

Northern Exposure: Growing Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts North

Blondell Reynolds Brown 22 May 2012

The Turnaround

Pop Quiz: What are the official boundaries of the Avenue of the Arts? (Answer to come later)

Since its creation in 1993 by then-Mayor and former Governor Ed Rendell, Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts has established itself as one of the most vibrant and famed cultural corridors in the nation. Overseen by the Avenue of the Arts, Inc., it is quite simply unrecognizable from its days in the 1970s and 80s when it housed the vacant architectural palaces that once made up Philadelphia's financial district. I can attest to this; as a former professional dancer with the Philadelphia Dance Company, aka Philadanco, I performed on the Avenue of the Arts before it was the Avenue of the Arts. Under the direction of Joan Myers Brown, I had the unique opportunity to dance at the historic Academy of Music at Broad and Locust—an unforgettable experience. Today, the Academy serves as one of the many cultural anchors of the Avenue of the Arts, but 30 years ago it was a different story. At the time, I remember "The Grand Old

"Lady of Broad Street" was an anomaly—the one cultural bright spot on that otherwise unremarkable stretch of South Broad.

To say that we have come a long way is quite the understatement. Since Governor Rendell christened the Avenue of the Arts in 1993, South Broad Street has seen the opening of:

- Arts Bank (1994)
- Philadelphia Clef Club of Jazz and Performing Arts (1995)
- Wilma Theater (1996)
- Philadelphia Creative and Performing Arts High School (1997)
- Prince Music Theater (1999)
- Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts (2001)
- Suzanne Roberts Theatre (2009)

The transformation has been a methodical process with targeted projects and goals that build and feed off of each other like an economic food chain. The result has been a rewarding cycle of success begetting success, with each step likely not possible without the foundation of those before. Think about it:

- Would theaters want to anchor themselves on the Avenue without the initial streetscape and beautification projects?
- Would the Kimmel Center have been possible without

the previous success of the Wilma Theater and Prince Music Theater?

- Would the Ritz Carlton have relocated to the Avenue if there were not thousands of patrons from the Wilma, Prince and Kimmel Center to house?
- Would the Capital Grille have opened if there were not guests of the Ritz Carlton and patrons of the Kimmel, the Prince and the Wilma to serve?
- Would anyone want to buy a \$1 million condominium at the Symphony House or the Residences at the Ritz Carlton without the added benefit of having theaters, restaurants and hotel amenities and more at your doorstep?

The rejuvenation of South Broad Street into a cultural hub is nothing short of astounding. In a 2007 interview with the *New York Times*, Governor Ed Rendell said, "On a Saturday night in 1991, you could walk the mile from City Hall to Washington Avenue and you wouldn't have seen 100 people. Now you walk around on a Thursday night, you see thousands of people on the street. It's not yet complete, but it's come a long way. If you had told me people would buy \$1 million condos on the avenue, I wouldn't have believed it" (Chamberlain 2007).

So if the turnaround is "not yet complete," you may ask, what else could be left?

This brings us to our pop quiz: What are the boundaries of the Avenue of the Arts?

Answer: Broad and Washington in South Philadelphia to Broad and Glenwood in North Philadelphia (the North Philadelphia train station).

Look to the North

Look to the North

For far too long, Philadelphia residents and visitors alike have imagined the boundaries of the Avenue of the Arts to be the south side of Broad Street, from City Hall to Washington Avenue. They would be incorrect. But can we blame them? From the beginning, the vast majority of attention and investment has been on South Broad.

However, nearly 20 years later, when the results of this effort have turned abandoned banks and parking lots into million dollar condos, 5-star hotels and world class performing arts venues, it is now the time for Avenue of the Arts North to take its rightful place at center stage.

With this article, I offer my “buy in” as a stakeholder and espouse my belief that over the next decade, we will see the Avenue of the Arts North become the “it” place to be—a hotbed of economic and cultural activity that will offer a transformation as equally stunning as we have seen from the formerly abandoned South Broad Street. We are currently at a tipping point, where it appears the floodgates of development and economic opportunity are about to be sprung open. Consider the impressive

checklist of accomplishments to date:

- Lofts 640 open at 640 N. Broad St. (2005)
- Marc Vetri opens Osteria at 600 N. Broad St. (2007)
- Progress Plaza begins \$16 million renovation (2009)
- Pennsylvania Convention Center opens facing N. Broad St. (2011)
- Marc Vetri, Stephen Starr and Joe Volpe announce new restaurants at 600 N. Broad (2011)
- The Pennsylvania Ballet announces new home at 321 N. Broad St. (2011)
- Lenfest Plaza opens at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts at 119 N. Broad St. (2011)
- The historic Uptown Theater launches new capital campaign (2011)
- Temple University unveils "Temple 20/20" plan for campus development (2011)

Ultimately, I believe that, for the city at large, it will be the "Promenade of Lights" that turns the most heads, signaling a permanent arrival for the Avenue. Slated to begin in April 2012, the Promenade will unify a 2.5 mile stretch of North Broad Street with 55-foot tall light masts sweeping up the center of the thoroughfare. As part of the "Building on North Broad" initiative, and paired with the planting of over 200 trees, this impressive and ambitious installation will serve as a physical and metaphoric symbol of the unbridled potential and electricity that will emanate from the Avenue of the Arts North and far beyond.

A Long Time Coming

A Long Time Coming

We did not arrive at this exciting moment quickly or without a significant amount of planning and hard work. Long before many, including myself, saw the vision that is now unfolding, Avenue of the Arts, Inc. Executive Director Karen Lewis planted the seeds. In 2001, the organization shifted its focus and resources to North Broad Street. In 2006, Avenue of the Arts, Inc., worked with the Philadelphia City Planning Commission to develop a roadmap—"Extending the Vision for North Broad Street"—an outstanding resource for anyone wishing to see the overarching big picture vision for the project. This strategy is now paying major dividends.

Another essential and critical lynchpin in this process has been my colleague, Councilman Darrell A. Clarke, whose district includes Avenue of the Arts North. Councilman Clarke has been a key stakeholder and leader for the last 10 years and is enthusiastic about the future. I asked him to reflect on the progress thus far and he commented, "North Broad's heritage and cultural assets, which have been ignored for far too long, are now key economic development resources. Both public and private investment along the Avenue of the Arts North is driving community revitalization, providing meaningful jobs, attracting new businesses and leveraging significant tax revenue." He offers praise for "community leaders, in

particular Ms. Karen Lewis at Avenue of the Arts, Inc., for their relentless efforts to improve North Broad."

Along with other stakeholders, I am confident that they will continue to move the needle forward in meaningful, bold and ultimately strategically successful ways.

Considering Karen Lewis' unparalleled success on South Broad Street, and Councilman Clarke's impressive knowledge and proven track record in the area of development, everything is possible.

Possibility Thinking

Possibility Thinking

I am a true believer in the link between culture and economic development. For 12 years as Chair of the City Council Committee on Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs I have seen the tangible, positive outcomes of investing in arts and culture. For every \$1 we invest in arts and culture, particularly at the community level, we see \$4 in return. We know that city residents are naturally drawn toward culturally vibrant neighborhoods and, as a result, when a commitment is made to increasing cultural vitality, we see populations shift, jobs created and, as we have seen with South Broad Street, success ultimately spurring success.

In his widely referenced piece, "The Rise of the Creative Class," Richard Florida details the direct link between

cities with expanding populations and growing economies with those that offer a diverse cultural experience (Florida 2002). Among young people deciding where to take their talents and live after college, "the most highly valued options were experiential ones—interesting music venues, neighborhood art galleries, performance spaces and theaters. A vibrant, varied nightlife was viewed by many as another signal that a city 'gets it.'"

My hope is that we can replicate this same model for success on the Avenue of the Arts North, which is home to a number of Philadelphia's most economically challenged neighborhoods. The ripple effect of cultural and economic development along North Broad Street would bring about an urban revival resulting in the same "magnet effect" as we have seen on South Broad while yielding significant rewards for neighboring communities and beyond. Considering a 2006 economic impact study showing an estimated \$424 million generated and 6,000 jobs supported as a direct result of activities on the Avenue of the Arts, it behooves us to continue moving onward and upward, literally.

The sort of vision that is required when undertaking such a bold plan reminds me of my favorite book, "Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking," by Rev. Robert H. Schuller (1967). For anyone who does not believe that North Broad Street can mirror the stunning transformation of South Broad Street, consider the difference between a "possibility thinker" and an "impossibility thinker." Schuller

writes:

The **impossibility thinker** looks for reasons why something won't work, instead of visualizing ways in which it could work. So they are inclined to say "no" to a proposal. With a sweeping, unstudied, irresponsible assortment of reasons why it can't be done; or why it is a bad idea; or how someone else tried it and failed; or, (this is usually their clinching argument) how much it will cost.

A **possibility thinker** resembles the hummingbird that looks for and finds honey, often in the most unlikely, unthinkable places; perceptively probes every problem, proposal and opportunity to discover the positive aspects present in almost every human situation. They keep striving until they climb over, find a pass through, tunnel underneath—or simply stay and turn their mountain into a gold mine.... Where there is a will, there is a way.

Councilman Clarke eloquently sums up this moment for the Avenue, and ultimately for Philadelphia. "This corridor now offers entertainment, dining, shopping and so many more opportunities. The momentum is there. The time is now for Philadelphia to capitalize on recent developments and to aggressively pursue the cultural economic potential of Avenue of the Arts North." I wholeheartedly agree. Along with Councilman Clarke, Karen Lewis and the many valuable stakeholders, I am excited to see the limitless possibilities of the Avenue of the Arts North turned into reality.

Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown is currently serving her fourth term as a member of Philadelphia City Council. Reynolds Brown is the only woman to win a Philadelphia At-Large Council seat since 1999. On January 2, 2012 she was elected Majority Whip, and is the only woman serving in City Council Leadership. Councilwoman Reynolds Brown has passed meaningful legislation and supported valuable community programming that positively impacts her core issues: children and youth, women, arts and culture, education, small business development, and the environment and sustainability. Her motto is "Dream Big, and when that doesn't work...Dream Bigger."

References

References

Chamberlain, L. (2007, October 17). A Third Act for Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts. *The New York Times*. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/17/realestate/commercial/17philly.html?pagewanted=print>.

Florida, R. (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Schuller, R.H. (1967). *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*. Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books.

