

Banking on the Arts

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In this city, culture means business.

By JoAnn Greco

It's obvious that the arts — and culture as a whole — have resonance in Philadelphia.

Just look at the public debates sparked by the projected move of the Barnes Foundation to Center City and, more recently, the sale of 19th century painter Thomas Eakins's little-visited but highly valued "Gross Clinic." But it's also plain that the impact of art and culture on the "City That Loves You Back," as it refers to itself of late, transcends aesthetic and emotional concerns.

"From a planning perspective, if you look at the success of downtown Philadelphia and all the national press that's generated, the arts have been a key contributor," says Janice Woodcock, AICP, who last October was named executive director of the city planning commission. "They've been of tremendous value in getting people to come to visit. But, more importantly, as a clear indicator of quality of life, they've been an essential driver in economic development." Woodcock, an architect and planner, headed her own consulting firm before starting work in the city planning department in 2004.

Last year, 218 member arts organizations that participated in a survey conducted by the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance spent \$562 million and earned \$573 million. According to "Portfolio 2006," the alliance's state-of-the-arts report, these respondents (out of 700 total members) account for more than 14,000 full- and part-time jobs.

That's a valuable contribution to a city that until recently was in decline. When Mayor Edward Rendell took office in 1992, he inherited a 30-year slide, which saw the loss of nearly half a million residents and 200,000 jobs. Office vacancy downtown was at an all-time high, and city hall itself was mired in a literal pall.

Rendell once famously got down on his hands and knees to assist in a symbolic, but thorough, scrubbing of the massive building, which to this day is still being restored. He went on to tackle a host of reform issues, from eliminating the city's deficit to taming its unions to rejuvenating Center City, Philadelphia's two-square-mile downtown.

As the city started to take pride in itself and to take stock of its assets, Rendell became an early proponent of using its stellar collection of long-standing and diverse cultural institutions as a building block for development. (It should be noted that Philadelphia has

long recognized the importance of the arts to public life. In 1959, it passed the nation's first "one percent for art" program, a budget requirement for all municipal construction projects.)

Payoff

That's still the case today. "In Philadelphia, arts and culture serve as anchors in several ways," says Steven Wray, regional executive director of the Pennsylvania Economy League, the nonprofit research group that crunched the numbers for the cultural alliance survey. "Not only do they act as a source of activity, creativity, and revenue, but they serve as a forceful economic engine."

All over town, arts organizations are gaining public and private financial support to continue building. Major projects on the drawing board include: a \$500 million expansion of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the relocation of the Barnes art collection to Center City, a \$50 million move by the Please Touch children's museum to Fairmount Park, a \$35 million overhaul of the park's Mann Center for the Performing Arts, and \$150 million for an expansion of the central branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

In all, local arts groups are engaged in or have recently completed capital campaigns totaling \$1.1 billion. But will this huge sum — equal to about 30 percent of Philadelphia's 2007 budget — benefit anyone besides the building trades?

Yes, promise the institutions. The Free Library, for instance, estimates that new services introduced by its expansion and renovation will support 118 jobs and generate \$6 million each year.

"That kind of impact is ongoing and routine; it attracts people week after week and pays off slowly but surely," says James Hartling of Urban Partners, a consulting firm that has performed economic studies for many of Philadelphia's cultural organizations. "There's an interactive process where the arts can lead to a residential boom that can lead to more restaurants and shops that can lead to improved office occupancy," he says. The hope is that a larger library will generate more street activity, and with the eventual presence of the Barnes and other planned improvements, a revitalized Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

In other words, the hunt is on for another Kimmel Center. That's the \$250 million performing arts venue credited with jump-starting activity on the mile-long stretch of South Broad Street that in 1993 was designated the Avenue of the Arts.

Now in its sixth season, the Kimmel is still \$30 million in debt, \$35 million short of its desired endowment, and plagued by underused public spaces. But it claims to have dumped \$321 million back into the local economy through salaries, taxes, and direct and induced expenditures in its first three full years of operation.

"Anchor facilities always have to struggle to break even because you're providing a subsidized venue as a centerpiece of a larger whole," says Hartling. "But look what's

happening around this centerpiece — the level of activity, the number of venues," he continues. "You've got expensive residences coming online, right on the avenue, an increased demand for office space, right on the avenue."

Power of a brand

The blocks now known as the Avenue of the Arts are alive with pedestrians. During the day, portfolio-toting, nose-ringed teenagers from the public High School of the Creative and Performing Arts shrug past tattooed students from the University of the Arts, a private institution dedicated to the performing, visual, and media arts. Both schools have buildings right on the avenue.

As the sun eases into its late afternoon descent, a throng of diners and theatergoers takes over. The avenue's dozen or so performing arts venues serve as feeders for a multitude of hip restaurants and bars nearby. Signified by colorful banners and specially designed streetscaping and light poles, the Avenue of the Arts designation has quite visibly transformed a neighborhood.

The roots of the concept go back to the 1970s, when recognition grew that the Philadelphia Orchestra had outgrown its traditional home, the Academy of Music, a grand 19th century opera house. The idea gained traction in the 1990s, when other arts organizations, including the Wilma Theatre and the performing arts high school, proposed relocating to the avenue.

Hartling, whose firm drafted these early economic development recommendations, says estimates predicted an eventual investment of \$750 million. "People thought that was too pie in the sky," he says. "Now it's projected at over a billion dollars."

Woodcock emphasizes the city's role in the transformation. Great institutions — like the 100-year-old Philadelphia Orchestra — would not have been enough to turn Broad Street around. That took a "cohesive marketing strategy that showed the city and the state were behind promoting this area," she says. "Public policy was used to reinforce the area's development. We said, 'This is a special, distinct part of the city, and you should want to be here.'"

The change didn't happen overnight. Until the Avenue of the Arts hit its stride, 13th Street, one block to the east, was known as the city's combat zone. These days it's filled with housewares boutiques, trendy clothiers, and bustling eateries.

But even on the Avenue of the Arts, south of the Kimmel Center, long-vacant lots remain. Moreover, not everyone is a fan of the Kimmel Center. Inga Saffron, the architecture critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, has taken the building to task for "squander[ing] its ample Broad Street frontage with a dull brick facade and a meaningless granite cube."

Karen Lewis, executive director of the Avenue of the Arts, is used to the carping. "The concept of the Avenue of the Arts goes back decades.

Look how much we've accomplished since then. As for the Kimmel Center," she says, "they've been focusing on their programming and not really looking at the appeal of their physical space. We'd like to see them become more engaged with the rest of the avenue."

Meanwhile, new construction is bringing more people to the Avenue of the Arts South. A \$125 million condo project, expected to be completed by this summer, will include a \$22 million theater (required by the city when it sold the parcel) for the Philadelphia Theatre Company. A \$175 million project, to include a National Center for Rhythm and Blues and related attractions, is also under consideration for the southern end of the avenue.

Looking north

For the most part, though, city planners have turned their attention northward, where the challenges are even greater. This segment of the Avenue of the Arts is bracketed by the newly expanded Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts, near city hall, and the North Philadelphia Amtrak station, 3.5 miles to the north. Although a few cultural institutions are located here, blight and crime are still problems.

In December, gunfire erupted outside the brand-new Pearl Theatre near Temple University. The movie house, the first one to be built in North Philly in 30 years, is part of a new housing and retail complex built by a private developer. After the shooting, Inga Saffron recalled in her blog "how teenage violence helped doom Chestnut Street movie theatres in the 1980s." But "Philadelphia is a different, more resilient place today," she concluded, and residents won't abandon ship.

The best hope for the Avenue of the Arts North is most likely the part closest to city hall. The imminent expansion of the Pennsylvania Convention Center will help the area dramatically, says Lewis, although its construction is forcing a host of smaller arts groups and individual artists to relocate. "The convention center will soon spill people right out onto the avenue," she says. "We'll be its front yard."

The convention center expansion may also provide a way to link areas east of Broad Street with the Avenue of the Arts. The problem now is city hall, which stands squarely in the middle of several critical intersections. "It's a grand building, a beautiful landmark, but it's sort of closed up and looks dark and scary," Lewis says.

In its report "Expanding the Vision for North Broad Street," the city planning commission calls for adding commercial and arts-related uses such as exhibit spaces to city hall, and removing the chain-link gates that block its entrances. Commissioner Woodcock describes city hall, as it is now, as "a hole in the fabric that knits together North and South Broad, Market Street, and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway."

Philly's Champs-Elysees

Philadelphia's major concentration of museums is clustered along the parkway, aligned on a 10-block diagonal axis that connects city hall with Fairmount Park. Its original intent was to echo Paris's Champs-Elysees, but instead of a vital mix of cafes and shops, the parkway offers only isolated institutions, set back along a flag-lined, multilaned street.

The whole thing veers dangerously close to being "one heavy, grandiose monument after another arrayed ... like frosted pastries on a tray," as Jane Jacobs once described the boulevards of the City Beautiful era. Walking the seven blocks from the Franklin Institute to the Philadelphia Museum of Art or crossing the street from the Academy of Natural Sciences to the Free Library can be daunting.

A report prepared two years ago by the Central Philadelphia Development Corporation and the Center City District offers a prescription for change: "The Parkway must become less a highway and more of a place ... [with] restaurants, cafes, and a diversity of uses that animate public spaces with strolling pedestrians both day and night."

Since then, plans have been put in place for more institutions, but not necessarily for the amenities the report called for. Still, economic development expert Ronald Bednar, AICP, a local government policy analyst with the Pennsylvania Department of Economic Development, is optimistic.

"I think as some of the gaps get filled in, we'll see a more pedestrian scale to the parkway," he says. "As these institutions strengthen, we may start to see the same effect as on Broad Street. The planning is pointing in that direction." Bednar is past president of the Pennsylvania Planning Association, the state's APA chapter, and a cochair of the host committee for this year's national planning conference in Philadelphia.

In fact, the library expansion promises a cafe, and the Moore College of Art has recently opened a shop selling the works of accomplished alumni. A new park showcasing sculptures by Alexander Calder is open, and a Whole Foods supermarket being built three blocks from the library is widely anticipated as a link between the parkway and Center City.

"We have yet to learn in Philadelphia that a block or two is not that far to get from one place to another," laughs the Economy League's Wray. The city may pride itself on its walkability, he continues, "but we really need help in creating linkages."

Grounds for optimism

Just as the parkway requires a cohesive plan to link — and market — its attractions, so does Fairmount Park. The Fairmount Park Commission is now considering a proposal to incorporate the Philadelphia Zoo, the Mann Center for the Performing Arts, and the Please Touch Museum into a single family-friendly entertainment district.

The idea is to create connections between these institutions' "spheres of influence," says Alan Greenberger of MGA Partners, creators of the master plan for what's being called the Centennial District. The 733-acre parcel in question (about a quarter of the park) is defined by the boundaries of the 1876 Centennial Exposition. The space is largely empty because many of the buildings that went up for the exposition are gone.

The 20-year plan recommends eliminating some of the roads in this section of the park and working with neighborhood groups in the distressed area to the west to renovate the

magnificent Victorian homes that border the park. "A successful park needs a strong neighborhood on its edge," says Greenberger.

Another recommendation is to add more venues — a children's theater, for instance — and to revamp the existing horticultural center into an environmental museum. "The idea is for people never to feel isolated when they're at one place, for them to see another attraction from wherever they stand," he says.

Greenberger estimates that infrastructure changes needed to carry out the plan's recommendations would take \$150 million. "I'm optimistic. It's just an idea so far, but some things will happen," he says, referring to the proposed relocation of the Please Touch Museum and the completion of the Mann Center, a popular outdoor facility. "This will all create more attention, more demand, and the possibility for further improvements."

Artists rule

In Philadelphia, as everyone will tell you, things take time. Artists, on the other hand, are an impatient lot, and often unafraid to leap before they look. Community-based groups like the nationally acclaimed Mural Arts program and the Village of Arts and Humanities, North Philadelphia's arts-based neighborhood development program, have provided work for hundreds of artists in struggling neighborhoods and encouraged residents to pay greater heed to their surroundings.

Meanwhile, events like the 10-year-old Philadelphia Live Arts Festival and Philly Fringe Festival have galvanized the entire city. Both bring nationally known performing artists to town every September. Each spring, the Philadelphia Film Festival shows more movies to more audiences.

A citywide collaborative graphics arts event, Philagrafika 2010, is set for January through April of that year. And this month, nine world premieres are being staged as part of the city's first New Play Festival. "Philadelphia theater has hit critical mass," says Deborah Golden, executive director of the Philadelphia Theatre Alliance, which boasts 110 member companies. Most important, she adds, "the writers and actors and designers and directors who graduate from theater programs in town are staying here, and they are making a living."

Readers may be tired of hearing about the importance of the "creative class," but there's little doubt that this group does play a keen role in a city's cultural vitality. And observers agree that the presence of well-educated professionals in technical and arts-related fields can in fact lead to real economic progress.

"Let's face it," says Bednar, "neighborhoods filled with derelict large warehouses are not suddenly going to turn around and see them occupied by manufacturers. But we can look at them as assets, as anchor buildings for different kinds of uses. Often, those uses can be cultural." He cites two mixed use developments in outlying neighborhoods, one in East

Falls and one in Kensington, where old textile mills have been converted into housing and studio space for artists.

"The ability of this region to attract this creative culture," Bednar continues, "is dependent on providing opportunities for those cultures to emerge." And as the city looks more formally at how to do that, changes will be needed in things like wage and business taxes and home occupation regulations, he adds.

Woodcock picks up on that thread. "We need to rework our antiquated zoning codes. The standards don't really address smaller industrial uses, so there's no place for an artist, say, who fabricates metal. We need to make it easier for artists who want to stay and work here," she says.

"Public policy is lagging on this, but the idea is starting to hit the radar and I'd like to see us become more proactive in promoting it. Once we get there, the arts can once again become a great tool — this time for attracting people to marginal neighborhoods."

JoAnn Greco is a freelance writer in Philadelphia. She has written widely on the arts and urban design.

My Vision of Eden

The Philadelphia region has been my home off and on for most of my career. I was in college at Swarthmore in the mid- to late-1980s when the city's trash collectors went on strike and the term "Philthydelphia" was coined. For several years I worked as an environmental planner in the Virgin Islands. When I came back to Philadelphia in 1989, real estate values and quality of life were deteriorating, and the city was struggling to maintain its population.

Things are changing. Just look at the PBS series *Edens Lost and Found*. The section on Philadelphia describes the idyllic place envisioned by William Penn, gardens, parks, and productive farmland. Later, the program focuses on the transformation of trash-strewn vacant lots into parks, flower beds, vegetable gardens, and orchards, even in the most troubled neighborhoods. Bare walls became canvases illustrating the hopes of community residents. The gardens, the murals, the urban environmental initiatives were community vision statements — even in places where there seemed to be no real reason for hope.

The program makes it clear that it was Penn's vision that laid the groundwork for the city's current vitality, but it was community residents and community planners who brought these projects to life. Most of them started small, like the bicycle trail connecting several of the city's most challenged neighborhoods that I worked on 10 years ago and that today connects several neighborhoods and includes a new environmental education center.

Our plans are bolder now, but the vision remains the same. It extends to the entire region, where city agencies, nonprofits like the William Penn Foundation and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, and even neighborhood groups are thinking outside the box. The

examples range from Chester City, which is reexamining its urban waterfront for new residential and recreational uses, to the Philadelphia Water Department, which is going well beyond the city boundaries to protect its water sources.

Beyond the metro area, suburbs, small cities and towns, and rural areas are doing the same. Multimunicipal planning programs promote green space planning and watershed preservation. Conservation design in new subdivisions is becoming the norm rather than the exception. People are moving back to older suburban boroughs. Rural areas are returning to sustainable practices in agriculture and forestry.

Edens Lost and Found made me even more aware of the essential role planners play in helping communities make the journey from brown to green.

Charnelle Hicks, AICP

Hicks is the president of CHPlanning Limited in Philadelphia. The firm's work is featured in the PBS series.

Penn's Grid

An excerpt from *Metropolitan Philadelphia* by Steven Conn

Penn wanted his Philadelphia to be "a greene countrie towne, which will never be burnt, and always be wholesome." The way he proposed to achieve this was as simple as it was revolutionary: the grid.

While he held title to a very large tract of land, Penn set aside roughly two square miles for his "great towne." He then subdivided the space within those boundaries into a regular, orderly gridiron. Streets ran straight, north and south, east and west, intersecting at right angles. The two widest streets — now called Market and Broad — were more commodious than any street in seventeenth-century London. The grid made its public debut in London in 1683 in a plan titled "Portraiture of the City of Philadelphia," an advertisement designed to attract purchasers. That grid, and the city that was laid out from it, constituted the most dramatic act of urban planning in the West probably since the Romans. In an early act of Enlightenment rationality, Penn imposed abstract geometry on the American wilderness.

The grid had a purpose beyond a mere abstract, geometric exercise. Orderly space, Penn believed, would shape an orderly society. Rational space, rational people. Rectilinear geometry would be Penn's way of keeping the city's density low, or at least lower than the packed, crowded conditions typical of most European cities, and of creating spacious building lots with trees on them. The grid was the shape of utopia.

Resources

Two books. *Metropolitan Philadelphia: Living with the Presence of the Past* was published last year by the University of Pennsylvania Press as part of its Metropolitan

Portraits series. Author Steven Conn, a Philadelphia native who teaches history at Ohio State University, focuses on the "vital relationship" of the city and its surrounding counties. Also relevant is *The Creative Community Builder's Handbook: How to Transform Communities Using Local Assets, Arts, and Culture*, published by the nonprofit Fieldstone Alliance. It offers 20 case studies of communities being revitalized by arts and culture.

And the winner is ... APA's 2005 outstanding planning award for implementation went to "Extending the Vision for South Broad Street — Building Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts in the 21st Century." Said jury chair Bruce Knight, FAICP: "Philadelphia didn't just invest in a nice streetscape, but worked to enhance all elements of Broad Street — concentrating on the arts, historic preservation, private reinvestment, and residential — to create a vibrant 24-hour urban area." There's more in the March 2005 *Planning*.

Photos galore. The Philadelphia Department of Records is making photos from its huge archive available to the public at www.phillyhistory.org. The service has attracted the attention of historians, geographers, and genealogists.

April in Philadelphia. Check out [the long list of mobile workshops listed in the preliminary program](#) for APA's 2007 National Planning Conference, April 14-18. The workshops, most led by planners, will take you to many of the locations mentioned in this issue.

At the conference

The evolution of urban form, in Philadelphia and elsewhere is the subject of an entire track at the national planning conference in Philadelphia, April 14-18. The track honors the late Philadelphia planner, Edmund Bacon.

The other side

Camden, New Jersey, just across the Delaware River, offers a sharp contrast to Philadelphia's revitalizing neighborhoods. Prize-winning urban photographer Camillo Jose Vergara spells out the difference in his Invincible Cities website: <http://invinciblecities.camden.rutgers.edu/intro.html>.

Edens Lost & Found is available from APA's Planners Book Service.

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