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Downtown Pittsburgh's Skinny Building has a storied past and an uncertain future


It's been home to burgers, art and drama.




At left, the Skinny Building. COURTESY OF PITTSBURGH HISTORY & LANDMARKS FOUNDATION

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At the corner of Wood Street and Forbes Avenue, Downtown, sits one of Pittsburgh's most iconic and peculiar buildings, and though it's been partially empty for years, it could soon take on a new life.

It's easy to miss. You don't have to crane your neck skyward to see it, you can't go inside, and you might walk past not realizing it's actually its own building.

At 5-feet, 2-inches wide, and 80-feet long, the "Skinny Building" has been a fixture near Market Square since the early 1900s, and it still commands attention and curiosity. Also known as the Hendel Building, it houses a ground-floor retail operation and narrow display space on the second and third floors.

Incline reader Lenore Harris, 58, of North Huntingdon, said she's "constantly dragging (her) family everywhere for funky stuff" like the Skinny Building. A history buff with a preservation mindset, she hopes Pittsburghers "embrace the quirkiness" of its construction. She brought her fascination with the building to Peculiar Pittsburgh to ask:

What is the future (and the past) of the Skinny Building, located Downtown?

The Urban Redevelopment Authority owns the building, and it turns out that it's considering selling it later this year, Executive Director Robert Rubinstein told *The Incline this week*, leaving the future of the building up to a new owner.

But before its future changes, here's what you need to know about its past.

The Skinny Building of the past

First, let's go back to the 1920s.

Accounts of the building's origins vary widely, but all agree that Forbes Avenue (then called Diamond Street) was widened and that took away a private landowner's property.

Some reports say that a larger building was cut into what's now the Skinny Building. Others say [a man named Hugh McKee](https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/the-skinny-building-an-unlikely-preservation-success-story-for-an-unlikely-downtown-structure/Content?oid=1768464) (https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/the-skinny-building-an-unlikely-preservation-success-story-for-an-unlikely-downtown-structure/Content?oid=1768464) erected the building. In what seems to be the most plausible story, some say a man named [Louis Hendel](https://archive.triblive.com/news/pittsburgh-allegheeny/skinny-building-in-downtown-pittsburgh-granted-a-fresh-face/) bought the land (https://archive.triblive.com/news/pittsburgh-allegheeny/skinny-building-in-downtown-pittsburgh-granted-a-fresh-face/) from Andrew W. Mellon to build a "tiny skyscraper" where he could sell produce because other business owners objected to him selling fruits and vegetables on the sidewalk. Regardless, it's clear that the building started with some serious drama.

From 1938 until 1979, the building was used as a hot dog and burger stand called Raywell's Restaurant. The lunch counter was so narrow, each stool had its own individual door (<https://archive.triblive.com/news/pittsburgh-allegheeny/skinny-building-in-downtown-pittsburgh-granted-a-fresh-face/>), where customers would slide in and squeeze the door closed behind them, *TribLive* reported. The restaurant used the second floor as a prep area, and its stainless steel counter remains in the building to this day.

After that, a retail space took over the ground floor.



The Steeler Nation exhibit at the Skinny Building in 2005. COURTESY OF THE SKINNY BUILDING ([HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/THE SKINNY BUILDING/](https://www.facebook.com/theskinnybuilding/))

In the early 2000s, public art covered the top floors of the Skinny Building in a project led by Pat Clark and Albert Kovacik. Clark, of Jackson/Clark Partners, arranged a six-year lease with the owner, and Kovacik managed the pseudo-gallery while working as a project architect in the city's engineering department.

Clark was also active in the movement to save the Skinny Building and several other Downtown buildings from the wrecking ball (<http://old.post-gazette.com/businessnews/20010909fifth0909bnp2.asp>), as then-Mayor Tom Murphy wanted to redevelop the area into a shopping center.

“We showed folks what was being called an eyesore actually had real significance for the city and the people who lived here. It wasn't something that was just disposable,” Clark told *The Incline*. “Let's take this building that has fallen into disuse and is completely weird and amazing and show it off for what it is.”

The Skinny Building's exterior windows became home to a different art installation every few months – everything from from a circus theme to a Steelers Nation display to a Myron Cope homage to a burlesque exhibit. Local universities like Chatham, Point Park, and Carnegie Mellon collaborated on projects there, and some even invited Kovacik to be a part of the course curriculum, bringing the artwork from conception to installation.



A Fred Rogers display at the Skinny Building. COURTESY OF THE SKINNY BUILDING ([HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/THE SKINNY BUILDING/](https://www.facebook.com/theskinnybuilding/))

At that time, Kovacik said, the building was painted black and gold and was “a little rundown,” but it was “a perfect venue” for art.

“If we cant put the art inside, let's put the art facing to the street,” he said remembering their solution to the problem of the building being too narrow for the public to enter. “It's the only art gallery where you can't go inside – you

have to view the art from the street.”

The project drew lots of media attention. A box full of newspaper clippings and Skinny Building documentation lives in the archives at Heinz History Center.

One particular tale attracted international intrigue. A “skinny off” was held in 2004, pitting Pittsburgh’s Skinny Building against the record-holding [Sam Kee Building](https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/sam-kee-building) (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/sam-kee-building>) in Vancouver, which measures in at just 6 feet, 2 inches wide. But, *Atlas Obscura* notes, Canada’s skinny building is free-standing and doesn’t depend on other structures for support like Pittsburgh’s does.

“We’re clearly skinnier than them,” Kovacik said. “When we proved that ours was skinnier, they kind of stopped answering our calls.”

Kovacik, 64, and now semi-retired, managed the Skinny Building out of pocket, spending his own money on the building’s utilities, supplies, and artist stipends and volunteering his Saturdays to the project, which he called a labor of love. He felt it was a public service to the city – beautifying a shabby building.

“I totally fell in love with it,” Kovacik said. “I’m an architect, and I’m into installation art.”

But in 2007, without explanation, [their sublease wasn’t renewed](https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/a-unique-downtown-art-project-holds-its-final-show/Content?oid=1338952) (<https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/a-unique-downtown-art-project-holds-its-final-show/Content?oid=1338952>).



From Forbes Avenue, note the distinction where one building begins and the other ends. ROSSILYNNE CULGAN / THE INCLINE

The Skinny Building of today

The URA purchased the Skinny Building and the attached Roberts Building in 2013 for \$1.3 million. (The previous owner, Duffy Road Corporation, bought it in 1997 for \$225,000, per Allegheny County property records.)

The URA bought the building at a time when several structures along that corridor were vacant and derelict, and the URA had two possibilities in mind, Rubinstein explained:

1. “Whenever there are opportunities to acquire properties for higher and better use assemblages, as well as for historic preservation purposes, we have done that.”
2. “There was a possibility in acquiring this building to combine upper floors with adjacent buildings, perhaps where the CVS is located.”

But combining the buildings never happened.

“Given that it has not materialized, there’s really no strategic purpose for us to continue to own that given that – for lack of better words – ‘the dust has settled,’” Rubinstein said.

Six years later, that corner has changed dramatically. A world-renowned eco-friendly PNC skyscraper has sprouted across the street. A vacant McDonald’s has been redeveloped into Hello Bistro. And the Skinny Building itself has

undergone a facelift thanks to a grant that repaired its facade. The restoration included upgrades to the tiled roof, tin details, and wooden columns, per Karamagi Rujumba, of Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation.

“It’s quite a vibrant corner now,” Rubinstein said.

During the URA’s ownership, they’ve leased the Roberts Building to 7-Eleven and kept a retail vendor who sells T-shirts and hats on the first floor of the Skinny Building.

They hoped to host public art projects in the upper floors, but it “proved to be a little challenging given the access requirements and given the fact that there’s an ongoing business operating out of the first floor,” Rubinstein said.

The URA will issue a request for proposals at some point this year for the sale of the Skinny and Roberts buildings.


“(The) new owner could then decide whether to renew existing leases or to go different directions,” he said.


As for Kovacik, he dreams of the building as a space for art again in the future. He talks excitedly about the glory days of Pittsburgh’s art scene in the early 2000s and was never deterred by having to choreograph his art installations with the vendors in the rest of the building. But funding the display out of pocket simply won’t work.

“If I had a source of funding,” he said, “I would love to do it again.”

What else are you curious about? Ask us [here](https://theincline.com/2019/06/05/we-want-to-answer-your-questions-about-pittsburgh/) (<https://theincline.com/2019/06/05/we-want-to-answer-your-questions-about-pittsburgh/>).

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