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TRAVEL + LEISURE

THE GREAT
AMERICAN SUMMER

GRUNGE



Tech money is transforming Seattle,
bringing with it a newly polished
populace. Can it also establish
the Pacific Northwest city
as an art and culture powerhouse?

BY CARL SWANSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE LAURIDSEN

GROWS UP

INFINITE WORLDS

ON THE 40-MINUTE LIGHT-RAIL RIDE FROM SEATTLE'S WELL-POLISHED AIRPORT TO DOWNTOWN.

I couldn't help thinking of the city's other train, the famous *Jetsons*-age monorail built for the 1962 World's Fair. It once represented an idea of Seattle's future—but it was clear to me as I watched the city go by that that future has arrived, and was being built and rebuilt right before my eyes.

Of course, the spectacular geography is as I've always known it, since I started coming here to visit friends and family a decade ago: against the dark Puget Sound with Mount Rainier off in the misty distance, it remains one of the most gorgeously improbable urban settings. But the city that always seemed a bit unsure that it wanted to commit to even being a city—maybe it was better to just go for a hike instead?—is now a cluster of busy cranes. Before my visit, the *Seattle Times* had reported that it has become the crane capital of America, with 62, triple the number in New York City, which had the most in 2015. Ten thousand new housing units are opening this year, which is a lot for any city, let alone one with 700,000 residents.


Emerging onto the surface of the city at the University Street station, near the Seattle Art Museum (SAM), it was easy to forget the easygoing, somewhat threadbare place Seattle was in the aftermath of the grunge years, when it had a bit more of an informal, ragamuffin vibe. It was a time when people I knew from college moved out here to build an agreeable alt-civilization tucked safely away off the global grid, with convenient skiing. My friend Tricia Romano, the editor of the alternative weekly *The Stranger*, who had lived here in the 1990s and then returned a few years ago, told me recently that back then “it was all about independent businesses and the ‘underground.’” Now the place that I used to think of as Berlin in the Cascades has morphed into something else, like that amiable stoner friend from college who, when you do a Facebook deep-dive, suddenly you find has become a Silicon Valley big shot with a house out of an HBO miniseries.

There's lots to recommend about the grown-up Seattle, of course: I stayed at the sleek new Thompson hotel, which is an elegant place that could be anywhere prosperous in the world, only with a jaw-dropping view of the sound from my room and an excellent locally owned restaurant, Scout. The city is only becoming slicker: up the hill from the hotel, Amazon is building a

Opposite:
A sculpture by
Dale Chihuly
at the Seattle
Center.





A photograph of a brick wall with a window and a chair. The brick wall is light-colored and textured. The window is dark-framed and has several panes. A black metal chair is visible in the foreground on the left side.

What I once thought of as the Berlin of the Cascades has morphed into something else.

\$4 billion campus that centers on three interconnected biospheres containing waterfalls, a river, and tree-house-like overlooks, all kept at 72 degrees, with 60 percent humidity, a climate similar to Costa Rica's Central Valley. I imagine it as a fantasy terrarium for nerds, a sort of amniotic playground for the digital ruling class.

From Boeing to Costco to Microsoft to Starbucks (and even Nirvana), Seattle has long been home to a surprising number of innovations and innovative brands, and the wealth that they bring. Early money was in timber, then shipping, and now big data. The current digital boom has made it more populous, and richer, than it ever has been in its history, thanks, most prominently, to Amazon, but also to companies like Google and Facebook and Alibaba, which have set up shop in its orbit. As a global tech hub, it is also a lot more transient and increasingly expensive. From 2015 to 2016, 86,000 moved in, and one city official told me that 70 percent of the population has lived there for under five years. As a result, the once bohemian city on a constrained, hilly isthmus between the sound and Lake Washington has become a mainstay on those "least affordable places" lists. This just in: the prices of downtown condos jumped nearly 50 percent year over year. Like San Francisco, it is filled with young, educated, often very well-paid people.

Almost as a first order of business, the new wealth demanded good food, and the city is now awash in culinary achievement both high and low (see: Chinapie, a popular pizza and dumplings joint). Romano said the skaters have now been replaced by foodies. "It seems like that's all people want to do when they hang out," she said. "I don't get asked by friends to go to shows, plays, museum openings, but to dinner and drinks." She does have friends who are interested in culture, but fine dining seems to be the default social currency. "We have so much food. I'm so sick of food," she told me, sounding mock-weary of the city's increasingly elaborate rounds of cutting-edge delectation.

But even as the area has become wealthier, more global, and more delicious, many locals have been frustrated about what they see as a lack of other, non-outdoorsy things to do.

Clockwise from top left: Pivot Art & Culture, a contemporary space opened by Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen; London Pane, a small-plates restaurant near Occidental Square; a work by Richard Serra at the Olympic Sculpture Park.



If the property values are heading the way of San Francisco, it's time for the cultural offerings to catch up.

"We have everything that you need, but we just don't have much of it," Romano said. There's good theater, the excellent Elliot Bay Book Co., and some legendary music venues—Neumos and the Showbox and the Crocodile. Pioneer Square and Capitol Hill have monthly "art walks," which are well attended, even if they are as much social events as opportunities for collectors to browse.

If the property values are heading in the direction of sister digital city San Francisco, goes the thinking, it's time for the cultural offerings to catch up. And there are encouraging signs. Olivia Kim, another New York friend who was lured out to Seattle a couple of years ago to take a big creative job at Nordstrom, is one of the optimists. Over breakfast at a place called Mr. West, which she noted approvingly could be in Brooklyn, she said Seattle was increasingly interested in fashion, art, style—things that in the past didn't seem to have a big impact. "Culture. We're begging for it here," she said.

If there's one person in Seattle who has long been supportive of the arts, it's Paul Allen, a founder of Microsoft and a prominent arts philanthropist (and owner of the Seahawks football team). Sue Coliton, who for more than a decade oversaw Allen's cultural grants, put things in perspective over dinner at Eden Hill, an exquisite storefront restaurant in the quaint neighborhood of Queen Anne.

"When I moved here eighteen years ago," she said, "what struck me was the deep history of literature and music." She was referring to the city's old guard, who liked their cultural evenings to be traditional and discreet. "The

visual arts were very conservative. You could see that at the Seattle Art Museum. Fabergé eggs was the big show."

Vulcan, Allen's foundation, has built or financed a host of cultural projects all over the city, including the recent Pivot Art & Culture,

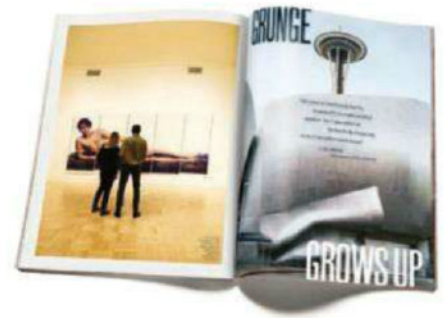


Above: The view from the Thompson Suite at the Thompson Seattle.
Opposite: The iridescent skin of Frank Gehry's Museum of Pop Culture.

a contemporary art space that opened in one of Allen's buildings in Lake Union, the formerly industrial zone where Amazon and other tech firms have their offices. Pivot sponsored SAM's exhibition "Seeing Nature," which consists of 39 European and American landscape paintings, from Jan Brueghel the Younger's allegorical series of the five senses through to Monet, Manet, Georgia O'Keeffe, Edward Hopper, Gerhard Richter, and Ed Ruscha.

These join other blue-chip art spaces sponsored by the city's tech billionaires, like the Olympic Sculpture Park, a nine-acre outdoor museum with works by Calder, Mark di Suvero, Richard Serra, and Louise Bourgeois on a former industrial site down the hill from the Space Needle. It opened in 2007 with support from John Shirley, the former president of Microsoft and a prominent art collector who now organizes (with Vulcan) the three-year-old Seattle Art Fair. It brings out-of-town galleries, including global heavyweights like (Continued on page 121)

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David Zwirner, to complement the work of ambitious local galleries like James Harris and Mariane Ibrahim, which are in a building full of mostly emerging spaces in Pioneer Square called the TK Lofts. (On view when I was there: a “collaborative multimedia experience” about the LGBTQ experience by the artist Laura Rodriguez.)

If the city is becoming something of a serious art town, that’s because, as Shirley told me, “it’s the thing that happens in any city in which people want to live.”

The SAM, which was founded in 1933 by a prominent local doctor with a taste for Asian art, has been run since 2012 by Kimerly Rorschach, who has been trying to put it on the contemporary-art map. “I came here because I thought, *What are these global companies going to mean for the Seattle Art Museum?*” she said when I met her in her corner office amid the skyscrapers downtown. “Huge things are happening, and, as you know, any art museum is tied to the fate of its city.”

She said that Seattle has responded enthusiastically to her contemporary and experimental programs, mentioning the long lines that weekend for Jacob Lawrence’s amazing Migration Series—a depiction of African-Americans moving to the North to find jobs and freedom. She expects an upcoming Yayoi Kusama exhibition to be a blockbuster.

Sylvia Wolf, the director of the Henry Art Gallery, a museum at the University of Washington, just northeast of downtown, has been on the vanguard of contemporary art for years. As soon as I met her, she took me to the museum’s James Turrell “Skyspace”—officially named, in →

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what must be a kind of terrible pun on the local weather, *Light Reign*—and she told me that “the whole place has changed in the nine years since I’ve been here. It’s been explosive and exponential. It’s incredible.”

Wolf came out west from the Whitney Museum, in New York City, where she was a photography curator; one of the Henry’s strengths has always been its photography collection. On my visit, she walked me through an extensive Chuck Close show, and we peered into a gallery where workers were packing up Paul McCarthy’s enormous, perverse, Bernini-esque sculptures of Disney characters.

Across town is the Museum of Pop Culture at the Seattle Center, which started out in 2000 as the Experience Music Project, another Paul Allen initiative. This one indulges his enduring fascination with rock music (don’t forget, Jimi Hendrix was a local). The multicolored crumpled blob by Frank Gehry is not considered one of the architect’s more successful compositions (locals dubbed it “the hemorrhoid”) and as a curatorial endeavor has had its fits and starts. But as a monument to nerd culture, it’s definitely worth the trip. Nearby, the legendary radio station WEXP—which you can stream anywhere—has built out lavish studios and a coffee shop and performance space from which you can watch DJs work behind glass. John Gilbreath, a jazz DJ I met through Coliton, showed me the station’s grunge reliquary, where original recordings by Nirvana and Green River are kept on display, complete with DJ commentary scrawled on the sleeves. (“These guys will be remembered for years to come because they know how to write HOOKS!” wrote one prescient employee. Another complained: “Four months in rotation?” with an arrow pointing to that famous *Nevermind* cover with an infant swimming toward money. “This little brat probably has armpit hair by now!”)

You can’t overstate the role music still plays in Seattle. One night Gilbreath, who is also the executive director of the arts group Earshot Jazz, drove me up to Café Racer, near the university, to watch earnest and

fresh-faced young people play avant-garde jazz with systematic passion. (Maybe Ryan Gosling’s character in *La La Land* had given them all hope.) The room was filled with vintage paintings—including an entire wall of clowns. Gilbreath told me, drolly, “The bad thing about Seattle is you can always make a living as an artist here.”

So what is left of the city’s edginess? For the most part it has moved south, near Boeing Field. One afternoon, I journeyed out to Georgetown, an industrial neighborhood on the south side of the city where the artists have had to move, to meet S. Surface, a gallerist who prefers to be referred to with the pronoun “they.” Surface is one of the partners in a space called the Alice and came to Seattle from New York City two years ago. They were wearing large earrings that read FEMINIST on one ear, 4 LIFE on the other. We went to Sisters & Brothers, a kitschy fried-chicken joint overlooking an airstrip, where they talked about the sense of possibility that still exists in a place like Seattle, if it doesn’t give in to consumerism.

The Alice is in a creaky old building with a series of cluttered, making-things-up-as-they-go-along art spaces. The gallery had just closed a group show called “Everyone’s in 3-D,” which was, to say the least, delightfully loosely curated. Some of the works were still there the day I stopped by, including a spangled banana called *Fetish Still Life*. Upstairs, in an attic-like space, the gallery Interstitial was showing post-Internet work, including the arresting, fragmented, selfie-inspired surreality of the feminist video artist Kathleen Daniel. A few blocks away is what is probably the most elaborate

space, Studio E, which was originally supposed to be a lighting showroom but has morphed, by happenstance, into a gallery that looks like it could be in New York’s West Chelsea art-gallery district.

All are well worth an Uber trek. The whole area still feels like a frontier town, and the margaritas at El Sirenito, a biker bar turned Mexican restaurant, are a great end to any adventure. But given the fact there’s a place called A Dog’s Dream Natural Pet Supply a few doors down, you should go before the forces of gentrification shake even this place.

The scruffy optimism of Georgetown reminded me of a friend from college, Grant Cogswell, who moved to Seattle in the mid 1990s and became a municipal celebrity for a while. Cogswell started a crusade to extend that old stubby, retro-futuristic monorail throughout the city. His plan, impractical and visionary, actually won a ballot initiative in 1997 (by a six-point margin), and, when the city put up roadblocks, he ran for city council (and lost). His quixotic story was turned into a movie called *Grassroots*. “Seattle then was L.A. in 1952,” he said in one old article I found when I Googled him (he’s since decamped to Mexico City). “I thought we could still turn the tide.”

Instead, the city was flooded with money, and talent, and ambition, and this brave new sense of itself as a city of the world, not a place tucked away from it. Even the locals aren’t sure what it will look like in five years with all the new people and all the high-rises crowding the sky. But the food is great. And while the light rail I rode in on from the airport might not be a monorail, it got built and works well. ■

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