

THE Center OF IT ALL

During the 1962 World's Fair, all eyes were on Seattle Center. Today, the city's gathering place is just as worthy of the attention.

BY HALEY SHAPLEY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ISAAC ARJONILLA

WHEN SEATTLE CENTER shot to fame during the 1962 World's Fair, it was a beacon of the future. After all, it housed a "World of Tomorrow" exhibit that made all kinds of predictions about what the 21st century would be like and featured as its centerpiece a new Space Age-themed landmark that's become the city's brand: the Space Needle.

While the name and notoriety of Seattle Center began in the 1960s, it all started, like some of life's most interesting stories, with a bar.

Pioneer Square saloonkeeper James Osborne had no heirs, so upon his death in 1881, he left \$20,000 to the city government for a civic hall. That came to fruition in 1928, when the Civic Auditorium was built on land that David and Louisa Boren Denny donated for "public use forever." Known as "the house that suds built" for its beer money roots, the auditorium became the anchor of what we know as Seattle Center today.

A few decades later, the area was deemed the best spot to hold an event that would catapult Seattle into the national and international spotlight. During the six-month heyday that was the World's Fair, Seattle Center included a food court, sports venues, performing arts buildings, science exhibits and an amusement park. The Monorail, still running today, carried 8 million people to and from downtown, easily paying for the cost of construction. While everyone was making bold predictions about what the future held per the theme of the fair, Seattle Center planners were forward-thinking in a quieter way.

"The organizers always had in mind that what would come out of the fair would be a civic gathering place," says Deborah Daoust, director of communications for Seattle Center. "That's unusual."







WORKS OF ART GRACE NEARLY EVERY CORNER OF SEATTLE CENTER, AN AREA BEGGING TO BE EXPLORED.

While we don't yet have the predicted rocket belts that enable a man to stride 30 feet, we do have a gathering place that still buzzes with the excitement it did more than 50 years ago, attracting a mix of travelers and locals to enjoy its charms.

The pièce de résistance remains the Space Needle, a tower that soars 605 feet in the air.

"It's that iconic piece of history, and it's also forward-thinking," says Dave Mandapat, director of public relations for the Space Needle, of the attraction's appeal. "It's where a lot of visitors come to get their bearings. You can get a much deeper dive into what Seattle has to offer, and it really does give you a chance to figure out where you're going to go next."

That next stop may very well be near the bottom of the Space Needle, where Chihuly Garden and Glass opened in 2012. Dale Chihuly has become famous the world over for his glassblowing, but he's particularly celebrated in his native Washington state. The Glasshouse is the first of its kind; a 100-foot-long suspended sculpture of red, orange, and amber tones lights up the glass-and-steel structure.

Even flashier than a giant ball of glass, EMP Museum makes its presence known with a brightly colored, futuristic building from architect Frank O. Gehry. The design was inspired by the parts of an electric guitar, fitting for a museum dedicated to rock 'n' roll. Beyond music, the exhibits explore science fiction and pop culture, from contemporary video games to horror films to Seahawks fandom.

If you have kids in tow, Seattle Children's Theatre produces high-quality shows that give children access to professional theater, while young 'uns and those young at heart will enjoy the Pacific Science Center's exhibits: a Tropical Butterfly House with 500 butterflies imported weekly, a Laser Dome

with lights choreographed to 15,000 watts of digital sound, IMAX theaters, and a High Rail Bicycle you can pedal 15 feet above the ground on a surface just 1 inch wide.

When you're ready to refuel, head to the Armory, originally built in 1939 to house the 146th Field Artillery and its half-ton tanks. Now it's known for nourishing the masses with fresh yet casual meals from Northwest chefs—consider it a next-level food court. It's a great place to get oriented, with maps of Seattle Center and an information booth. You may also get a little entertainment with your meal, as there are more than 3,000 free performances on the stage every year.

In fact, while the special events are indeed special, they're certainly not infrequent—you can't throw a stone anywhere around Seattle Center near summertime and not hit one or two. The main season is bookended by two big music and arts events: Northwest Folklife Festival, a Memorial Day weekend tradition, and Labor Day weekend's Bumbershoot. Winterfest during the holidays includes an ice rink, a turn-of-the-century village and train, internationally acclaimed ice sculptors, and performances galore. Any time of year, you may catch Festál, a series of 20-plus free events that honor the diversity of the Pacific Northwest. On the third Thursday of every month, Seattle's Best Damn Happy Hour gives the 21-and-up crew access to games—think Backgammon, Balderdash and Bananagrams—along with music, raffle prizes and, of course, deals on food and drinks.

For evening entertainment, there's nothing like a night out at the beautiful McCaw Hall, which began its life as the Civic Auditorium that James the barkeep so generously bequeathed. Pacific Northwest Ballet and Seattle Opera share the space as resident tenants, putting on about 150 shows a year between them. KeyArena, too, is always hopping, given a full schedule of nationally touring musical acts, Seattle Storm basketball games, and bouts between the Rat City Rollergirls, the city's all-female, flat-track roller derby league.

For those original planners who wanted to leave a legacy of a public gathering space, mission accomplished. Part of the beauty, though, is that you can visit none of these places and still have a good time. "Even if you don't step inside a building, there's so much to see," Daoust says.

You're bound to stroll past a roaming musician, a skate park with just two rules (have fun and don't be a jerk), a group of yogis in tree pose and laughing children trying to stay beyond the changing splash line of the International Fountain.

"On the surface, you don't really see that much until you start digging in and exploring," Daoust says. "Then you realize there's a really vibrant world here."

The Inside Scoop

> What's in a name?

Needleland, Pleasure Island and Pacifica were all name changes contemplated for Seattle Center. It spent two years as Century 21 Center after the World's Fair.

> Taking flight:

The Space Needle planned to have a stork's nest on top, until the sad realization that storks aren't fans of Pacific Northwest weather.

> Lads from

Liverpool: The Beatles' first concert in Washington was at the Seattle Center Coliseum (now KeyArena) in 1964. The stage was raised 12 feet for their protection.

> Smells like rain:

Bumbershoot is another term for umbrella—which locals famously carry less often than you would think given the precipitation frequency.

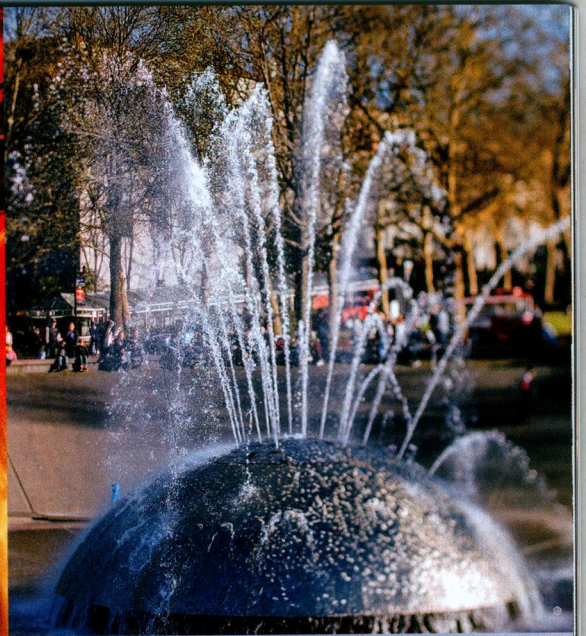
> Pressing matters:

The most common question the information center gets: "Where are the bathrooms?" (Good news—if you've made it there, you're really close!)

> A good cause:

When you park in one of Seattle Center's garages, the fees go to support programming and upkeep of the grounds.

> Heavy load: The Monorail can carry the weight of 4.25 adult male elephants and reach a top speed of 45 mph. A one-way ticket is \$2.25, cash only.



A CENTER FOR ARTS AND CULTURE, SEATTLE CENTER IS FILLED WITH ARTWORK, INCLUDING INTERACTIVE PIECES LIKE SONIC BLOOM (BOTTOM RIGHT).

