Fair. Once you reach the Seattle Center there are a number of buildings and attractions to note, including the following.

Pacific Science Center - 200 2nd Ave

The Pacific Science Center started out as the NASA-themed US Science Exhibit at the Seattle World's Fair. Designed by Minoru Yamasaki, who I mentioned earlier with regards to the IBM Building and Rainier Tower.

Yamasaki's inspiration was varied, including Gothic cathedrals and Islamic mosques which can be seen in the blind tracery that decorates the buildings exterior and the forms of five arched towers. In addition, Japanese gardens and the Swedish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, informed the layout of five interconnected buildings around a courtyard with reflecting pools.

Space Needle - 400 Broad St

Arguably Seattle's most iconic building, is the Space Needle. The tower was initially inspired by Fernsehturm Stuttgart, a telecommunications tower in the German city of Stuttgart built in 1959. The Seattle World's Fair Commission chairman Eddie Carlson visited the Fernsehturm and sent the idea to Fair officials via postcards.

Architect, John Graham Jr, was brought on board to realise Carlson's vision. The original concept underwent several dramatic revisions until the final design was reached. At this point, they had very little time for construction and the tower was erected in a mere 400 days.

Though the Needle is 184.4m (605ft) tall, its foundation is such that its centre of gravity is just 1.5m (5ft) above the ground. The flying saucer-esque crown has several levels including a revolving restaurant, observation deck, mezzanine and plant level. The Space Needle is the third and final observation deck.

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The Feminine One

Various designers contributed to the design of the Space Needle, including Victor Steinbrueck. Inspired by an abstract sculpture of a dancer in his office, Steinbrueck came up with the pinched tripod that supports the crown. Look for a reproduction of that sculpture entitled "The Feminine One" at the base of the tower.

Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP) – 325 5th Ave N

In the 18th Century, German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said "Music is liquid architecture; architecture is frozen music."—which seems apt in the case of the Museum of Pop Culture known previously as the Experience Music Project (EMP).

Frank Gehry's Deconstructivist design is said to have been inspired by a pile of rubbish taken from a guitar store in California. Shaped and coloured skins encrust a concrete shell, capturing the "energy and fluidity of music" says the Museum website. Metal tracks that run across the building are intended to represent guitar frets.

The building completed in 2000, houses one of the world's largest collections of Jimi Hendrix memorabilia among various other contemporary cultural exhibits that include movie props and costumes.

That concludes our self-guided Seattle architecture tour. I hope you enjoyed this look into Seattle's history and urban landscape. If you have any feedback, please leave me a comment at <https://duendebymadamzozo.com/seattle-architecture-tour/>