

Smith Tower Views

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When in February 1913 the last rivets were punctured into its steel skeleton, the Smith Tower was, at last, "topped-off." Residents, who normally would be gazing at the ring of sublime scenery that surrounds this city, had for more than a year been looking inward at the city's center and upward at the steadily scaling colossus of their very own "largest building west of . . ." almost everywhere.

Now with 42 stories attached to the horizon, anyone could imagine a trip to the top. However, only a few, like the Webster & Stevens photographer of this week's historic panorama (above right) could arrange an early ride up through the skinless structure to the exposed 35th-floor observation platform. The general public would settle for the photographic record of what they would only see more than a year hence at the July 4, 1914, official opening of the Smith Tower.

As the photographer was transported to the top, in every direction the views were surprising. Especially to the north where — at the 20th floor — Lake Union appeared suddenly. Beyond that the developing suburbs stretched on to the forest. What the photographer finally framed from the 35th floor in the spring of 1913 still can be compared in a few details with what can be seen nearly 70 years later (below right).

The roof of the Central Building is evident in the lower left portions of both views. More elegant remnants are seen in both on the lower right: the Rainier Club, built in 1904 and added onto later, and behind it the classical third home of Seattle's first congregation, the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Just right of center in the old view is Providence Hospital. First occupied in 1883, its seven-story cross-topped central tower was a landmark until it was torn down in August of 1914. Today, the Federal Courthouse, which in the contemporary photograph can be seen between the Bank of California and a hotel being built, The Madison, fills the hospital's old block facing Fifth Avenue

between Madison and Spring Streets.

When the Federal Courthouse was completed in the early 1940s it was the city's first sizable modern structure.

In the historical view, there are many more landmarks still remembered by thousands. We'll name and locate a few.

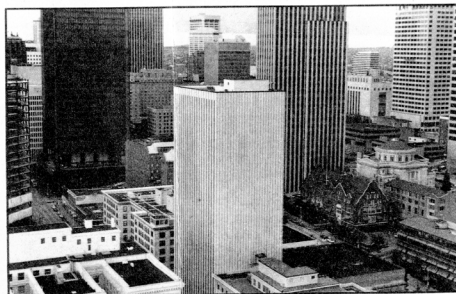
Starting with the old Carnegie Library, just left of center, we move west across the street to the Lincoln Hotel at the northwest corner of Fourth Avenue and Madison Street. The Lincoln and its roof garden were destroyed by fire April 6, 1920. Today the Seafirst Building fills that spot. The library, with its contemplative classical facade, was leveled in the mid-1950s. The new library is hidden behind the 23 stories of the white-ribbed Pacific Building in the foreground.

Across Spring Street from the old library, the dark bulk of the old McNaught Mansion is silhouetted against the back wall of the Metropolitan Theater's stage. The theater opened the night of Oct. 2, 1911, with a performance of "Jumping Jupiter," and in 1924 was surrounded and later absorbed by the Olympic Hotel. The recently renovated Olympic is seen, in the contemporary photograph, just to the right of the Seafirst Building.

To the left of the Metropolitan Theater is the southern wall of the White-Henry Building. In 1914, the Stuart would be added to fill the block, and later all would be leveled for the Rainier Tower.

To the right of the theater is the old Hippodrome dance and exhibition hall, at the present site of the Skinner Building, and to the right of that the chancel end of Plymouth Congregational Church. The church's white tower, which faced Sixth Avenue between Seneca and University Streets, is evident just above the center of the photograph.

There are at least seven other church steeples on the horizon. Most of them are attached to modest Gothic structures built to serve the working-class families that lived between downtown and Lake Union in the greater Cascade neighborhood.



The most evident is the Immanuel Lutheran Church at Pontius Avenue and Thomas Street. It is silhouetted against the lake, as is Cascade Elementary School just to its right. The school is gone, but the church still stands and serves.

Across Lake Union the treeless streets of Wallingford line up as far west as Stone Way. There the old Stone Way Bridge connects across the lake with the boardwalk along Westlake. To the north, Stone Way, which still divides Wallingford from Fremont, extends past the forest of Woodland Park to the southern shores of Green Lake.

For half a century, until the Space Needle was opened in 1962, the Smith Tower was the optical axis for the ring of spectacular views that surround Seattle, and for the city itself. Some still prefer it.

Today's view from the same spot is utterly altered. The lake is virtually hidden, though a few old structures remain.