

The Arcade in downtown Providence is a gorgeous space, and is the nation's oldest indoor shopping mall. The mall concept may seem ho-hum today, but when it debuted in 1828 the Arcade was on retail's cutting edge in grouping a range of businesses under one roof. The Arcade was also important in the development of downtown Providence, and was the first major commercial building west of the Providence River.

The Arcade's architecture is an outstanding example of the Greek Revival style. Each of the two entrances features six substantial Ionic columns. Inside the mall, light pours into the granite three floor structure from the skylights that stretch its length. Even on a rainy afternoon, the interior is anything but gloomy and positively glows. The Arcade was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1976, and substantially renovated in 1980. It retains many of its original features, and the second and third levels have wood floors, as well as slightly bowed and sagging handrails that top the balustrades that run from one end of the building to the other.

Visiting the lightly traveled second and third floors is key to appreciating the Arcade's elegant interior design. There are several tables on these upper floors, and it's a good strategy to grab lunch or coffee at ground level and then move up a floor. Both ends of the Arcade have exterior staircases, and there are stairs and an elevator at the mall's midpoint as well. This middle stairwell is worth a look for its display of vintage photos. These include twentieth century shots in which the Arcade is an island in the midst of flooded Providence streets during the 1938 and 1954 hurricanes, as well as a photo of a streetcar stopped in front. There is also an 1829 print that depicts an ox pulling a cart on the cobbled streets surrounding the then newly constructed Arcade.

The Arcade's interior is unified, symmetrical and elegant, offering the visitor "a marvelous spatial experience," writes Providence architectural historian W<sup>m</sup> Mackenzie Woodward. The outside is another story, as the two entrances have different designs. The columns are the same, but the Westminster Street side has a pediment or triangular space at its top, while the Weybosset Street side features a parapet or low-slung wall. One theory has it that the different styles are the result of the Arcade's two designers attempting to one-up one another.

If it's shopping you want, there is the mammoth Providence Place Mall a few minutes away. Arcade tenants are chiefly small restaurants and cafes catering to local office workers. There are a number of empty storefronts, and the mall has a long history of commercial difficulties. In its early days it was called "Butler's Folly" after Cyrus Butler, who financed its construction. It was judged to be too remote from Market Square, Providence's center of commerce in the 1820s.

Though it is more food court than anything else, there are offices housing nonprofits on the upper floors, and a few retail and service outfits. There is a barber shop, you can talk Dungeons and Dragons at the Game Keeper, or you can buy a clock designed by a local artist at Copacetic Rudely Elegant Jewelry.

Everyone has probably seen too many malls, but none like the Arcade. "It has no peer in the nation," write Woodward and Edward Sanderson in a 1986 volume published by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission.

Stamatis Karapatakis, a restaurateur born on Crete who has been serving up souvlaki and gyros from his eatery at the Arcade's northern end since 1982, concurs. "It's a beautiful building," he says.

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***The Arcade closed in 2008 and will not reopen in its previous form. Instead, a single tenant will likely occupy the space.***