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Dan Morey's guides

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Rochester: an Architectural Tour

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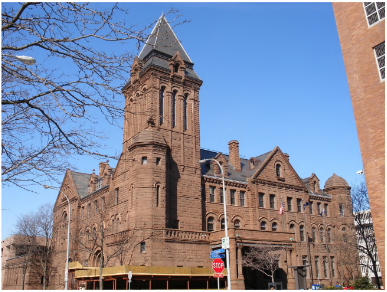
Like its Rust Belt neighbor, Buffalo, Rochester is an upstate New York town in the midst of a comeback. Downtown is being revitalized and people want to live there again. Developers are trying to keep pace by converting old buildings into condos and apartments. Amid these reinventions some old favorites have been lost (Midtown Plaza), but many more have benefited. The wonderful restorations of the Medical Arts Building and Main Street Armory are notable examples. Use this guide to experience Rochester's wealth of historic architecture, from Romanesque Revival to Art Deco and beyond.



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Historic City Hall

30 Church Street, Rochester, NY 14614-1205

City Hall is an excellent example of Romanesque Revival architecture in Rochester. It was built in the late 1880s and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. The turreted Portland sandstone exterior resembles a fortress, and could certainly function as one with its 18-inch thick walls. Be sure to go inside to explore the stunning atrium. The floor features a mosaic representation of the Genesee River, and there are three stories of symmetrical arches and marble columns. Portraits of Rochester's mayors and lots of civic memorabilia are on display.

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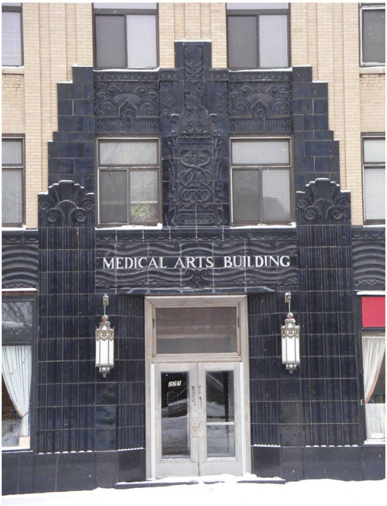

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Medical Arts Building

277 Alexander St #307, Rochester, NY 14607, USA

This eye-catching ten-story Art Deco building on Alexander Street was built in 1929 to house medical offices. The two-tone black-and-white facade features all kinds of stylized Deco motifs. I love the two intertwining snakes over the front door-- a caduceus meant to symbolize medicine, but actually representative of the Greek god Hermes. The building was recently purchased by Flower City Management, restored to its former glory, and converted into a retail/commercial/apartment complex with a very innovative geothermal heating/cooling system.

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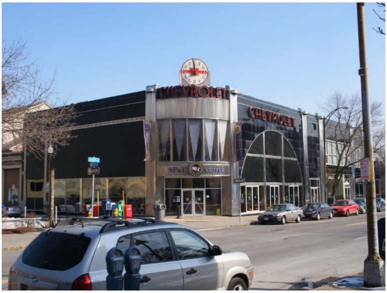

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Spot Coffee

200 East Ave, Ste 2, Rochester, NY 14604-2698

This branch of the popular upstate coffee chain is located in a former (1936) Chevrolet dealership showroom. The design of the building is classic streamlined Art Deco with an unusual arched window and two-tone black and metallic color scheme. The neon Chevrolet signs are still in place, as is the old clock with its red

Chevy logo. In addition to Spot Coffee's much loved brews you can get wraps, pizza, sandwiches, salads, breakfast, and dessert. Eat in or take away.

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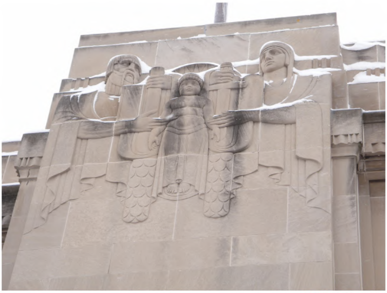

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Rundel Memorial Building

115 South Ave Rochester, NY 14604 United States

Another great Gordon & Kaelber designed building to make the National Register of Historic Places in Rochester. The Rundel Memorial Building was constructed in 1932 with funds from the estate of art dealer Morton W. Rundel and still serves as the old wing of the Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County (the new wing is across the street, connected by underground walkway). Look for the amazing Art Deco relief work at the top of the Indiana limestone façade, and enjoy great views of the Genesee River, which the building abuts, from the back windows.

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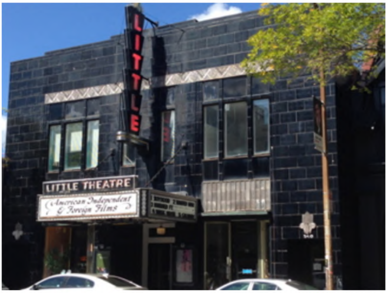

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The Little Theatre & Cafe

240 East Ave, Rochester, NY 14604

This small Art Deco movie theater opened in 1929 as part of the "little cinema movement" that sought to showcase experimental and offbeat films in an intimate environment. It has stayed true to its mission and still screens lots of indie and foreign movies. There is also a cafe (adjacent building) with food, frequent live music, and art shows. The theater facade is shimmering black tile with Art Deco details and a vertical neon sign. Inside, the seats and display cases are also original Deco. One of my favorite places in Rochester!

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Auditorium Theater

885 E Main St, Rochester, NY 14605

This 1929 former Masonic Hall is a designated Rochester landmark. The building is full of ornate meeting halls, lounges and offices, as well as a 2,400 seat auditorium that was used for Masonic theatricals and ceremonies. Art Deco ornamentation abounds both inside and out, along with some nifty neo-medieval flourishes. Due to dropping membership, the Masons sold the complex in the 1980s. It's now home to the Rochester Broadway Theatre League, who book touring shows in the auditorium. The rest of the building is occupied by various businesses.

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Rochester Fire Department Headquarters

185 N Chestnut St, Rochester, NY 14604, USA

This two-building complex (shops and headquarters) was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985, and is one of my favorite Art Deco fire departments. Along with the Little Theatre (1928), these 1936 buildings are among the only remaining low-rise Art Deco structures in Rochester's Inner Loop. You will find excellent relief carvings, including lettering and firefighting iconography (axes, lanterns, wheels, even telephone dials) galore. The front door, flanked by towering twin firefighter sculptures and topped with intricate axe-motif metalwork, is the highlight.

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Radisson Hotel Rochester Riverside

120 East Main Street, Rochester, NY 14604

Large, full-service hotel on the banks of the Genesee River in downtown Rochester. Can't beat the view or the location; easy access to everything downtown, and they even have a skyway that connects to the convention center. With bike rentals and a free airport shuttle, the Radisson has plenty of transportation options. It's also pet friendly and has a seasonal outdoor pool. The restaurant, Legends Sports Bar, serves up tasty pub grub and plenty of sports action on big screen TVs.

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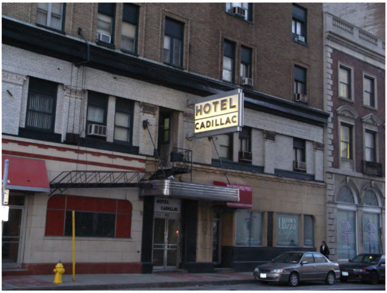

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Cadillac Hotel -- CLOSED

45 Chestnut St, Rochester, NY 14604, United States

The Cadillac Hotel was a swanky place 90 years ago, and you can still see remnants of that era on its facade: Corinthian pilasters, vintage Art Deco sign, streamlined metal canopy... Inside, however, it's a different story. The Cadillac is one of those hotels that's been bad for so long it's become infamous. Crimes are often reported here, and it's frequently used for emergency housing when the homeless shelters are full. Word is that the Cadillac will soon be redeveloped into condos or student housing.

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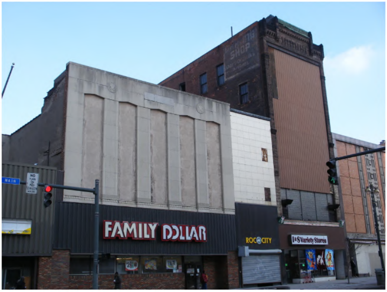

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Family Dollar

176 E Main St, Rochester, NY 14604, USA

This store is located in an area of downtown Rochester that has certainly seen better days. Like many downtowns in the Rust Belt this stretch of Main Street would've once been home to jewelers, shoe and clothing stores, bakeries, etc. You can tell by the pilastered Art Deco facade of this Family Dollar store that it was at one time a fairly glamorous shopping destination. Now it's about the only place to get basic groceries and household items in this food desert neighborhood.

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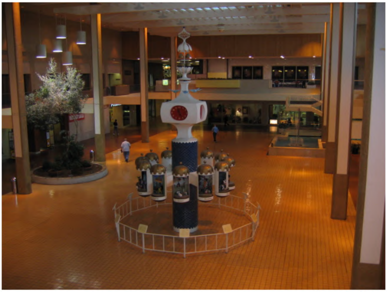

AdsitAdventures flickr

Clock of Nations

1200 Brooks Ave, Rochester, NY 14624, USA

This unusual clock was the centerpiece of Rochester's Midtown Plaza (the first indoor downtown shopping mall in the United States), for half a century. When the city tore down the plaza in 2008, the clock was restored and moved to the Greater Rochester International Airport, where it remains. The Clock of Nations is a beloved piece of nostalgia that features in many childhood Christmas memories. A lot of people are hoping it will be moved to a more accessible location. The clock's mechanized dioramas depict scenes from 12 different world nations, including Israel, Nigeria and Germany.

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Times Square Building

45 Exchange Blvd, Rochester, NY 14614, United States

The 14-floor Art Deco Times Square Building is my favorite skyscraper in Rochester. Its construction began in 1929 on a very inauspicious day: October 29th, or "Black Tuesday." Yes, the cornerstone for a building that would become the Genesee Valley Trust Bank was laid on the day of the worst stock market crash in U.S. history. Fortunately, the building (designed by Ralph Thomas Walker) was completed and survives today, long after the bank failed. Its distinctive feature is the sculptured rooftop finial known as "The Wings of Progress," an Art Deco icon and master of the Rochester skyline.

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EASTMAN
SCHOOL OF
MUSIC

ADpianist Skyscanner

Eastman School of Music/Theatre

26 Gibbs St, Rochester, NY, United States

The Eastman School of Music was founded in 1921 by George Eastman of Eastman Kodak fame. It's one of the world's premier music schools (enrollment is around 900 undergraduate and graduate students) and has produced numerous famous musicians over the decades, including Charles Daellenbach of the Canadian Brass and soprano Renée Fleming. The school (spread across five downtown buildings) houses the Sibley Music Library (largest in North America) and the curving, Beaux Arts style Eastman Theater. There are student recitals going on all the time and they're free to attend.

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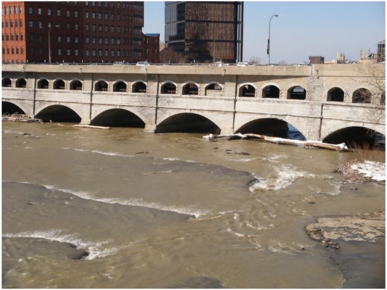

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Broad Street Aqueduct

Broad St, Rochester, NY 14608, USA

The Erie Canal once had 32 navigable aqueducts. This one, on Broad Street in Rochester, was constructed between 1836 and 1842 to cross over the Genesee River. After the canal closed, the aqueduct was used as a bridge for auto traffic and a tunnel for the Rochester Subway. It's 800 feet long and 70 feet wide, and made the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. You can walk through it or even take a tour. The interior walls are covered with graffiti.

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Rochester Abandoned Subway

W Broad St, Rochester, NY 14608, USA

When the Erie Canal closed in 1919, the city of Rochester was left with a big, empty canal bed. It was decided, quite ingeniously, that this would be the ideal place to start a subway system. The Rochester Industrial and Rapid Transit Railway opened in 1927, and peaked during the WW II era. In the mid-50s City Council voted to close the subway and build an expressway over it. Tunnels can still be found and explored, including a two-mile stretch under Broad Street. Watch out for rodents and hobos. Very spooky at night!

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Rochester Skyway

Rochester, New York State, USA

The Skyway is a great way to get around Rochester, especially in the winter. Though a few sections are a bit chilly, it's always warmer than outside. The Skyway connects numerous buildings (Riverside Convention Center, Radisson Hotel, etc.) on the east side of the river, bridges streets, even goes underground. There are building foyers and intersections and escalators at various points, but if you follow the circular blue and white Skyway signs they will keep you on the right path.

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Mercury Statue

50 E Broad Street, New York, United States

This 700 pound 21 foot tall statue of Mercury, Roman god of commerce, is a true local landmark. It was created by J. Guernsey Mitchell, and paid for by his brother-in-law, William Kimball, owner of William S. Kimball Tobacco Factory on the corner of Court and Exchange. The statue is made of copper plates from the old John Siddons Co. on East Main Street. Kimball installed the god atop one of his smokestacks, where it remained until the tobacco factory's demolition in 1951. It was moved to the top of the Aqueduct Building in 1973.

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East Avenue Historic District

East Avenue Rochester, New York 14607

East Avenue is one of those stately streets you find in most Rust Belt towns. During the region's industrial heyday, freshly minted millionaires built their big houses and cathedrals along it. When the factories shut down, many such thoroughfares were decimated (Euclid Ave. in Cleveland for instance), but Rochester was wise enough to preserve many of its old mansions. The East Avenue Historic District contains some 700 buildings, including houses (Sibley, Boynton, Strong-Todd), churches (St. Paul's, Third Presbyterian) and museums (Eastman House, Memorial Art Gallery). One of Rochester's great walks.

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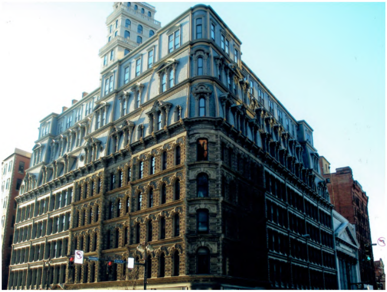

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The Powers Building

16 E Main St, Rochester, NY 14614, USA

The Powers Building started out as a five story structure in 1868, but had grown to eight floors (plus an observation tower) by 1890. Its owner, Daniel Powers, was determined to have the tallest building in Rochester, so every time a bigger structure went up, he added a story. The Powers Building was revolutionary. It used steel frame construction and had the first elevator (a.k.a. Vertical Railroad) in upstate New York. It was later the first to be electrified. The building underwent a thorough restoration in 1990 and is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

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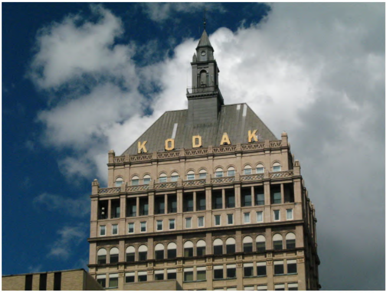

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Kodak Tower

343 State St, Rochester, NY 14650, United States

The architectural firm of Gordon & Kaelber designed this 19 story French Renaissance skyscraper in the High Falls neighborhood of Rochester in 1912 (completed 1914). At 360 feet (including the antenna) Kodak Tower was the tallest building in Rochester until the 1960s. It was built to house the headquarters of the Eastman Kodak Company, and still does, making it a historic monument to the art of film photography. Notable architectural features include a mansard roof and Gothic steeple. At night, the neon Kodak sign glows red and is visible for miles.

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Xerox Tower

Xerox Tower, 100 S Clinton Ave, Rochester, NY 14604, USA

This 443-foot skyscraper is the tallest building in Rochester, and third tallest in New York, outside of NYC. It was constructed in 1967 of poured concrete, and was the headquarters of the Xerox Corporation for decades. It sits in the center of a nearly 3 acre complex (plaza, parking garage, etc.) known as Xerox Square. Xerox, however, sold the plaza and tower in 2013 for $40 million. Xerox (Rochester's 4th largest employer) still leases space in the building. Check out the series of cool inverted pyramids employed in the tower's base.

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Rochester Main Street Armory

900 E Main St, Rochester, NY 14605, USA

Rochester's castle-like Old Armory was built by the United States Army in 1905 and used for processing and training soldiers. Its 35,000 square foot arena was also home to a pro basketball team (Rochester Centrals), lacrosse team, and many events, from car shows to circuses, over the decades. It was abandoned in 1990, but restored in the mid-2000s, and now hosts concerts, wrestling matches and numerous other functions. The building was designed by George L. Heins, who was famous for his fortress-style Romanesque armories.

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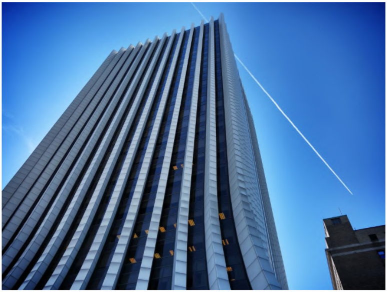

robef flickr

The Metropolitan

195 E. Main Street Rochester, NY 14604 United States

This 392-foot skyscraper (third tallest in Rochester) was known as the Chase Tower until 2015 when it was purchased by Gallina Development. Gallina plans to revamp the building and add condos to the top four floors (there are 27 total). Future occupants will surely appreciate its famously fast "rocket" elevators (1,000 feet per minute). The tower was designed by John Graham & Company in 1973 and is known for its white vertical fins (once marble, now aluminum). Notice how the building curves out at the base. Reminds me of a waterfall...a nice homage to Rochester's High Falls.

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693
STRONG-TODD
HOUSE

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Strong-Todd House

693 East Ave, Rochester, NY 14607, United States

This mansion in Rochester's East Avenue Historic District was designed by architect J. Foster Warner for Eastman Kodak's first president, Henry Strong, in 1902. Libanus Todd, a businessman, purchased the estate in 1926, and later, during the Great Depression, used it as the model for his Todd Plan, which employed jobless men to improve houses. The plan was implemented across the country and inspired President Roosevelt to start public works programs like the WPA and CCC. The mansion now houses offices, a massage center and Baha'i religious space.

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Genesee Brew House

445 St Paul St, Rochester, NY 14605

The Genesee Brewing Company has been making beer on the Genesee River in Rochester, NY since 1878. The old, yellow, sprawling brewery is an icon in the High Falls neighborhood. Though the company is no longer independent (it's owned by the North American Breweries conglomerate), they still brew a working class beer for a working class town. They also do a craft-inspired line under the Dundee Ales and Lagers label. Dundee Oktoberfest is a great marzen, and very reasonably priced. You can tour the Genesee Brew House at 25 Cataract Street.

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Reynolds Arcade Building

16 E Main St, Rochester, NY 14614, USA

The original Reynolds Arcade opened in 1829 and was one of Rochester's most important downtown buildings for over a century. It was razed (old construction made it a fire hazard) and replaced in 1932 by this ten-story steel-framed Art Deco arcade. The exterior is limestone and the interior features a variety of shops and businesses, including a shoe shine, barber shop and Armed Forces Recruiting Office. It was one of the first air-conditioned buildings in Rochester and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

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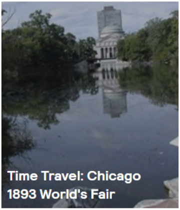

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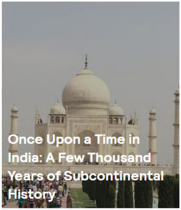

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