

Rockford is making a comeback — and so is the city's pride

Long known for manufacturing, Rockford is in the midst of a reboot. A once sleepy downtown has come alive, and the pride among residents is palpable.

Kate Silver Chicago Tribune



DOWNTOWN'S ROCKFORD ART DELI HAS JUST ABOUT EVERY ROCKFORD-THEMED SOUVENIR YOU COULD WANT.



PRAIRIE STREET BREWING CO. IS A POPULAR SPOT TO GRAB A BITE — DON'T MISS THE FRIED CHEESE CURDS — AND A BREW.



THE OLD, RED BRICK BUILDING THAT SAYS ROCKFORD BREWING CO. IS ACTUALLY HOME TO PRAIRIE STREET BREWING CO. THE BUILDING DATES TO THE MID-1800S, WHEN IT HOUSED PEACOCK BREWING CO.



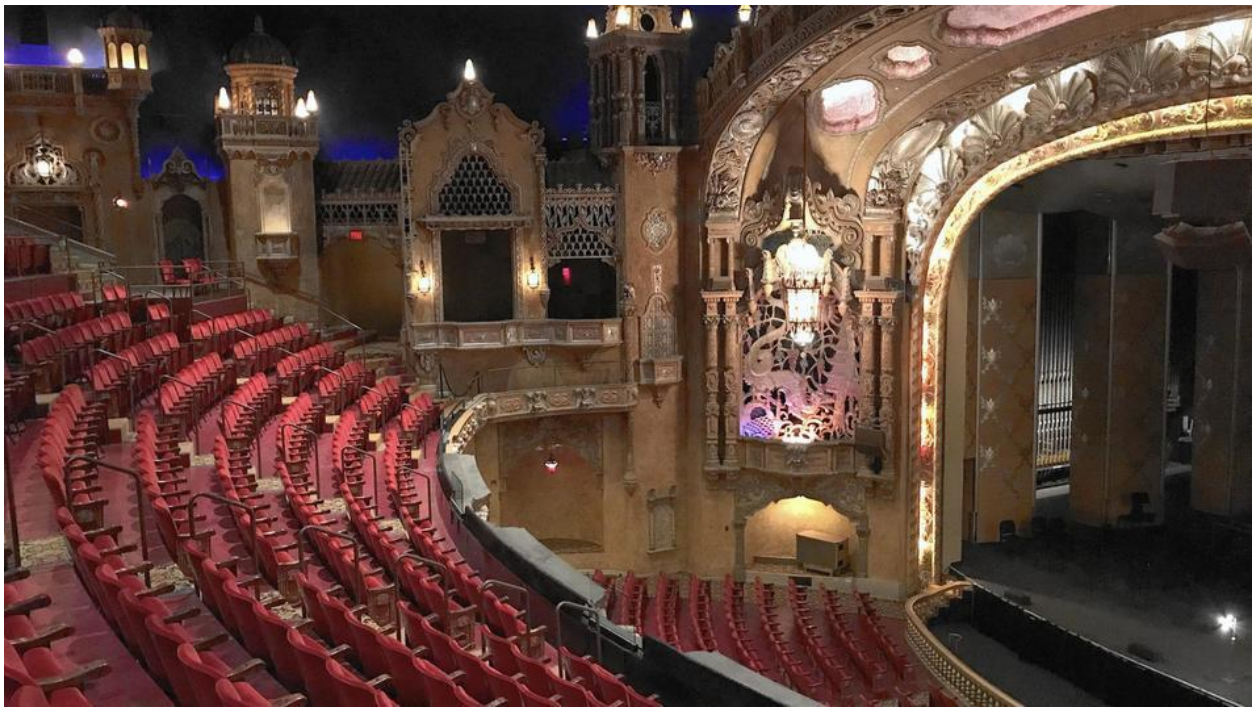
ROCKFORD ROASTING CO. HAS FANS FROM FAR AND WIDE, INCLUDING FOOD NETWORK STAR ALTON BROWN, WHO STUMBLED UPON THE DOWNTOWN COFFEE SHOP WHEN HE WAS IN TOWN FOR AN EVENT AT THE NEARBY CORONADO PERFORMING ARTS CENTER.



A COMFORTABLE PLACE TO RELAX AND GET CAFFEINATED, ROCKFORD ROASTING CO. IS AT 206 N. MAIN ST. IN DOWNTOWN ROCKFORD.



LAST YEAR, FOOD NETWORK STAR ALTON BROWN NAMED ROCKFORD ROASTING CO. ONE OF THE TOP EIGHT COFFEE SHOPS IN THE COUNTRY.



BUILT IN 1927 BY A PROMINENT ROCKFORD FAMILY WHO LIVED IN AN ART DECO APARTMENT ATTACHED TO THE VENUE, THE CORONADO PERFORMING ARTS CENTER EVENTUALLY FELL ON HARD TIMES. BUT THE PEOPLE OF ROCKFORD RALLIED, AND IT REOPENED IN 2001 AFTER AN \$18.5 MILLION RENOVATION.



MINGLEWOOD BOUTIQUE IN DOWNTOWN ROCKFORD SELLS AN ARRAY OF ECO-FRIENDLY FASHION AND JEWELRY.



MUGS AT ROCKFORD ART DELI ARE ANOTHER SIGN OF ROCKFORD PRIDE.



WHEN IT OPENS IN 2020, THE HILTON EMBASSY SUITES HOTEL — SHOWN HERE IN AN ARTIST RENDERING — WILL OFFER VISITORS A PLACE TO STAY IN THE CENTER OF DOWNTOWN.



THE ROCK RIVER RUNS THROUGH THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN ROCKFORD.



AMATEUR SPORTS TOURNAMENTS AND COMPETITIONS DRAW VISITORS TO THE NEW UW HEALTH SPORTS FACTORY.



STROLL ON STATE, HELD EVERY NOVEMBER, FEATURES A PARADE AND PLENTY MORE. THIS YEAR'S EVENT TAKES PLACE NOV. 24.

If you haven't been to Rockford in a few years, it might be time to plan a visit. While you were sleeping, the area's downtown started waking up. And now, work is underway to transform an old, dilapidated factory called the Amerock

Building into a 160-room Hilton Embassy Suites Hotel and Rockford Conference Center that's steps from the action.

Wandering around the urban core of the city, about 90 miles northwest of Chicago, there are bustling spots that feel a bit like Milwaukee or Indianapolis or other river-lined cities in the Midwest. Rockford has many of those elements that city dwellers have come to expect from energized urban areas: craft breweries ([Prairie Street Brewing Co.](#) and [Carlyle Brewing Co.](#)), a bustling restaurant scene (with locally sourced offerings at places like [Social Urban Bar & Restaurant](#) and [Octane InterLounge](#)), a coffee roaster ([Rockford Roasting Co.](#)), swanky lofts, yoga studios and more.

Cultural institutions are another downtown draw, including an ornately restored theater ([Coronado Performing Arts Center](#)) and a museum campus with the [Discovery Center Museum](#), [Burpee Museum of Natural History](#), the [Rockford Dance Company](#) and the [Rockford Art Museum](#). On the sporty side of things, the Rockford IceHogs — the Blackhawks' minor-league team — are at [BMO Harris Bank Center](#), and the new, river-hugging [UW Health Sports Factory](#) brings in amateur tournaments in basketball, volleyball, pickleball and more throughout the year. The backdrop to it all: story-filled, old brick buildings, many of which are skeletons from Rockford's factory-filled past.

When the hotel opens in spring 2020, city officials are banking on it drawing more visitors to the area. It's not just any hotel and conference center, after all. The 13-story concrete building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, is in a prime location, overlooking a large park and the Rock River. And the developer is [Gorman & Co.](#), a Wisconsin-based outfit known for its revitalization projects.

"I see this changing downtown Rockford. I really do," says Gary Gorman, chairman of Gorman & Co. "I think we're going to be able to attract events to Rockford that wouldn't come here otherwise. And I think we're going to change the image of Rockford."



When it opens in 2020, the Hilton Embassy Suites Hotel, —shown here in an artist rendering, —will offer visitors a place to stay in the center of downtown. (Gorman & Co.)

Connecting past to present

Gorman & Co. has deep experience in the historic rehabilitation arena, having worked on more than 30 projects fitting that description since 1985. One that's especially notable is the radical transformation of a former Pabst Brewery into the beloved [Brewhouse Inn & Suites](#) in Milwaukee. Gorman's company has also turned the former Garton Toy Factory — which made sleds, tricycles, wagons and other wheeled toys — into apartments in Sheboygan, Wis., and converted a wagon factory and auto plant into the Mitchell Wagon Lofts in Racine. The real estate development company is headquartered in a former high school built in 1922 in Oregon, Wis.

Gorman says that with the current hotel project, he wants to meld the history of the Amerock Building and modern-day Rockford.

“People like to see indications of what the building was previously used for,” he says.

It’s still early on in the construction process, though, and Gorman says he’s not yet sure what, exactly, those historical touches might look like.

Construction on the \$87.5 million project, which is using a mix of public and private funds, began in late 2017. As construction crews remove lead paint and tear out old wood from the floors, they’re finding and saving treasures from the building’s history, like old lockers, a newspaper dating to 1923, antiquated meters and elevator tags that could be put to use in the new design. When it’s complete, the hotel will have a two-level spa, a first-floor restaurant, a 12th-floor outdoor cocktail lounge and 40,000 square feet of conference space with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out on the Rock River.

“It’s going to be a spectacular setting that doesn’t exist in Rockford right now,” says Gorman.

But the project isn’t just about a hotel. It’s really a symbol of the evolution of Rockford, long a manufacturing hub with the nickname Screw City. In the early 20th century, the concrete building was Rockford’s first skyscraper and home to a number of businesses related to the knitting industry. It was originally named for William Ziock Sr., a leading figure in the knitting and textile arena. Its name changed to the Amerock Building when, for decades, it housed the manufacturing company Amerock (a portmanteau for America and Rockford), a cabinet- and hardware-maker. More recently, it’s been a symbol of blight, referred to as an “eyesore” by local newscasters and residents, and there have been a number of efforts to redevelop the building.

Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara says the hotel further validates the downtown development — and momentum — that’s been going on for the last few years.

“I think any time you can get such a flagship (hotel brand) that we have been fortunate enough to get, it just speaks volumes about what is going on,” says McNamara.

The mayor and a half-dozen others interviewed for this story said that when they were growing up in the '70s and '80s, they didn't spend much time downtown. Back then, the storefronts were more likely to be empty than filled. McNamara, who is in his mid-30s, recalls that he'd get in the car with his parents and go to a museum, or they'd visit the YMCA, but then they'd get back in the car and go straight home. Today, he says, it's a different story. People of all ages have moved into more than 300 lofts in the downtown area. On any given day, you can see men and women in business suits walking to lunch at [Kuma's Asian Bistro](#), parents pushing strollers into [Wired Cafe](#) for a latte, and women shopping for flowing, eco-friendly dresses at [Minglewood](#) boutique.

In warm weather, the Rock River, which runs through downtown, becomes a destination. On Thursday nights, crowds gather on the docks at Prairie Street Brewing for free live music and a barbecue buffet at the weekly Dinner on the Dock series. On Friday nights, [Rockford City Market](#) is the place to be, with its live music, craft vendors, a farmers market, food trucks and more. Then it's on to [Davis Park](#) for outdoor movies by the water, held the first Friday of the month. On weekends, stand-up paddleboards, kayaks and canoes rented from [Rocktown Adventures](#) dot the water.

Last November, a record-breaking crowd of more than 80,000 turned out for [Stroll on State](#), an annual holiday celebration that includes a parade, live music, ice skating, wagon rides and other festivities. This year's installment is Nov. 24.



Stroll on State is an annual holiday celebration that draws big crowds to downtown Rockford. This year's installment is Nov. 24. (Rockford Area CVB)

According to McNamara, recent development and downtown energy have helped galvanize more of the same.

“Five years ago, if a storefront opened up, it was like, oh my gosh, so-and-so left. Now it’s like, well, who are we going to get? Now you’re seeing four or five people bidding,” he says. “It’s super exciting. It’s what you want to see.”

McNamara chalks up much of the recent growth spurt to the state-run [River Edge Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program](#), which gives owners of historic properties a 25 percent state income tax credit for qualified expenditures on rehab projects. The program is open to a handful of cities in the River Edge Redevelopment Zone, including Rockford, and it’s attracted millions of dollars of development — including the Hilton Embassy Suites project, which is also getting a 20 percent federal historic tax credit.

“We’ve benefited tremendously from the River Edge Redevelopment and the historic tax credits,” says McNamara. “You probably can’t say enough about that.”

He adds that it’s exciting to watch the latest wave of residents, including his own two young children, grow up in the new Rockford.

“Probably one of the neatest things to me is the generation that’s coming up now, like the last five to 10 years, is experiencing a totally different city than what I got to experience,” he says.

Building on Rockford pride

Downtown redevelopment has brought with it something that had been missing for years: foot traffic in the urban core.

“You see women with strollers and families, says Prairie Street Brewing co-owner Chris Manuel, who opened the brewery in 2013. “When we started, you wouldn’t see that at all.”

The brewing company — the same one that hosts Dinner on the Docks in the summer — operates in a beautiful, old brick building from the mid-1800s, when it was home to Peacock Brewing Co. In addition to the brewery and restaurant, the property has event spaces, offices and lofts.

The recent changes have brought about a deeper sense of hometown pride, which you can see on display at [Rockford Art Deli](#), an eco-friendly screen-printing shop selling all things Rockford: T-shirts, coffee mugs, hats, buttons.

The story of Art Deli reflects the spirit of what’s happening in the surrounding streets. Owner Jarrod Hennis moved downtown 14 years ago; his retail store has been open for nearly six years.

“We’ve really been downtown since there was nothing,” says Hennis. “Now there’s foot traffic all the time. Right at noon, when we open, we’re always busy. It’s night and day. A lot of money is coming downtown.”

Just as downtown has changed, so has Art Deli’s attitude. In the beginning, Hennis says, he was making shirts that poked fun at Rockford. “And it didn’t feel right; it didn’t feel good,” he says. So he switched gears and started making shirts that showed Rockford pride. Some are cheeky: “Rockford AF,” “Always Proud Always Rad Stay Rockford,” “Rockfordians do it better.” Others are more straightforward, like “815” (Rockford’s area code) and simply “Rockford.”

The shirts that embrace the city have been such a hit that Hennis says he’s gone from offering six designs in the early days to nearly 60 designs today. In fact, Rockford pride runs so deep, other designs just don’t sell.

“We keep trying to do more Illinois and Midwest, but everyone wants just Rockford or 815,” he says.

One recent design that seems especially appropriate today: “Making a comeback, Rockford, Il.”

Kate Silver is a freelance writer.