

Hidden Detroit: Fishing for Secrets at the Fisher Building

By **Jack Thomas** - April 21, 2026

Everyone has a favorite secret spot, but few are eager to share. For this year's City Guide, we took on the challenge. Along with revealing a few of our own picks, we gathered recommendations from contributing writers, tour guides, and other insiders. And while logging in thousands of steps, we peeked behind closed doors and over balconies, and we ventured inside two completely off-the-grid locations that safeguard some of Detroit's most precious artifacts.

When searching for ways to get to the highest floors of Detroit's iconic buildings, we were referred to tour guide and local historian Jacob Jones, who has been giving tours of the Fisher Building and more through Pure Detroit and the Albert Kahn Legacy Foundation for more than a decade. Needless to say, he's a fan of the building.



This southward view peers down Second Avenue with the hazy downtown Detroit skyline from the Fisher Building's 26th floor. // Photo by Brad Ziegler

Though his high-rises are well-known in Detroit, Kahn also made a substantial impact on industrial design. "He pioneered a version of steel-reinforced concrete that allowed for larger floor plans and for the massive windows that allowed natural light to pour into the factory," Jones says. "Albert Kahn brought light to the working class."

Kahn's notable factory designs nearby include the Packard Plant and Ford's Highland Park plant, the birthplace of the auto assembly line.

"It's rare today, I think, to have a building that combines beauty, combines engineering, and is also a place that is open and presented to the public on a daily basis," Jones said as we met him for a private tour up to a place the public can't go: the 26th floor.

This floor, currently vacant, was the first floor of the Fisher Body offices — the auto-body company founded by the brothers who commissioned the building. The reception room outside the 26th-floor office was the highest the public elevators went (and still is).

The next two floors — 27 and 28 — were executive offices, only accessible via a separate private elevator and stairs. Most recently, floor 26 was occupied by the Christman Company, the firm that restored Detroit's Book Tower and Michigan Central.

Here are some more "hidden" things we saw or learned about on our tour.



Photo by Brad Ziegler

Fancy Ventilation

On the arcade ceiling (above), there are 26 lunettes with bronze-colored "medallions" or "wheels" at the center. This was a clever way to disguise the building's original air-vent system.

The Hidden Meaning Behind the Frescoes

The vibrant frescoes visible on the arcade ceiling and walls were designed by Hungarian artist Géza Maróti and painted by some 200 crew members. The ceiling frescoes near the West Grand Boulevard entrance depict several of Kahn's favorite buildings — among them the Pantheon and the Taj Mahal. On each lunette are various symbols accompanied by a single word like "THRIFT," "KNOWLEDGE," "MUSIC," "AGRICULTURE," and "NAVIGATION," reflecting the symbolic principles and morals of the Fisher brothers. These also show up in other spots, like the paneling on an elevator in the lobby.

The Tunnel System

The lower level of the Fisher Building contains tunnels connecting to surrounding buildings. There's one that connects to the nearby Albert Kahn Building (formerly the New Center building) on the opposite side of Lothrop Street and another connecting to Cadillac Place (formerly the General Motors building) on the other side of West Grand Boulevard. These tunnels are no longer accessible to the public.

The Parking Garage

The Fisher Building has a built-in parking garage that opened in the same year as the building, which Kahn designed. Today, it's reserved for building employees and badge holders, accessible off Lothrop Street. At the time of completion, it was likely the first of its kind — an attached parking structure that implemented an innovative double-helix ramp design — Kahn's invention, according to Jones.

A Former Daycare

Today, the Fisher Building's fourth floor is occupied by several private offices. One empty suite, 450, was most recently used by Detroit Public Schools. During the building's early years, Jones says, this area offered free child care, available to shoppers patronizing the many stores that once filled the building's arcade on the first three floors. It featured a courtyard (still visible today) and carousel surrounded by a tiled floor, and the building was retrofitted to give it a skylight. Today, a picture of the carousel is on display on the first floor of the arcade near the Lothrop Street entrance.

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