Midtown Towers (originally the Keenan Building)

Thomas Hannah, architect, 1907

Active in Pittsburgh between 1899 and 1930, Thomas Hannah modeled the Keenan Building after the Spechels[Later Call] Building of 1898 in San Francisco. The Keenan Building was erected for Colonel Thomas J. Keenan, the chief owner of the Penny Press and a man with an eye for publicity. His skyscraper is decorated with portraits of 10 "worthies" associated with Pennsylvania or the Pittsburgh of his time, and the fancy dome was once capped with the figure of an eagle in flight. The building is now used as moderate-income housing; the exterior was repaired and cleaned in 2006.

EQT Plaza

(formerly Dominion Tower, originally CNG Tower)

Kohn Pederson Fox (New York), architects, 1987

Conspicuously Postmodern in its use of columns, arches, and keystones, this skyscraper is site-specific. Its distinctively treated lower portion recalls Victorian building heights; its principal section echoes the height of the adjacent Midtown Towers, and the greater height of many modern downtown buildings is matched in EQT Plaza's full height. In addition, the arched roof at the top is an allusion to Pittsburgh's many bridges.

This development project required the demolition of several significant historic buildings and resulted in the agreement between preservatistionists and the Henniz interests that led to the creation of the Penn Liberty Cultural District and the formation of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust in 1984.

Heinz Hall (originally Loew's Penn Theater)

Rapp & Rapp (Chicago), architects, 1926; renovated, 1997

A motion-picture palace where live performances were also given, Loew's Penn Theater was chosen in the late 1960s as a centrally located home—at first temporary, then permanent—for the Pittsburgh Symphony. The successful reopening of the Penn Theater as Heinz Hall in 1971 set the stage for revitalizing the Penn-Liberty district: the Stanley Theater (Benedum) was restored 16 years later; more than 100 historic buildings were protected and many have been reused; and major new buildings have been constructed.

Byham Theater (formerly The Fulton)

Dodge & Morrison (New York), architects, 1904

Following its Halloween night opening in 1904, the Gayer Theater, as it was originally called, became one of the country’s foremost stage and vaudeville houses. Ethel Barrymore, Gertrude Lawrence, and Helen Hayes performed there. The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust purchased the theater in 1990, restored it, and renamed it in 1995.

PHI Tours

Situated on a peninsula jutting into an intersection of rivers, the city of 305,000 is gemlike, surrounded by bluffs and bright yellow bridges streaming into its heart.

“Pittsburgh’s cool,” by Josh Noel, Chicago Tribune, Jan. 5, 2014

FREE TOURS

Old Allegheny County Jail Museum

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Every Friday, May through September (noon to 1:00 p.m.)
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- July: Gens of Grant Street
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- September: Fourth Avenue & PPG Place

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June 14 (Sat.): Isaac Lichtenberg House Restoration Celebration
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July 26 (Sat.): Millvale Church & Neighborhood Walking Tour
Sept. 20 (Sat.): Cul-de-sacs of Shadyside Walking Tour—
   A Semi-Private World

Oct. 11 (Sat.): Bus Tour of Modernist Landmarks on
   Pittsburgh’s North Side
Oct. 25 (Sat.): Bus Tour to Chatham University’s Self-Sustaining
   Eden Hall Campus

FOR DETAILS & RESERVATIONS

412-471-5808, ext. 527 or marylu@phlf.org

Funding from the Alfred M. Opperheimer Memorial Fund of The Pittsburgh Foundation helps underwrite PHI’s tour program.

Meeting Location

Katz Plaza, at the corner of
Penn Avenue and Seventh Street

Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation

Renewing Communities; Building Pride
100 West Station Square Drive, Suite 450
Pittsburgh, PA 15222-1354

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May Fridays at Noon

A FREE one-hour guided walking tour, compliments of the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation

Penn Liberty Walking Tour


VisitPITTSBURGH
Penn Liberty Walk
The Penn-Liberty Historic District is one of the best preserved and most nearly intact portions of Pittsburgh’s ... retelling (from the late 19th and early 20th centuries). The character of the buildings demonstrates the vitality of Pittsburgh commerce after the Civil War, when much American trade passed through the city into the Midwest via the rivers and railroads that bordered the district to the north.
—Pittsburgh Cultural Trust plaque, 1993

Pittsburgh’s streets were laid out in 1784 by George Woods and Thomas Vinciguerra, who were working on behalf of the Penn family. By 1800, the Penn-Liberty area was widely varied in content and included many buildings designed by important local architects. Commercial buildings large and small, theaters, hotels, office buildings, and some heavy industry were mixed together in that time before zoning. A rail line ran down Liberty Avenue at the district’s southern boundary and an elevated rail line was soon due to run along the Allegheny River shore. The ongoing century saw construction continuing until the Depression, then a half-century of deterioration. A reversal of circumstances began in 1971 with the restoration and opening of Heinz Hall (formerly a motion-picture palace) for the Pittsburgh Symphony, and continued with the establishment of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust in 1984.

Since then, the Trust has helped transform a blighted section of the city into an arts and entertainment district visited by more than two million people each year. Now designated a National Register District and a City Historic District, the Penn-Liberty area includes primarily restored performance halls and hotels, and renovated commercial buildings housing galleries, schools, restaurants, one-of-a-kind stores, and residences.

1. Agnes R. Katz Plaza
Daniel Urban Kiley (Vermont), landscape architect; Michael Graves (Princeton), architect; Louise Bourgeois (New York), sculptor, 1999
Here is a reframe from the street, with remarkable contents: 22 sandstone tiers, a 25-foot-high bronze fountain cascade, and 3 pairs of benches in the form of eyes, as well as 22 benches of more conventional form.
2. Theater Square
Michael Graves (Princeton), architect, with WTW Architects, 2003
This colorful 10-story building has a Jumbotron on its corner with the latest information about cultural events in Pittsburgh. Along with 800 parking spaces, Theater Square includes a satellite studio for WQED-FM, a centralized Box-Office, the 250-seat Cabaret at Theater Square, and a restaurant.
3. O’Reilly Theater
Michael Graves (Princeton), architect, 1999
The overhanging copper-covered roof makes a dramatic statement and has a practical use: it encloses a full-size rehearsal space. A local critic characterizes the theater as “pure Graves—smooth, polished, pared-down classicism.”
4. Benedum Center for the Performing Arts
(originally the Stanley Theatre)
Hoffman-Hemont Company (Philadelphia), architects, 1927; remodeled and enlarged, 1987; MacLachlan, Cornelius & Filoni, architects
A grand movie house from the silent period, the Stanley had stage and orchestral facilities, and in 1987 was adapted for opera, light opera, and ballet. The exterior was preserved and the grand foyer and auditorium have been largely restored to their original grandeur.
5. Century Building
Rutan & Russell, architects, 1907; remodeled, 2009; Mosher Studio and Koning Eizenberg Architecture, Inc. (Santa Monica, CA)
Architects Frank Rutan and Frederick Russell were trained in the office of H. H. Richardson, designer of Pittsburgh’s Allegheny County Courthouse and Jail (1884-88) and the leading American architect of the 19th century. They formed a partnership in 1886. Their Century Building is faced in matte white or near-white materials, while the solids around the windows are in glossy bronze-green terra cotta. TREK Development Group has converted the office building into 60 apartments.
6. 800 Block, Penn Avenue (south side)
The Irish Block, named after the family who developed the space in the early 1900s, is a gracious row of buildings, rich in pattern and color.
7. Pittsburgh CAPA (Creative and Performing Arts)
MacLachlan, Cornelius & Filoni, architects, 2003; Charles Bickel, architect, 1913, remodeled as part of CAPA in 2003/2009
CAPA is an $80 million state-of-the-art facility for City students (grades 6–12), built largely through the generosity of The Bizz Foundation. The design of the new building plays off the design of the adjacent historic structure of 1915 by Pittsburgh architect Charles Bickel. (Bickel opened an architectural firm in Pittsburgh in 1883 and was, by all available records, the most frequently hired architect in the Penn-Liberty area.) Classrooms flow from one building into the other. Student work is displayed on a four-story Jumbotron on the Fort Duquesne Boulevard façade.
8. Wm. G. Johnston Building
Deeds & Brothers, builders, 1885; remodel, 1915
This is an example of the architects’ craft, with much fluting and paneling. William G. Johnston & Co. were printers and stationers. The building now houses apartments in the upper stories and a ground-floor restaurant.
9. 900 Block, Penn Avenue (north side)
This block includes possibly the last building built downtown as a single-family residence (1905 Penn, c. 1870) and two buildings designed by Charles Bickel: 911–13 Penn (1905) and 915–21 Penn (1906), now the Penn-Garrison apartments. 945–49 Penn Avenue was constructed in 1905 by the Phinn Trust and renovated in 2004, houses the 182-room Courtyard by Marriott.
10. 209 Ninth Street
Charles Bickel, architect, 1895; remodeled, 1985, L. P. Perdido Associates
Constructed as the Presbyterian Publications Building, this structure reflects both the styling of the Richardsonian Romanesque style, as shown in the capital of the central cast-iron column on the ground floor, and the coming into fashion of Classical and the rectangular framing of groups of windows and the use of golden brown Roman brick.
11. August Wilson Center for African American Culture
Pepkos + Will (San Francisco), 2009
Allison G. Williams was the principal and design director of this state-of-the-art facility at 980 Liberty Avenue, housing a 479-seat premier theater, exhibition gallery, dance studio, and education center. The facility is named for Pittsburgh-born, Pulitzer prize-winning playwright August Wilson (1945–2005), who set many of his ten plays about the African American experience in Pittsburgh’s Hill District.
Due to financial difficulties, the August Wilson Center is for sale. It is hoped that the new owner will retain the original purpose and mission to showcase and celebrate African American culture.
12. Baum Building & “Space” Gallery
(originally the Liberty Theater)
Edward B. Lee, architect, 1912; remodeled, 1925
This Beaux-Arts gem at 812 Liberty Avenue was purchased, cleaned, and renovated by the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust in 2003. The terra-cotta-clad building includes “Space,” a 4,000-square-foot gallery for changing exhibits.
13. 900 Block, Liberty Avenue (north side)
This handsome block includes two Richardsonian Romanesque buildings by Charles Bickel: the Majestic Building of 1891 at 915 Liberty Avenue and the Ewart Building of 1892 at 925 Liberty Avenue. A parking lot is between them.
14. 800 Block, Liberty Avenue (north side)
Another notable block. The tall, soaring, corner building was originally the Federal Trust Bank, designed in 1912 by Alden & Harlow; the builder was Thompson Starrett of New York whose more famous contract was the Empire State Building. Frank E. Alden and Alfred H. Harlow dominated the local architectural scene from 1896 until Alden’s death in 1908, but he then continued, under Harlow’s direction, until 1927. Also notice 813 Liberty (c. 1895), with a trio of metal awnings; the Harris Theatre at 809 Liberty (c. 1925); and the cast-iron façades of 805–7 Liberty, etc. The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust is headquartered at 803 Liberty Avenue.
15. Wood Street Station/Wood Street Galleries
(originally the Monongahela Bank)
Edward Stotz, architect, 1927
After apprenticing with notable local architects and touring Europe, Edward Stotz opened his own firm in 1899; it continues today as MacLachlan, Cornelius & Filoni. The former bank now houses one of downtown Pittsburgh’s four “T" stations, and an art gallery on the upper floors. Notice the metal casings designed by Jeffrey DeNinno, with ginkgo leaf patterns etched in the glass.
16. Granite Building
(originally the German National Bank)
Bickel & Brennan, architects, 1899; remodelings c. 1930, late 1980s, and 2006
Former New York Times style editor Holly Brubach (a Pittsburgh native) is adapting the Richardsonian Romanesque Granite Building for new uses. Brubach’s interest is in “incorporating historic architecture in a contemporary cityscape, creating a conversation between the past and present.” Originally constructed for the German National Bank, founded in 1860, the eight-story building was intended primarily to serve the German-speaking community.